INT137EV - Exploring Voices

Unit 4, Access to Voice

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Broad Strokes:

Media —at their broadest definition —are modes of communication, representation, and storytelling that transport us to other places, but mediated encounters with other people and places only ever offer a partial view.

Media texts are a powerful site for accessing others' stories and listening to others' voices. They can also be a powerful site for reimagining our ways of thinking and being in the world, and the ways we voice and story ourselves. Media texts have incredible power over how we can listen to others because they decide what we can see and hear.

What is/are "the media"?

We often use "the media" as shorthand for a wide variety of forms of mass communication and audiovisual forms. Yet, this doesn't cover all mediums and always does some form of selection in regards to what we mean by media. The construct of "the media" has its own history, part of which is based on the time and place in which particular media forms and technologies came about (industrial age, colonial expansion, war), and part of which gestures towards different ways of studying and thinking about media (communications, political science, journalism studies, film studies, sociology, cultural studies).

The way that media texts can make sense, and the ways we can study media's relationship to culture and society, cannot be separated from institutional contexts and fields of study.

Many forms of mass media became part of popular culture during the rise of industrial capitalism and mass consumerism, many institutions involved in creating and circulating media texts emerged with a very particular set of values. In the U.S., we often associate freedom and assess cultural value often through an economic lens. Because our media institutions operate using a commercial model, media texts are produced and assessed often by profit and commercial popularity. How does this context shape decisions about which voices have value, about which voices matter?

Even though social media have somewhat reversed the one-to-many model, mass media continue to hold a lot of symbolic power. Even if the means of making media

and voicing ourselves are easier to hold in our hands, the ways of circulating our stories and making them matter are still rather centralized and concentrated.

Methods and Approaches

Much of the ways of studying media - and its impacts or relationships to forms of cultural power - come from **two perspectives**: one trying to assess the tangible effects of media forms on parts of social life and cultural logics; and one that tries to understand that relationship as more of a give and take:

MEDIATIZATION
- "denotes the processes through which core elements of a cultural or social activity (e.g. politics, religion, language) assume media form."
- "describes the transformation of many disparate social and cultural processes into forms or formats suitable for media representation."
- "has a tendency to claim that it has identified one single type of media-based logic that supersedes older logics across the whole of social space."

Roots in Mass Communication
- **New forms of media bring about new forms of social interaction and organization. Content is less important than the form of communication. Each new medium expresses a new media logic and re-shapes symbolic production in predictable patterns.**
- The focus is on how new media technologies shape environments and transform the ways a "mediatized" society **communicates and interacts** with one another.

MEDIATION
- "media processes involve **a huge complexity of inputs (what are media?) and outputs (what difference do media make, socially, culturally?), which require us to find another term to differentiate the levels within and patterns across this complexity.**"
- "describes the fundamentally, but unevenly, **dialectical process** in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web), are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life. (Silverstone, 2002: 762; emphasis added)."

Roots in Cultural Studies/Sociology of Culture
- Mass media technologies are **tools that evolved out of specific cultural contexts. The ways that people use technologies and texts are mediated**

by the social, cultural, and political context of the time and continue to be adapted to new contexts. Media are a site of contestation and negotiation for symbolic power.
- The focus is on how social and cultural changes create new needs, which drive the creation of new forms of communication and connection. These impact the ways that cultures can circulate symbolic and cultural goods.

Examples in a digital context: A mediatization approach sees digital media and the internet as a brand new medium that has irreversibly changed our social and cultural interactions unlike any other form of media in the past. It has a clearly identifiable "media logic" in which most cultural and symbolic exchange happens online. Conversely, a mediation approach would ask: how did this medium emerge? What was it supposed to do? What was happening socially that this medium helped people to overcome? How did this shape the ways that this medium could produce cultural objects? How have other technologies re-fashioned the cultural roles the internet fills?

Mediation sees media texts and technologies as always caught up in multiple processes of interpretation and construction based on a wider symbolic field.

Because digital technologies have somewhat inverted the flows of mass media, **Couldry finds mediation to be more productive for tracking the ways that both culture and media shape and are re-shaped by digital storytelling**.

Storytelling and voicing one's self — almost for the first time — can be hyper-individual, unattached to any institutional body. This carries incredible potential, but it also raises new questions about the democratization of voice and storytelling.

Examples of digital storytelling (previewed in lecture):

New digital platforms sometimes make different voices, stories, and points of view more visible

Means TV: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGo-ydzjtBY

They can also provide new ways of engaging with old media forms, opening new possibilities for community and collective storytelling

Los Sures: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkZoF_E64n4

Others provide opportunities to explore different subjectivities:

Bear71: https://vimeo.com/259334683

And other digital media technologies can re-shape forms of archiving and activism
   Mosireen: https://www.mosireen.com/

Other forms of digital storytelling try to make audio-visual media even more immersive and affective
   VR Journalism:
https://www.ted.com/talks/nonny_de_la_pena_the_future_of_news_virtual_reality?language=en#t-22629

Each example offers new possibilities in regards to democratization of voice, storytelling, and/or listening, but also continues to engage individually and at a distance. **Is giving space for new voices and stories enough to enact real social change?**

Does Having a Voice Guarantee Listening or Conversation?
   Despite the inversion of the one-to-many model of MASS communication in digital contexts, **mainstream institutions** still have a TON of power in regards to **directing attention and determining values.**

   This is precisely Tanje Dreher's point in "A Partial Promise of Voice":
   ● "… a focus on voice as a process or the bare opportunity to tell one's story can be seen as a minimum standard which **does not necessarily address overall inequalities in how voice is valued, nor the unequal distribution of voice as a value within mainstream media and policy settings**."
   ● "As suggested by the emerging critiques of the DS 'formula', **the genre itself may contribute to limited listening**. Jerry Watkins and Angelina Russo (2009), for example, argue that the original model of digital storytelling is **an individualistic and prescriptive mode of storytelling, more reactive than interactive.** Others suggest that the form is **too sentimental, too individualistic with too much emphasis on self-expression and inadequate attention to 'serious' work**, or to propagation and dissemination strategies (Hartley and McWilliam2009: 14 –15)."
   ● "The argument for 'voice that matters' as developed in this paper is intended to **shift some of the responsibility for listening on to mainstream institutions.** Beyond ensuring opportunities for voice as storytelling, **key institutions must also commit to listening to ensure voice that matters**… In contrast to the common assumption that listening may operate as a form

of therapy, Bickford instead argues that **political listening can be unsettling, risky and challenging.** It is precisely this dynamic and sometimes difficult conception of listening that is required alongside the celebration of storytelling that dominates at digital storytelling launch events. As well as applauding participants' achievements, listening can also serve to challenge the **'hierarchies of attention'** (Thill 2009) which shape institutional listening."

In other words, Dreher asks: Is the ability to record and share one's story enough?

Authenticity

This is somewhat the problem of using authenticity (especially the very personal sense of authenticity we typically discuss in digital contexts) as **a marker of value.** In some ways, authenticity can be used as a way to tether bodies, stories, and voices to a specific recognizable identity (usually an idea of the self). There's some power and freedom in being unidentifiable and refusing the call to express your "authentic" self.
 Because if we **manage** our authenticity online, what is authenticity?

Thus, authenticity itself is one of those abstract concepts that gets more complicated on the surface: The desire to attach authenticity to a clear, identifiable individual or culture stands in contrast to more relational ways of thinking and being (multi-vocal authenticity) in which truth emerges and is remade by the relationships between stories and voices. In some ways, individual authenticity helps us "make sense" of unfamiliar voices (quickly, with minimal effort!), but in other ways it closes down avenues for engagement with others by selecting and organizing parts of a sensorially and symbolically rich culture or event. **Authenticity, in this second sense, becomes a form of cultural power, assessing performances as authentic (valuable) or inauthentic (not valuable, fake, nonsensical).**

A Final Note
We've been deconstructing notions of truth, reality, and authenticity this week to try to open up space for making and sharing stories, and hearing and listening to stories that don't necessarily "make sense" to our habits of listening and watching. This is different from claims like "fake news." The idea of "no universal truth" has also been manipulated by those trying to compete for or diminish others' truths, which is distinct from embracing processes of mediation and listening, which are at the core of this week's scholarship and work.