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TITLE

Crossing Boundaries, (Re)Drawing Life Spaces: Exploring Media Practices of Young Adults in Montreal.

This essay deals with the role and place of gender in the media practices of young adults (mobilizing both traditional media and new technologies of communication). I argue that neither technologies, nor gender are pre-existing, self-evident, entities with fixed properties. Rather, they are constructed, by and in the discourse, only in their reciprocal definitions, characteristics, and properties that they give each other (Hennion, 1993; Hennion et al, 2000). Although I hold no disciplinary background in feminist studies, I am inspired by a few post-modern feministic theories, which call upon gender deconstruction in order to mobilize a mediation approach that allows both for a theoretical and an analytical response.

My goal is to show:
- First, how, in the discourse, media practices are the product (or effect) of specific **conjunctures or structured relationships**;
- Secondly, that these conjunctures create what I call "**plural life spaces**" that is to say particular networks of people, groups, objects, situations and events, with moving and fluid **boundaries.**
- Third, that it is at the **crossroads** of these boundaries, that particular **social subjects** are defined and experienced and become **meaningful**.

In the following lines, I will outdraw briefly a few theoretical and methodological elements that underpin my research. Then, I shall rely upon the preliminary analyses of an ongoing ethnographic study on media practices of young adults in Montreal, to

illustrate what I mean by conjunctures, life spaces and moving boundaries linked to gender.

Young people, gender and technology as fixed categories

In the communication field and media studies today, many researches are interested in New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT), and more specifically, in their use by young people. However, few of these researches are interested in gender. Let us say briefly that certain researchers (for example, in the work of Livingstone, 1999; Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) notice differences in gender, in terms of consumption, use, taste and so forth. However, seen as a person's biological sex, gender is noted as a specific category, but not questioned, for it is not the object of their study.

From here on, other fields of research such as education (Jackson & al., 2001; Clegg, 2001), have made of these differences the aim of their research in order to understand this gendered fracture, for example, from the point of view of under-representation and the unequal access for women to technology. (Ayalon, 2003).

Although this is sketched broadly, there seems to me to be a common point here in the sense that technology and gender are postulated as *a priori* **analytical categories**. They are "realities" that seem to exist independently from each other, as if they were a "given" already there, which the researcher seeks to uncover and to understand.

Young people, gender and technology: Undoing boundaries

In contrast, Judith Butler's work and particularly *Undoing gender* (2004) claims gender deconstruction. Thus, for Butler, instead of conceiving "gender" as a person's fixed attribute, it should be understood as a relation between socially constructed subjects. It is a fluid variable that can slip and change in time and due to specific contexts. In this frame, I will add that it seems to me that "gender" is what others (Allor, 1996; Grossberg, 1997) have called " **conjunctural** ": It is "produced" and not "given"; it is always situated and historically rooted.

But how do we empirically account for this conjuncture? For this fluidity and change? How can we proceed, from an analytical point of view, to grasp the dynamic aspects of these relations without falling into categories already made?

Although far from the gender issue, to begin to answer these questions, I have mobilized a particular methodology and theoretical perspective of mediation.
Mediation and Spaces of life: a theoretical and analytical perspective

Inspired in particular by Antoine Hennion's[1] work, the approach of mediation is both theory and method. Theoretically, this approach seems to me to be close to Butler's gender question. Like her, Hennion rejects duality and all fixed attributes. Even if Butler proposes to understand what gender is in terms of relationships between subjects socially constructed, Hennion believes this but he goes even further. In fact, for him, subjects are constructed in and through their relation with **objects**, which are themselves constructed socially. Thus, what Hennion calls **mediation,** is far from being an intermediary, an in-between as the Latin etymology makes us believe. For him, mediation is a **reciprocal** co-construction of the relations between subjects AND between subjects and objects (1993). In fact, the theoretical postulate of mediation is that neither technology nor young adults and gender are "givens", existing in themselves, independently of one another.

Methodologically, it is about showing how in discourse, particular social subjects and particular social objects are constantly constructed and reconstructed through definitions and characteristics that are attributed to them.

In another way, it is about analytically defining in which specific **conjunctures** these definitions move and change, thus, redrawing what I have called '**plural life spaces"**. By

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this term I mean different networks of people, groups, objects, situations, etc., in which media practices participate in giving importance and meaning.

This is the approach that I have taken in my own research.

The shifting boundaries of gender and technologies: an exploration of media practices of young people in Montreal

The selections from the interviews in this paper come from meetings spread over a period of 3 months with a 22-year-old young woman from Montreal, named Mary. In total, eight hours of interviews were recorded in the form of a life story. Apart from these formal periods of interviews, sustained and frequent contacts were held (e-mails, telephone calls, and informal encounters). At the same time, Mary had to describe and to tell me about her technological practices on a daily basis. She used a voice recorder that she carried around with her during three weeks. The following verbatim were taken from all the information she provided.

In the first exerts of the interviews that I'm going to present now, I want to show, within one of **Mary's life spaces**, the general effect of **conjuncture** on the definitions and characteristics given to the objects and subjects, and their **fluid boundaries** put in place by Mary.

Mary; interview 1: When I am at home, I have a real routine, I take my coffee in front of the computer and I take the time to answer my e-mails. When I come home in the evening, I go and check them […] because I am very **curious**. I want to know everything, whether something has happened.

Interviewer; interview 3: On the tape recorder you say: "I spent the whole day with Helen and so, I had to wait the **whole** day **patiently** before checking my e-mails." You explained that she has an old computer.

M: Yes, but it's because I am a **hyper curious person**. No joke! For a while, I used to call home 5 times to check whether I had any messages on my voicemail. I want to know all the time what is going on. I want to know all the time if I have messages.

Interviewer: And what do you do when you are at Helen's [house]? What do you do with your curiosity then?

M: […] When I am at Helen's, it's as if **it's not part of my preoccupations then**, as much. The level of complexity is too important and it goes beyond the level of curiosity! I am not curious enough. […] Whereas when I come home, I am curious but that's easy then.

At first view, Mary defines herself as a very curious person, this being a major attribute of herself, showing in this way what some researchers have called "technology dependency". However, we can notice, as the discourse moves along (interview 3), that her degree of curiosity [and dependency] is very moving and circumstantial. During this fourth interview (following many contacts and meeting hours), Mary spoke with me about herself and about her relationship with Helen and her strong attachment to her. Within this specific conjuncture, Mary shows us how the definitions and characteristics of social subjects and social objects are moving and fluid. Thus, redrawing a very special life space.

In the same vein:

Mary (interview 4): SMS's are cute too, but it depends on your relationship with the person […] Like I said, with Helen we began to become closer through MSN and also through SMS`s. So, it's a very private relationship, through writing, which wasn't the case with my ex girlfriend who would have perceived this as a kind of disconnection. Sometimes, I send Marie an MSN just to tell her that I love her, that I'm thinking of her.

Thus, this life space strongly inhabited by Helen shows how Mary makes special use of SMS's, which she shares exclusively with Helen (and Gab, an other intimate friend).

What I wanted to show briefly in these extracts here, is that it seems important from the point of view of the analysis, to grasp these moments and to retrace what I have called a person's different life spaces, with the person who was interrogated.

In what follows, I want to show how definitions given to gender, define and characterize **at the same time technologies**, within a relationship of interdependence and reciprocity.

Mary: " […] computers, it's a guy's big talk. I don't know why, because it's cold, I guess. Because it's about order, it's a language but it's quite logic, Cartesian, mathematical."

M: […] it's funny, there's this teacher who told us an anecdote this week. He said: "guys, you put them in front of a computer and they're going to touch all the switches and buttons to see what they do." I'm like a real guy! It's true that I'm curious, I'll touch everything, I'll go and look at everything."

Interviewer: Did you agree with this teacher?

M: I don't always really agree with the separation that is made between boys and girls. I'm very…, I have a very male brain for some things and very female for other things. I think we're all like that.

Here, the definition of technology given by Mary is very instrumental (touching everything; touching all the switches to see what they do) and is linked to (male) gender. So, one could say that she reproduces a persisting social discourse that recalls particular representations. In fact, she (re)produces traditional and hegemonic gender categories associated with new technologies (the cold language, Cartesian, etc., "typically male" of the computer; curiosity associated with "buttons" typically male too, etc.) and thus, **naturalizes** these categories. **But** at the same time, this gender perception and her own experience with technology structure and perform their **own** gender identity. In this way, the link between "technology equals buttons equals male equals a part of herself", **is only possible because at the same time** Mary defines her gender identity in a special way: if she likes to touch "buttons", it is because she is "like a guy". Something she stresses afterwards by combining male and female within each person.

But later on, she stresses:

M: "The computer isn't only a tool. It's used for pleasure and not only for work, for I use it a lot for entertainment, a lot for relaxation and a lot for my activities, for my hobbies. To draw with the use of a computer or to paint is the same thing."

M: […] it's quite cold, but at the same time, this is not exactly where my link with my computer is […] I don't really care whether my computer is neither cold nor hot, It's an extension of myself. An extension of my apprehension of reality. […] Yes, it is an extension of me. A computer is **intimate**. It has all my photographs, it's like my diary.

By contrast with what Mary said before, here the computer is much more than instrumental for her. The characteristics that she gives to it create an attachment that wasn't there beforehand. So, we can see that these characteristics (and the uses that she makes of the computer) are not fixed nor framed. They are truly circumstantial according to the associations that she makes between herself, and this technology.

Of course, these few extracts do not do justice to the richness of the analyzed remarks. However, it seems that we can see from here on, how Mary's discourse defines conjuncturally her media practices and, in doing so, creates fluid boundaries between, gender and technologies, among other things. These boundaries are done through the oscillation between reciprocal definitions that she gives (to herself, to people, to subjects, to technologies, etc.) and their interdependence.

Conclusion

The perspective that I want to develop here tries to understand how and when discursive boundaries are set up and, in doing so, how special social subjects are constructed. More specifically, I try to show how gender is constructed not only in and through relations between socially constructed subjects, but also in and through relations with socially constructed objects too.

Far from falling down into absolute relativism, it is by resituating the discourse in these complex webs of relations, that we can repopulate them with different elements. Such as, events, objects and particular people, which media practices bring to the front in order to articulate them as important and significant resources for managing everyday routines. It then, seems possible to redraw a person's most important life spaces and to render meaning to the tensions that can be perceived within. Tensions that others tend to call contradictions or ambivalence of women about technology (Faulkner, 2001).

To conclude, I think that today, the issue of gender and NTIC is of great interest in feminist theory and research, as well as other disciplinary fields. Numerous works, by moving away from classical dichotomies, put forward the complexity that characterizes the issue now. However, I think that one of the major challenges we have to take up now as researchers is to develop specific methodologies which can grasp empirically this whole complexity without falling again into ready-made categories. That is to say without betraying its richness. I hope that my ongoing research is a step in this direction.

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