

Interculturalities in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The digital age, with its ubiquitous social media, has transformed sociability and socialization, creating opportunities for accessing diverse knowledge, but also new symbolic boundaries. In a connected society shaped by identity politics, this article proposes an intercultural reading of social tensions relayed online. It advocates an interpretive approach to intercultural communication, understanding cultures and identities as resources individuals use to negotiate and co-construct meaning in interactions. Based on examples of social tensions relayed or seemingly aggravated by digital media, it distinguishes two forms of interculturality in this context: "forced otherness," where individuals are reduced to stigmatized identities, and "unconscious otherness," where algorithmic personalisation is used by individuals to support particular worldviews on given topics. The article draws on theories of conflict mediation, identity, and intergroup relations to analyse and potentially mitigate social tensions in the digital age, emphasizing the need for media literacy and a nuanced understanding of intercultural dynamics.

Keywords: Interculturality, mediatization, identity discourse, polarisation, digital public sphere, interpretivist paradigm, social tensions, social media, duality of culture, forced otherness, unconscious otherness

1. Introduction

The popularity of the notion of culture is such that the field of intercultural communication spans a rich and increasingly broad set of topics. Despite efforts to structure it into perspectives or paradigms (Kim 2017), there is often relatively little consensus among specialists regarding definitions of cultures or their supposed impact on human behaviour, depending on the type and aims of the research they are carrying out. Many scholars study or compare national cultures, examine sensemaking in context, propose or evaluate training materials or practices, denounce

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social injustices, and generally seek to promote a better world, where respect, tolerance and understanding can lead to peace and prosperity.

Yet this world is changing rapidly, notably under the influence of technological reconfigurations of our social relations, which simultaneously open up possibilities to access new knowledge and erect new symbolic boundaries. Post-truth politics, deep fakes, right-wing xenophobia, ethnic tensions, filter bubbles, racial or religious violence, hate speech, neocolonialism, terrorism and open warfare dominate the headlines and news feeds of the early 2020s. While working to promote intercultural competence or global understanding is clearly a positive step in reaction to this, how can we also mobilise intercultural communication scholarship to better analyse and understand the new forms of “interculturality” which seem to underpin the various social crises and conflicts in today’s world?

In this paper, I argue that while research on intercultural communication potentially holds the key to shed light on many of these emerging global phenomena, in practice it often promotes simplistic essentialisations which can reinforce perceived barriers and social conflict. I defend the need to take seriously the dialectic between cultures and communication (Hall 1959): the way that we draw on multiple sources of cultural knowledge to make sense of and for one another, and the way that our interactions contribute in turn to spreading, maintaining or recreating cultural knowledge. Shifting the focus from what cultures do to people to what people do with cultures and identities, how they negotiate and co-construct codes in their interactions, how they instrumentalise perceived similarity and difference to position themselves and others, this paper outlines an interpretive understanding of communication and interculturality which places individual agency back at the centre.

In today’s volatile, digitally connected world, where information moves around the globe quasi-instantaneously and leaves indelible traces online, it is crucial to take into account the mediated dimension of interpersonal communication (Hepp 2015). The ubiquity of social media affects both our sociability and our socialisation through contact with different groups, online and offline. Digital media reconfigure the way that cultures evolve, technically offering individuals access to a wide variety of deterritorialized social groups and identities, while providing affinity-based recommendations. This affinity-based personalisation of media contents in the fragmented media sphere, fuelled by marketing, can potentially lead to “echo chambers” (Jamieson and Cappella 2010), whereby people are exposed to opinions similar to their own. I will argue that the social pressure to fit in to online groups encourages people to voice opinions likely to be approved in likeminded company, and that this can, in some cases, lead to a gradual normalisation of extreme opinions for members of these groups. Within the public sphere more generally, the fact that individuals are exposed to quite different opinions and even information can lead to misunderstandings and symbolic or physical violence. To illustrate the discussion and the sociotechnical mechanisms behind such behaviour, examples will be provided of how social media communication appears to have been linked to sporadic episodes of symbolic or physical violence in recent years. To date, this phenomenon remains largely understudied within the field of intercultural communication. I will outline how, for scholars, such phenomena can usefully be analysed with reference to existing research on conflict mediation, understanding difference and neurodiversity, identities and intergroup relations, competence development and so on. By approaching them as “cultural” and identity-based conflicts, I will argue that various approaches to interculturality can help us analyse,

inform and possibly relieve some of the social tensions taking place under our very noses. This is also a chance for scholars to renew scholarship and existing models within the field of interculturality, by taking into account the impact of digital media on the way that we relate to cultures and identities (Hepp, Breiter, and Hasebrink 2018), and on the way that these circulate and evolve in the global public sphere.

2. Rethinking interculturality in a globalised, connected world

2.1 Media, sociability and socialization

The anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai, in his book *Modernity at Large* (1996), was one of the early thinkers to address the relationship between mass media technologies, migration, globalisation and culture. Along with Manuel Castells, who highlighted *The Power of Identity* (1997) in the context of “networked society”, Appadurai theorised the way in which global economic, demographic, symbolic, technological and media flows were contributing to restructuring the social “scapes” around the globe. The new interconnections also influenced the way that people saw the local in relation to the global, and their place in it. Appadurai and Castells were writing at the beginning of the internet, before social media further transformed the scene, exacerbating many of the trends which they had anticipated.

More recent work, in sociology and communication studies, has gone further in trying to conceptualise the all-encompassing effect of media technology on our everyday life and communication. Andreas Hepp, as a leading figure of what Guiseline Kuipers (2018, 426) calls “the Bremen school of communicative figurations”, studies social relationships through the lens of the “meta-process” of mediatization (Krotz 2007). Hepp and colleagues (Hepp, Breiter, and Hasebrink 2018; Hepp 2015; 2017; Couldry and Hepp 2016) build on Norbert Elias’ concept of “figuration” (Elias 1978), in order to see the social world as structured by digital media into “communicative figurations”. These are composed of all of the people with whom we are in contact both through physical proximity and online sociability: our close family members, our neighbours and colleagues in the local workplace, but also the people with whom we interact online, directly or indirectly, through social media, forums, fan groups, etc. Indeed, often these two groups are not distinct: smartphones and other handheld media devices are ubiquitous even in face-to-face social interactions, and we consume the same (deterritorialized) social media contents as our (physically present) friends, and often expect them to share these same references.

In this way, our mediatised communicative figurations have an impact on both our sociability (with whom we socialise) and on our socialisation: the everyday process through which we develop our social behaviour, cultural knowledge and so on, as theorised by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and adapted for mediatised society by Couldry and Hepp (2016). Socialisation typically happens through our face-to-face interactions and our consumption of media contents, which shapes our vision of who we are, and also of other social groups. Almost three decades ago, Appadurai was commenting on the impact on our socialisation of migration (diaspora groups) and global media flows in the age of satellite television. Today, socialisation takes place in a connected media sphere, whereby individuals may frequent groups offline – where digital media also constitute a point of reference – and online. Online groups may be

composed of people with shared interests, rather than a shared geographical location, sometimes along linguistic lines, or often in global English. Socialisation is increasingly influenced by the sociotechnical dimension of media access, as people are exposed to personalised media feeds, based in part on algorithmic predictions of what will interest them (*infra*). The massive and rapid arrival of technologies based on generative artificial intelligence looks set to strengthen this trend of increasing personalisation and algorithmic selection or formatting of the information to which individuals are regularly exposed.

2.2 Identity politics in a connected world: predictability, interculturality and primordialism

Identities are both important and fragile in contemporary society and when it comes to online encounters. Scholars have been underlining the growing importance of identities for individuals and within society for many decades, often associating this with late modernity or postmodernism, where a loss of stable categories makes identification more reflexive (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994), more liquid (Bauman 1999), more networked and volatile (Castells 1997). “Identity politics” have become prominent in many Western-style societies since the 1980s, emerging from postmodern thought and building on the multiculturalist view of a society where minorities have as much right as the majority to demand that their lifestyle choices be respected. This has led to calls for social justice in the face of perceived discrimination and a systematic questioning of social privilege, which finds a powerful echo in the digital public sphere and the possibility it affords individuals to find sympathisers who share their cause and even defend it vocally, from behind a screen.

French communication studies and political science scholar Dominique Wolton underlines the paradox whereby society tends to advocate individual freedom to exercise lifestyle choices, often facilitated by digital sociability, yet the more individuals emancipate themselves, the more the ties to the collective are questioned, and the more the collective identity seems to need protection, provoking a kneejerk reaction of defence. The individualist movement thus needs to be understood in the light of a strengthening of collective, national, community identities (Wolton 2003, 57). This defensive trend is also exacerbated both by migration and by digital technologies, argues Wolton, since they both make the “Other” more visible. When perceived as a threat, typically by members of a dominant majority group, this can engender reactions of resistance and rejection, and a desire to restate and reinstate the “comforting” distinction between Us and Them (Barth 1969).

Beyond these underlying factors, identities play a key role in our connected societies as (i) predictors of behaviour, (ii) markers of affective belonging and (iii) vectors of social tensions. In both face-to-face encounters and in online interactions, we use what we know about people’s identities to help us to predict what they are going to do and say. Yet, in the semiotically-poor digital media sphere, we often know relatively little about the identities of the individuals we meet: their age, gender, maybe profession, possibly an interest group or political affiliation..., information which becomes all the more important when seeking to understand their behaviour and when anticipating how they might react to us. Moreover, since our digital reputation rests upon these potentially fluid and shifting identities, it is important for us to show strong

commitment to them. This is especially true in fleeting encounters online, characterised by weak social ties (Granovetter 1983), where there is social pressure to conform to group prototypes in order to remain predictable and be accepted as a *bona fide* member of the group whose identity we are claiming. If the collective identity is threatened, ingroup members can be expected to try to collectively save face and defend it. This, finally, may engender new intergroup tensions or exacerbate existing ones, online or in wider society, in turn resulting in further stereotyping and binary identifications. In this sense, our online behaviour may reflect a tendency to reduce ourselves and others to stereotypes, resulting from the limited information we have about one another and a desire to reduce intersubjective uncertainty and anxiety (Gudykunst and Nishida 2001), at the same time accentuating intergroup tensions.

Although this paper presents the field of intercultural communication as a source of possible solutions to help reduce such tensions, it is important to acknowledge that, in many cases, discourse about cultural differences seems instead to further consolidate the problem, strengthening perceived barriers rather than challenging them. Indeed, identity talk in society leads to claims of cultural specificities from particular social groups, to increasing consciousness of “cultural diversity” and the need to adapt to this. Identity politics further strengthens such positions, with the idea that social groups are somehow culturally distinct, that only group members are entitled to enact cultural behaviours associated with their group.

Such discourse tends to feed into or draw upon positivist approaches to interculturality which emerged in the 1980s as a first attempt to understand macrosocial-level differences between national groups. Questionnaire-based research used to produce “cultural dimensions” was popularised by Geert Hofstede (1984; 1991; 2011), Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1993), the GLOBE project (House et al. 2004) or Erin Meyer’s *Culture Map* (2014). It has proved very popular in the business world, to provide insights into possible differences of reasoning along national lines. However, this research has also been widely criticised, partly for methodological problems (McSweeney 2013; 2024), partly for the way it has been misappropriated and applied to microsocial phenomena. Hofstede notably denounces this misapplication in a 2011 article, regretting that a majority of studies using his model ignore his warnings about the “ecological fallacy” of trying to equate statistical averages with individual-level behaviours (Hofstede 2011).

Indeed, the risk of such models is that they give a very essentialising view of (national) cultures, which tends to reinforce the idea that cultures divide societies, in a way which resonates in modern-day media and much popular political discourse. Already in 1999, Ulf Hannerz drew attention to the phenomenon he named “culturespeak”, defined as careless and essentialising uses of the term culture. Hannerz argued that scholars have a duty to defend a non-simplistic, non-reductionist vision, to try and combat some of the excesses of populist uses of culture (Hannerz 1999, 405). Following on from this, and from a scientific point of view, it is necessary to consider in more detail the ways in which we use our cultures and identities in our communication, in order to show how an “intercultural” approach can shed light on contemporary social phenomena in our connected societies.

2.3 Moving beyond essentialism – the duality of culture

Often recognised as the “founding father” of intercultural communication in the post WW2 period, Edward T Hall famously wrote that “culture is communication and communication is culture” (Hall 1959, 186). While this statement can be analysed from multiple perspectives, it is likely that Hall was referring to the dialectic between culture and communication: culture both shapes our communication and is shaped by it. This duality is underlined by Zygmunt Bauman, when he claims that:

[Culture] is as much about inventing as it is about preserving; about discontinuity as much as about continuation; about novelty as much as about tradition; about routine as much as about pattern breaking; about norm-following as much as about the transcendence of norm; about the unique as much as about the regular; about change as much as about monotony of reproduction; about the unexpected as much as about the predictable. (Bauman 1999, xiv).

This praxeological approach, which bears a family resemblance to Bourdieu’s practice theory (Bourdieu 2000) or Giddens theory of structuration (Giddens 1984), recognises that culture can be seen to work as a process on both the macrosocial and microsocial levels. Our cultures constitute a framework of expectations for our interactions, but this framework is actively subverted or maintained by individuals who using it to create meaning in specific contexts. And this incremental subversion or maintenance, through our interactions, is what leads cultures to evolve or to remain constant. In this sense, culture can be apprehended both as something sufficiently fixed and stable to guide our expectations, but also as something which emerges through our interactions (Desjeux 2002; Frame 2017; 2023).

Heuristically, we can draw a parallel with language. It’s not because a group of people “speak the same language” that they all say the same thing in the same way. When talking to one another, they rely on the structural framework of grammar and vocabulary, to understand when someone is speaking in a sophisticated, informal or poetic way, or simply talking nonsense. However, they are free to express themselves in any way they see fit – the language they speak does not determine what they say, nor even how they choose to say it. Cultural frameworks can be seen to function in a similar way. The macrosocial shared norms and expectations function like the grammar and vocabulary, and are used as reference points by other people who attribute meaning to what we do, in the light of these shared norms. It is thanks to this that they understand when we are acting rebelliously, arrogantly, compliantly, etc. Meaning is made by adhering to or deviating from anticipated social norms, through impression management strategies, as studied by Erving Goffman (1959; 1967) and the symbolic interactionist school of sociology with its theorists of identity (McCall and Simmons 1966; Blumer 1969; Stryker 1980; Burke et al. 2003).

Indeed, when it comes to creating meaning in interpersonal interactions, the question of identity is paramount. We are expected to act in a particular way because of the identity or identities which are activated in the given context, be they *role* identities (linked to a given social role), *social* identities (linked to a given social group) or *person* identities (how we are seen as individuals with particular character traits) (Burke et al. 2003). These identities draw on various cultural frameworks, which may be specific in the case of social identities linked to particular social groups, or more general in the case of role or person identities, not associated with their own specific cultures. Since individuals can be seen, in a given interaction, to play

on multiple identities of each of these types, their behaviour is interpreted on the basis not just of national identities and cultures, but of all the cultures which are deemed relevant by the participants in that interaction.¹ These cultures may be shared by other participants (members of the same ingroup), or not. However, even non-members typically have some knowledge or representation of the outgroup culture, and of the norms governing group members' behaviour, however stereotyped these may be.

The fact that individuals have multiple identities and knowledge of multiple cultural repertoires leads Anne Swidler to introduce the metaphor of cultural “tool-boxes” (Swidler 1986). In a given interaction, people choose the tools which seem best suited to the circumstances, based on who is present and what is known about them. These shape their expectations and their scope of action. In other terms, they prefigure and configure our encounters (Frame 2012), and then we perform them, negotiate them through our actions and words, at the same time actualising our cultures.

Such an “interpretive” understanding of interpersonal communication, where individuals play on multiple identities and negotiate meanings through their interactions, is far removed from the comparative, positivist approaches which contrast “national culture A” and “national culture B”, in order to identify differences and predict where misunderstandings may occur. It follows that when thinking about interpersonal communication, we need to pay attention to how various cultural traits are being mobilised in relation to multiple identities, rather than focusing solely on national cultures. The interpretive approach also lets us take into account the way individuals, on the microsocial level, adapt their behaviour to one another, anticipating possible interpretations of different lines of action. It encourages us to see cultures not first and foremost as sources of inalienable difference, but rather as repertoires, as resources to use in interactions, in order to better understand one another.

Such an approach to the duality of culture, reconciling the macro and the micro, possesses sufficient complexity to counter simplistic “culturespeak”. Yet in many cases it is hard to escape reasoning based on social categories, which allow us to simplify the world and reason in chunks, on the macrosocial level. Fred Dervin & Regis Machart (2015) are among those who have denounced the essentialism implicit in much intercultural discourse. They also make the point that, since such culturespeak is seen as common sense and is taken for granted, it is often used to “put people into boxes” and instrumentalise identities. This can be done on either end of the political spectrum, to foster group cohesion against an external “Other”, to stigmatise, to make claims based on apparently inalienable cultural difference. Such discourse is commonplace on social media and is an integral part of the “interculturalities” upon which this paper proposes to focus.

2.4 Rethinking interculturality

Following on from the reasoning developed in the previous section, if we consider that all individuals mobilise multiple identities and cultures in their interactions, we may be led to agree

¹ This process is neither explicit nor typically is it conscious, and it is highly individual: although some identities may be known to all, others may not be, and each individual interprets the behaviours and utterances of a particular person in light of what he or she knows about them. This is of course exploited for the purposes of dramatic irony in many fictional portrayals of social activity.

with Eric Dacheux that “all communication is intercultural” (Dacheux 1999). Indeed, it appears scientifically unsatisfactory to arbitrarily limit “interculturality” to interactions involving people of different nationalities, for example. Scholars of interculturality have indeed at times been forced to admit that such a distinction, commonly used, appears to be one of convention, and that it does not reflect a clear scientific definition related to the concept of culture itself (Gudykunst and Kim 1992, 17). If we look for a more scientific grounding, how might we differentiate intercultural from interpersonal communication?

Rather than being a field of research, interculturality is in the eye of the beholder, answers Martine Abdallah-Preteille: it should be seen as a way of thinking, a hermeneutic. It is about the way scholars approach their objects of study rather than something intrinsic to the objects themselves.

No fact is ‘intercultural’ at the outset, nor is the quality of ‘intercultural’ an attribute of the object. It is only intercultural analysis that can give it this character. It is the look of the beholder that creates the object and not the other way round. Thus, for example, to say that we are in an intercultural society, or that we are working on intercultural things, would in fact be a misuse of language. The uniqueness of the intercultural approach lies very much in the manner of questioning and not in a field of application presented as intercultural. (Abdallah-Preteille 2006, 480)

For others, such as Helen Spencer-Oatey and Peter Franklin (2009), the distinction can be justified rather by the experience and subjective perceptions of those involved in an interaction. From a phenomenological perspective, they suggest, we should talk about interculturality when people take each other’s supposed difference into account: “An intercultural situation is one in which the cultural distance between the participants is significant enough to have an effect on the interaction/communication that is noticeable to at least one of the parties”. (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, 3).

I’d argue that these two positions are not incompatible, that they can be taken as alternative or even complementary ways of defining the interculturality of the encounters we are studying. If individuals appear to focus on anticipated differences in their interpersonal interactions, then scholars are all the more justified in choosing to focus on this element, but situations in which cultural differences are not expected should equally be open to “intercultural” enquiry. The important point is that this broader approach to interculturality can help move beyond more essentialising postures based solely on national identities, and allow us to consider interculturalities which appear to result from social dynamics associated with digitally mediated communication.

3. Understanding interculturalities in the contemporary, mediatised world

3.1 Technical and social dimensions of social media logics: heterogeneity and polarization

The renewed digital media landscape, and its impact on sociability and socialisation (*supra*, section 1.2), has several consequences, leading to phenomena which can usefully be analysed

from an intercultural standpoint. The argumentation behind this is as follows: today's society has become fragmented and increasingly polarised through social dynamics fuelled by differentiated exposure to social media contents, and the underlying social and technical media logics (Altheide 2013) of online media. Whereas in the past radio or terrestrial television tended to act as unifying sources in the public sphere, shaping the *habitus* by ensuring that people within a particular society were exposed to similar contents, today, individuals are faced with much more diversity. There is evidence to suggest that active digital media consumption increases exposure to heterogeneous information sources (Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016) and indeed the heterogeneity of contents available means that, depending on individual choices, even people with similar social profiles may be socialised quite differently.

The heterogeneity of socialisation is a first element in the argumentation presented here. It is provoked by both technical and social aspects of digital communication. Technically, personalised online news and media feeds and recommendations made by algorithms are based on user profiles, which are themselves built up over time, depending on the media consumption practices of each individual. These may include, among others, user-defined preferences, data generated by cookies on navigation behaviour and choices, data about time spent reading particular posts, interactions with these posts such as clicks, likes or even reliant on eye tracking, and data about what “similar” profiles have done, which may lead to predictions of “suitable” contents (i.e. contents with which others have interacted). The reasoning behind this technical “optimisation” of the user experience is largely economic, since by making their platforms “sticky” (hard to leave) through the choice of content provided, the algorithms serve to keep users connected and potentially viewing paid contents in the form of advertising. So, depending on their user habits and online practices, users of social media can have access to a wider range of information, but they may also be habitually exposed to similar types of information or similar opinions, because of platform algorithms.

Beyond the purely technical dimension of algorithms, however, the success of the business model of “social” media seems to rest first and foremost on the social dynamics of intergroup relations (Tajfel 1982). The second argument presented here is the idea that these online social dynamics can also affect wider society, often through actions which seem relatively innocent in themselves, but whose impact is amplified by algorithms. So as to remain visible and feel integrated into online groups, individuals need to interact with and produce contents which others in their immediate online entourage will appreciate. Such “prototypical” behaviour (Turner et al. 1987) is all the more important online, where predictability becomes a reassuring marker of belonging, and in the absence of the organic bonds which are often associated with offline groups. Engaging with such contents may well be done in a semi-humorous, ironic or satirical fashion, in order to try to win the approval and recognition of other members of the online group who react in a way which underlines their common position regarding the information in question. Many such acts could be classified under the category of low-cost, everyday curation of e-reputation. In the context of the group, reacting to a joke, liking a popular post, agreeing with fellow members who have criticised someone seen as having done something reprehensible to the group or its wider cause, voting in a poll about possible courses of action: such acts seem harmless in themselves and can be motivated by a desire for online social recognition within the group.

Example 1: call-out culture and collective identity-based ostracization

The compound effects of such behaviour can be exemplified by the fate of a French long-distance runner at the 2024 Paris Olympic games. Shortly after competing in the finals of his discipline, the athlete was widely criticised (or “called out”) on social media for having posted antisemitic and homophobic tweets, as a teenager, around 10 years previously.² Although such behaviour is clearly reprehensible at whatever age, it is interesting to focus on the banal sociotechnical mechanism by which the athlete’s reputation became completely overshadowed by this story. Since it was a relatively low-cost action to criticise such behaviour, and symbolically valued for anyone wanting to actively defend or simply show compassion for the targeted groups, the information was widely commented on and relayed on various social networks. This fed into the algorithms which promoted the information, linked to the Olympic games, which were already being widely discussed. Through a multitude of seemingly innocent identity-based micro-actions, the athlete gained in visibility and at the same time was collectively reduced to a figure of public hatred on social networks, depersonalised to become a symbol for a broader identity-based agenda. Such depersonalisation, sometimes associated with terms such as “call-out culture” or “cancel culture”, appears as a side-effect of generalised social pressure to be sensitive to calls for social justice linked to various identity movements. By condemning any (apparently unethical) behaviour, individuals distance themselves from its perpetrator while receiving the approval of their likeminded peers, although the effects of such collective actions may extend well beyond the intentions of any of their single authors.

When participating in an online group and striving to show that they conform to the central values of the group, individuals can be tempted to enter into a logic of prototypical one-upmanship, (re)posting or clicking on more “shocking” information. Progressively and collectively, to show that they fit in, people active in a given group may (re)post or react to more and more extreme materials, provided to them by algorithms depending on their profile and aimed to keep them engaged. If the same thing happens at opposite ends of a political spectrum, on whatever subject (migration, climate change, gender equality, race, religion, etc.), what is presented as “normality” within such groups respectively, gradually becomes more and more distinct. In a wider social picture, this can be seen as a vicious circle, leading to increased polarisation of world views within society, and sometimes referred to as the “echo chamber” effect (Jamieson and Cappella 2010). It is important to note that this effect has both social and technical dimensions.

3.2 Identity, affect and post-truth society

Much recent scientific literature tends to suggest that popular hypotheses of “filter bubbles” (Bruns 2019; Kaluža 2022) and “echo chambers” are commonly overstated in media discourse about digital communication (Barberá 2020), that the supposed cognitive effects of echo

² Source: <https://www.lequipe.fr/Jo-2024-paris/Athletisme/Actualites/Hugo-hay-presente-ses-excuses-apres-l-exhumation-de-tweets-a-caractere-raciste-et-homophobe/1490250>. Accessed on 01/03/2025.

chambers in reality only concern a small percentage of highly politically-engaged individuals who actively cut themselves off from other news sources (Ross Arguedas et al. 2022). The extent to which such structuring effects of algorithms (*infra*), where they do exist, may have a spillover effect to wider society is also open to debate. Indeed, most people appear perfectly able to determine what is likely to be considered appropriate behaviour or discourse in different social contexts, depending on whom they are addressing. They thus distinguish between what they say in an online (or offline) group with a strong political agenda, and what might be considered more appropriate in a discussion with people who do not seem to share those views (again, whether online or offline).

Some critics point however to the apparent banalisation of extreme views and their increasing expression in the public sphere, underlining that social groups, at least in the US, do indeed seem to be becoming increasingly polarised on particular themes (Iyengar et al. 2019). This polarisation appears to function more on the affective than on the ideological level, meaning that even if the majority of individuals may still be exposed to diverse contents, what seems to be increasing is the strength of the negative sentiments they tend to harbour towards the members of groups they identify as being opposed to the dominant ideology in their own group (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021). We might hypothesize that this effect also increases when the said group is constructed along the lines of a particular social identity, making the intersection between ideology and identity a particularly sensitive one. Indeed, in our identity-conscious contemporary societies and what some have termed the “post-truth era” in politics (Keyes 2004; Suiter 2016; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017), the adherence to political causes appears to be linked as much to identities and affect as it does to ideology *per se*, or at least these ingredients are generally combined. Even though political propaganda is an age-old phenomenon, comments Susana Salgado, the variety of information sources and opposing “expert” opinions circulating via digital media seems to have discredited, in the eyes of many, mainstream politicians’ attempts to use rational, truth-based argumentation, in a social context marked by postmodern relativism and distrust of single narratives (Salgado 2018). Notably, but not exclusively, for populist politicians, who seem to excel in the genre of post-truth propaganda, engaging in political debate seems to involve providing striking yet possibly implausible arguments for their supporters to pick up and repeat. The success of these arguments is not necessarily based on any value of intrinsic truth, but because they serve as statements of affective adhesion to the provocative stance of a leader claiming to represent “the people” against some collective binary foil, constructed as “the Other”, be it the Establishment, rich capitalists, immigrants, etc. (Aiolfi 2025).

It has also been noted that social media appear to be particularly widely and successfully used both by extreme-right and extreme-left political and protest movements (Engesser et al. 2017; Jost et al. 2018).³ Several factors may explain this, including disintermediation (the lack of human media gatekeepers, allowing contested contents to circulate more easily), the relative visibility afforded by social media platforms to controversial messages (Mercier 2015), and the

³ The beginning of Donald Trump’s second term in office as US President in early 2025 has further underlined the perceived proximity between politics on the far right and the leading social media companies. Alongside his close ally Elon Musk, owner of X, Trump received the public support of Meta, Google, Apple, OpenAI and even ByteDance, the Chinese parent company of TikTok, which Trump had hitherto threatened to forbid in the US by presidential decree (Source: <https://apnews.com/article/trump-inauguration-tech-billionaires-zuckerberg-musk-wealth-0896bfc3f50d941d62cebc3074267ecd>. Accessed on 01/03/2025).

existence of *ad-hoc* and more established peer-to-peer networks or “mini-publics” (Thimm 2015) able to swiftly relay such messages to a likeminded audience. The fact that such communicative figurations (Hepp, Breiter, and Hasebrink 2018) are already virtually structured through social media platforms, in a context marked by identity-based tensions, means that a simple triggering event can set off a violent chain reaction. A tragic illustration of this can be provided in the form of the events leading up to the riots and anti-immigration protests which took place in parts of England and Northern Ireland in summer 2024.

Example 2: prefigured identity-based networks triggered by disinformation

On 29th July 2025, a knife attack on a Taylor Swift themed dance and yoga class in Southport, UK led to the fatal stabbing of 3 young girls and multiple other casualties.⁴ False rumours circulated on social media, claiming that the perpetrator was an asylum seeker of Muslim faith. Although these rumours were swiftly denounced as untrue by the British police, they were widely propagated by extreme right groups, and this became the pretext for the ensuing violence.⁵ Riots broke out in several cities in England and Northern Ireland, and there were isolated attacks and insults aimed at Black and Ethnic Minority British citizens elsewhere across the United Kingdom. Violent mobs attacked Mosques, or hotels used to temporarily house asylum seekers, leading to multiple confrontations with the police. Non-violent marches were organised and coordinated, notably but not exclusively through social media, bringing thousands into the streets to protest against immigration. Although counter protests, also organised and relayed on social media, took a stand to denounce this racist violence, the episode was reported as particularly traumatic for British society.⁶

The triggering event behind the violence and the way that it was misreported on social media, reveal multiple social, political and media factors at work. The false allegations relating to the identity of the supposed perpetrator of the attack were picked up, relayed and amplified across social networks, thanks to pre-existing “communicative figurations” linking individuals willing to believe in the information and ready to take it as a pretext to stir up hatred and violence. Police statements denouncing the disinformation were rejected in a climate of conspiracy theory and suspicion, in a society already divided by the memory of misinformation and strongly polarised immigration-related debates surrounding Brexit (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021). Arguably, the general social and political context, characterised by underlying resentment of visible minorities among part of the population (Boukari and Devakumar 2024), were more relevant to understanding what happened than the actual false information which served as a triggering pretext for the violence. Parallels can and have been drawn with race riots and urban violence in the UK in previous periods of history.⁷ But the mobilising power of pre-existing identity-based or opinion-based networks of likeminded individuals is clearly a factor which shapes and accompanies such outbreaks of violence in contemporary society, as well as the resistance to them.

⁴ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cql8j2j0304o>. Accessed on 01/03/2025.

⁵ Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zshjs82>. Accessed on 01/03/2025.

⁶ Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/08/world/europe/uk-riots-southport-timeline.html>. Accessed on 01/03/2025.

⁷ Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/10/british-history-riots-racial-progress>. Accessed on 01/03/2025

Social networks may thus contribute to exposing visible minorities as a target for symbolic or physical violence, but they may also create more unexpected, less visible divisions within society, thereby constituting what some scholars present as a threat for the democratic public sphere (Kaluža 2022). Politics has always divided, but Jernej Kaluža argues that exposure to personalised news feeds on social media or “filter bubbles” have contributed to growing alienation between supporters of rival political movements. After the initial enthusiasm shown by scholars for the concept introduced by Eli Pariser (2011), much recent research on filter bubbles tends to reject the idea that individuals become “trapped” by algorithms into a digital sphere where they are exposed only to dominant one-sided information sources, resulting in a technologically-induced confirmation bias. Many scholars now contest the idea that such an effect can be empirically observed, arguing instead that the vast majority of people using social media are exposed to fairly heterogeneous sources, both online and offline (Bruns 2019). Indeed, the technicist case for algorithms preventing people accessing contents running counter to their pre-existing opinions is not upheld empirically, and if they are defined in the strict sense of information deprivation, it should be recognised that filter bubbles are not a realistic threat to democracy.

However, notably in the context of post-truth politics, it may not matter so much whether individuals are exposed *only* to the same dominant opinions, but rather that they are exposed to them at all, or indeed, as Kaluža suggests, that they are exposed to them *habitually*. Kaluža’s 2022 review of the related literature on the concept of filter bubbles leads him to conclude that “implicit personalisation” of media contents by algorithms results not in isolation of users, but rather in their gradual habituation to particular dominant ways of thinking, based on their past choices. Filter bubbles do have an impact, he claims, but one due to habituation rather than isolation.

Yet even if we take a more moderate stance on the question of agency, moving the cursor from the machine back towards the user, we can still make a case for algorithmic personalisation leading to the creation of new social divides. When we take into account the social dynamics previously mentioned, we can consider that algorithmically personalised news feeds, by selecting the most “suitable” information for users (*i.e.* information framed in a way coherent with their pre-existing opinions), in fact provide the factual or non-factual arguments that users need to socially and cognitively underpin their (existing) political stances. Just as the “uses and gratifications” theory of media influence underlined the active role played by receivers who select and consume media, including online media, in relation with various cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative motivations (Ruggiero 2000), it appears coherent to suggest that users also respond to various motives, including ones relating to cognition and social integration, when consuming social media. The social and political impact of filter bubbles, in the sense of personalised algorithms, may indeed be linked not to technological determinism, but rather to the converging arguments they provide and which users actively select to maintain and share socially a coherent world view. Additionally, the online (and potentially offline) groups in which they socialise may also serve as echo chambers to exchange and amplify such opinions. While the “agenda-setting” power of algorithms can be questioned, it may be more appropriate to conceive of them as tools employed by users for “agenda-

choosing”. A third and final case provides an illustration of this mechanism, and why an “intercultural” approach can help to analyse the social divisions it produces.

Example 3: filter bubbles, echo chambers and agenda-choosing

Attitudes towards Covid-19 vaccination seem to have varied among friends, colleagues, neighbours and even family members, in many societies, during and after lockdown. The particular conditions of physical (and relative social) isolation during lockdown arguably accentuated media consumption as a way to find relevant information and determine appropriate behaviour in the face of the perceived risk of the pandemic. Both online and traditional media played a role in shaping attitudes towards this risk (Chung and Jones-Jang 2022), sometimes linked to stances adopted by political representatives in various countries (Maarek 2022).

Much of the data available relates to the situation in the US, which is arguably a specific case, given the prevalence of partisan news reporting in mainstream media networks. In the light of this, some studies report that higher social media usage actually increases the exposure to more diverse information about vaccination (Jones-Jang and Chung 2024), in line with existing research countering the idea that individuals are trapped into online filter bubbles. Other studies found clear evidence of the existence of echo chambers, notably associated with the American alt-right, conservative movements (Jiang, Ren, and Ferrara 2021; Rathje et al. 2022), characterised by anti-vaccine discourse. The political partisan dimension is clearly documented in the US, with evidence of an evolution in polarization of discourse on Twitter over the period, with growing proximity and interactions between accounts of Republican sympathisers and (pre-existing) anti-vaccination groups on the one hand, and between Democrat voters and public health officials on the other (Quintana et al. 2022). It can be noted, however, that the political dimension should not be resumed to a simple correlation between left and right across the globe. In the UK, for example, vaccine hesitancy was not reported to be more common among Twitter accounts associated with the political right (Rathje et al. 2022). Finally, Amlani and colleagues, who carried out a study into personal relationships and vaccine status during the pandemic, found the vaccination status of an individual’s discussion networks to be the strongest predictor of that individual’s own vaccination status, regardless of partisan political status (Amlani, Kiesel, and Butters 2023). This would tend to indicate that, while political affiliation clearly played a role in shaping attitudes to vaccination in the US, the (largely online) social interactions conducted by individuals during lockdown were a more relevant factor in determining actual representations and behaviour.

The overall picture of social media consumption during the pandemic, with regard to Covid-19 vaccination, is thus one of possible exposure to multiple discourses with the existence of echo chambers presenting different “facts”, or with different and opposing readings of the same phenomena. Political partisanship may play a role in influencing the information feeds to which people chose to expose themselves but, in many cases, this may have been less important than the social networks in which they were active. Progressively, their selective exposure to these information feeds and the associated “filter bubbles” equipped users with the arguments necessary to back up their chosen positions.

3.3 Interculturality as a prism to shed light on social tensions in the digital age

Building upon the theoretical discussion and the three examples given to illustrate some of the ways in which tensions between social groups seem to be upheld or encouraged by social media communication, I will now make the case for analysing such situations as intercultural phenomena. The argument runs as follows. In mediatised society, online sociability is an extension of everyday sociability, resulting in socialisation within particular groups, in a context where identities are foregrounded for symbolic and semiotic reasons. Since all communication involves multiple cultures and identities, and so can be studied from the standpoint of interculturality, I am arguing that if we look at online sociability as an intercultural phenomenon, we can gain new perspectives to analyse communication through digital media. I have argued that in our contemporary connected societies, questions of identity appear to be particularly pressing, associated with culturespeak and othering, and also that the “social media logics” are governed by inherently social motivations, at least as much as they are shaped technically or algorithmically. It follows that work familiar to interculturalists and social psychologists in the area of intergroup relations can help shed light on these, depending on the nature of the “interculturality” being observed. Based on the preceding discussion, I suggest that scholars can usefully identify two specific forms of interculturality, linked respectively to (i) a lack of *perceived* common ground and (ii) a lack of *real* common ground, between individuals or groups.

The first form occurs when identity categories become hyper-invested and essentialised to the point of depersonalisation. Martine Abdallah-Pretceille (2006) proposes the term “prison identities” to evoke situations in which we are reduced by Othering to a single identity, typically a stigmatising one, and (pre)judged on that basis. This occurs when a particular identity category (gendered, religious, ethnic, racial, sexual...) is imposed upon us, for whatever reason, and typically essentialised, or when we inflict such treatment upon others. This was illustrated by example 1, where banal social practices linked to impression management and maintaining group cohesion led to witch-hunt style collective shaming and depersonalisation. It also corresponds to example 2, where prefigured identity-based networked groups, already affectively polarised on the issue of migration, were triggered into violence against an identity category negatively cast as “Other” and a threat. From an intercultural perspective, this can be defined as “*forced otherness*”. It is rooted in a variety of factors, both technical and social, including network architecture and communicative figurations, but also a prevalence of culturespeak and the growing consciousness of identities and social justice in our connected societies.

To understand the complex mechanisms behind “forced otherness”, as well as its consequences on social behaviour, it is necessary to move beyond essentialising stances which would analyse such tensions as a mere reflection of supposedly deterministic cultural differences. Instead, in line with the discussion about interpretive approaches to interculturality (*supra*, section 1.3), we need to consider the processes leading to protagonists reducing social complexity to a single differentiating identity, which becomes the source of tension and conflict.

Reflecting on identity dynamics pushes us instead to consider how the “us and them” effect leads people to favour ingroup members over outgroups, how it alters and depersonalises our perception of both ingroup and outgroup members’ behaviour, how increased uncertainty resulting from othering reinforces stereotyping, how existing identity-based tensions in society lead us to shape our behaviours in a way which differentiates our group from others, and how unconscious bias stops may affect the way we engage socially with people whom we associate with an outgroup. This analysis thus draws on intergroup theories from social psychology, namely Social Identity Theory (Tajfel 1982), Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner et al. 1987), approaches from intercultural communication with Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory (Gudykunst and Kim 1992), from sociology with Fredrik Barth’s work on maintenance of group boundaries (Barth 1969), as well as recent neuroscience approaches to unconscious bias (Shaules 2015).

The second form of interculturality can be termed “*unconscious otherness*”. Because of choices we make in terms of access to media contents, motivated by social and/or political considerations, we are exposed – or choose to expose ourselves – to particular opinions on a given issue. Even if we are not trapped in a “filter bubble” in the technical sense, personalised algorithmic recommendations based on our past activity present us with convenient arguments which equip us to defend our pre-existing viewpoints, should we wish to, and notably if we are socialised into an online echo chamber relating to the issue in question. In such cases, people with similar social profiles but quite opposing world views on a particular, relatively isolated issue, linked to their online socialisation, may meet without them necessarily being conscious of this (invisible) difference. Example 3 is an illustration of this phenomenon, where sociability patterns appear to be the most important factor influencing someone’s opinion on the topic of Covid-19 vaccination, along with the corresponding filter bubbles and echo chambers from which they garner relevant arguments to support this opinion cognitively and socially. “Unconscious otherness” can be seen as misalignment in beliefs and representations surrounding a given theme, resulting from socialisation in groups whose views have developed in opposing ways on this topic, under the influence of filter bubbles and echo chambers. In many ways, it represents the archetypal example of “intercultural misunderstanding”, whereby individuals socialised in different groups act on the basis of beliefs and representations which are different, without them necessarily being conscious of the extent of these differences. As a result, the literature dealing with intercultural mediation can be relevant here, including the need to raise awareness of difference and to address ethnocentrism, to seek to understand the beliefs and representations underlying the discourse and acts of the Other, to try to find common objectives or beliefs from which to begin building consensus.

Paradoxically, we can note that “unconscious otherness” is a phenomenon based primarily on differences of a cultural nature, resulting from socialisation in distinct groups (even though they may not be recognised as such by the protagonists), whereas “forced otherness”, which people may spontaneously see as resulting from cultural differences, can rather be analysed as first and foremost a question of identity and othering, where the supposed cultural differences are overstated by focusing only on one differentiating and often stigmatising identity (e.g. the racist, the migrant...) and ignoring other sources of similarity. These two forms of interculturality have been separated here to underline the specific sociotechnical mechanisms from which each appears to result in the context of digital media, and to introduce the concepts

and approaches we can use to analyse these. In reality, the difference is not absolute and the two forms may also sometimes overlap or combine, for example when “unconscious otherness” becomes identified through misunderstandings and disagreements. In such cases individuals may then consider each other as different and become conscious of the “interculturality”, possibly also then moving on to stereotype and reduce each other to the differentiating identity (e.g. antivax, liberal...), resulting in “forced otherness”. The important point here is that considering social media communication from the angle of interculturality opens up new possibilities for understanding such phenomena, with tools and concepts which have already been elaborated and tested in other contexts.

The suggestion that we should apply intercultural analysis to digital media communication fundamentally takes a stance against technological determinism by treating such communication first and foremost as a social activity. It follows that neither “forced otherness” nor “unconscious otherness” is inherently specific to digital media: both notions can be observed in offline interactions too. However, digital media do also influence the way that these social phenomena play out specifically, through sociotechnical mechanisms which have been discussed in this paper. In a context where identity play is prevalent and associated with underlying social tensions, the sociability of digital media usage may reinforce symbolic barriers separating us from visible others, leading to forced otherness. Under the action of echo chambers and personalised news feeds, communication on social networks may also stimulate new social divisions where we were not expecting them – unconscious otherness – resulting from differentiated socialisation and choices we make about the information we consume, possibly from personalised news feeds.

Adopting an intercultural perspective, I have argued, can help us analyse and improve our understanding of the interplay between social tensions and digital media usage. Looking at such situations through an interpretive intercultural lens can lead us to recognise situations stemming from artificially polarised identities (forced otherness), and try to mediate between groups by drawing attention to common ground. Or, in the case of unconscious otherness, we can foreground the media logics which can help people realise why they may end up with opposing views, and attempt to mediate by searching for fundamentals on which they can agree. More generally, by adopting a resolutely sociotechnical approach to the phenomenon of digitally mediated communication, we can aim to reduce some of the social tensions discussed, by working on user literacy both in terms of media literacy and understanding of interculturality. It is important to insist on the link between the two, in order to avoid simplistic analysis. Raising awareness of the technical mechanisms of filter bubbles and echo-chambers should be linked to the social motivations behind them; and we are more inclined to question reductionist or essentialist identity-based discourse if we understand how algorithms intersect with social dynamics to favour such simplifications.

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