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Identity

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Identity is an intriguing concept with a plurality of applications and meanings that make it attractive but also contested. Associated with questions such as "Who am I?" all the way to "Would I sacrifice for my community?" identity reflects multiple associations and dissociations, including, while not limited to, ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, sexuality, and religion. One of the most influential concepts across social sciences and the humanities, identity has particular resonance to media and communications, especially as it raises important questions about media power: Is identity reflected or shaped in the media? What are the implications of media representations for different groups and their identities? Do media enhance understanding or hatred toward others? These questions have enduring relevance, but answering them has become increasingly complex, especially as media diversify, exposure to proximate and distant others expands, and digital connections—asymmetrically but effectively—manage spaces of belonging within and across physical boundaries.

A concept that is malleable, identity is used in academia, as much as it is used in everyday and political contexts. In everyday life, it primarily relates to the presentation of the self to others: identity is no less than an ordinary performance, Erving Goffman argues (1969). The ways people dress in public or present themselves in social media are about performing identity and finding ways to locate the self(-identity) in the world (social

identity) through acts that are socially recognized as carrying certain meanings. Thus identity is as much about self-making as it about the position individuals take in social systems. As Paul Gilroy puts it, there is a constant "interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed" (1997, 301). This dialectic becomes most evident when identity is mobilized to support political claims, or even to justify violence. Propaganda radio broadcasts in Nazi Germany and during the Rwandan genocide projected the "purity" of German and Hutu identities respectively against "impure" and "inferior" identities of the Other (Appadurai 2006). Either in responding to or in shaping powerful narratives of identity, propaganda radio did in the twentieth century what extremist websites do at present: symbolically mark identity and difference through powerful mediated discourses and imagery.

As these examples reveal, the relationship between identity construction and media and communications is long-standing and prominent. Many argue that this relationship's significance has grown in time, not least as opportunities for identification with communities (e.g., fans), places (e.g., cities), and cultures (e.g., celebrities) have multiplied due to the digital expansion of media technological affordances and representations. This claim gains more validity especially if we examine it in relation to three key macro-processes associated with the organization of contemporary social and cultural life: globalization, migration, and mediation. Each of these macro-processes has implications for identity, some of which are captured by three concepts that have gained eminence in analyses of identity and in relation to these macro-processes: reflexivity, hybridity, and performativity. Not unlike the concept of identity itself, these concepts—which can also be considered as conditions of identity formation—have wider and global

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relevance, though their particular meanings are always contextual and particular. As Stuart Hall puts it, identities "are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (1990, 223). Thus, questions of identity are best understood at the juncture of macro-processes that make history and society and the distinct and particular micro-processes of everyday life—what in social sciences is vividly captured through the debate of structure (given norms and limits) versus agency (individual capacity to make choices).

Debates on the relation between structure and agency raise critical questions: How much control do individuals have over their own identities? How reflexive and aware are they of their choices? Anthony Giddens (1991) responds to the binary opposition of "structure versus agency" by proposing their dialectic interdependence. Identity matters and involves a process of *reflexivity*: individuals make decisions based on their awareness of norms and boundaries and while mobilizing their capacity to negotiate and even resist such structural boundaries and norms (Giddens 1991). Audience research has supported such arguments. David Morley's now classic study of *The Nationwide Audience* (1980) demonstrates that class identities were central to interpretation of television programming, while more recent research emphasizes the role of gender, ethnic, and national identities in negotiating media norms and values (Georgiou 2006; Nightingale 2014). These discussions also recognize that individuals' and groups' reflexive engagement with the media has grown in complexity at global times.

Globalization has challenged traditional societies, not least through the faster and wider circulation of information on different cultures, subcultures, and value systems. The more information becomes available to people about the particularity of their own identity vis-à-vis the range of other identities and experiences in the world, the more identity turns into a reflexive but also fragile project. Media constantly show their users that very little can be taken for granted as universal truths or as globally accepted norms—family life, work cultures, and lifestyles vary, and all this diversity is regularly visible to them. Identity of one's own and of others is constantly under scrutiny, even under threat, especially as media remind their audiences of risks, such as terrorism, close by and at a distance, and of others' constant presence on screens (Silverstone 2007) and on the street, especially as a result of migration.

Yet, access to information and communication remains uneven—not everyone sees themselves and others in the media to the same extent. Unequal access to media and communications and uneven representations of different groups, especially on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, class, and location, can privilege certain groups against others. Returning to the questions of whether individuals have control over their own identities and if identities represent a global reflexive project, one might need to consider whether media power and control are directly involved in producing identity hierarchies. This question becomes even more important if we approach identities as symbolically constructed. Mead (1934) argued that different symbols allow individuals to imagine how others see them and act self-consciously in response to that. Such symbols can be a passport or a language that represent nationality, but they can expand across a range of identifiable or subtle representations, such as media representations. Does it matter that ethnic minorities are underrepresented on national television in most countries of the Global North? Does it matter that stereotypical images of femininity are reproduced across different media? And does it matter that Internet access between continents varies enormously with both technological and content control overconcentrated in the Global North? Feminist

and postcolonial scholars (see Gill 2007a; Hegde 2016) have emphasized the role of the media in constructing, not just representing, identities; Teresa de Lauretis (1989) powerfully argued that cinema is a technology of gender, that media representations *are* the constructions of gender, class, race, not just their reflection. While media and communication scholars widely recognize these challenges, their responses vary. Some emphasize the significance of fairer and regulated representations of diversity in mainstream media as a necessity for different groups gaining recognition and respect for their cultural identities and difference (Downing and Husband 2005). Others argue that digital media have changed the game altogether by diversifying identity representations; increasingly media users become producers of their own desired representations of the self and of their communities (Bruns 2007).

Discussions on participatory and reflexive engagement with the media have gone hand in hand with debates on the fragmentation, multiplicity, and *hybridity* of identities. Digital technologies have boosted mediated mobility between spaces, but migration has enhanced physical mobility and identification with a range of collectivities and communities for much longer. A core element of global change, intensified and diversified migration has presented a range of challenges to the concept of identity, not least as this has historically been associated with the nation and bounded communities. Influentially, Benedict Anderson's (1991) theorization of imagined communities established the close relation between the nation and the media throughout modernity. Sharing the same news and the same media within the boundaries of the nation has reproduced shared imagination of collective identities among people willing to commit and even die for the nation, he argues. Currently one in thirty-three people is an international migrant (United Nations Population Fund 2015), while more than half of the world's population lives in cities, largely as a result of mass migration. Do national media still have the power to widely and effectively circulate symbols of a community? Or do current formulations of media and culture destabilize identities that used to be dominant, like national identities, but even social class, gender, and religion?

A range of approaches respond critically to these questions, especially by problematizing the limits, relevance, and biases of the concept of identity. Kevin Robins (2001) talks against identity altogether, arguing that as a concept it has become irrelevant to the experience and imagination of people who live between different physical and mediated environments. Ien Ang (2003) recognizes the value of identity, especially in recognition of its mobilization for political projects of emancipation, as seen in the case of indigenous and ethnic minority movements. At the same time, she highlights the dangerous territory of identity, as it is sometimes mobilized within national and transnational communities to promote hostility to difference and to diversity. In response, she turns to hybridity as a concept helpful to understanding "a world where we no longer have the secure capacity to draw a line between us and them, the different and the same, here and there, and indeed between 'Asian' and 'Western'" (2003, 141). Hybridity has become an attractive concept, especially in critical approaches to identity, as it opens up a space for understanding and promoting togetherness-in-difference rather than being preoccupied with identity's separateness (Ang 2003). Is the binary of togetherness/separation the inevitable result of a politics of identity, or is there space for a politics that recognizes both difference and commonality? W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" speaks of a "two-ness," of feeling "an American, a Negro" (1903/1986, 364), a line of thought followed by Gilroy's (1997) conceptualization

of the "changing same" in regard to diasporic identities' multiplicity and ambivalent perspectives. Continuity comes with change and identifications with new places and people. Urban music often reflects such hybrid, complex, and ambivalent systems of identification (Georgiou 2013): R&B and hip-hop lyrics and musical themes sometimes capture experiences and histories of migration and diaspora, while at the same time identifying struggles firmly grounded in urban, marginalized locales.

Music, graffiti, advertising, as well as social media currently constitute elements of mediated communication, as much as the press, television, and radio. Thus, information and symbols of identity—from world news to "likes"—are circulated widely through a range of networks including those controlled by media conglomerates, but also by communities, such as music fans, diasporas, and extremist groups. As a result and inevitably, debates on the inclusion and exclusion of different groups from media production and representation have now expanded far beyond mass media. Who speaks and on behalf of whom and with what consequences for identity is a question requiring more complex responses than in the past. Arguably, media power has grown, not least as all different elements of communication—interpersonal, community, professional, local, and transnational—are increasingly mediated. Roger Silverstone (2007) argues that mediation comes with significant changes in social and cultural environments and regulates relations between individuals, groups, and institutions. The diversification but also the ever presence of media in everyday life open up prospects for more democratic and diverse recognition of identities and difference, argue some; yet others emphasize the danger for further regulation and containment of identity—theories of *performativity* have been influential to both claims.

For Judith Butler (1990), identity is more about what you *do* rather than about what you *are*. Identity is a regulatory fiction, she argues, reinforcing limits and control upon individuals. Following Michel Foucault, Butler argues that gender, like all identities, is the result of repeated performances "that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, 33). Inscriptions of identity are reproduced through the repetition of certain symbols, not least through media representations. If media's influence in culture and society is growing, as mediation scholars claim, then important questions are raised in regard to the mediated reproduction of identity hierarchies—such as heterosexuality versus homosexuality, whiteness versus blackness, West versus East. Scholars who criticize the growing commercialization of the Internet (Mejias 2013) express concerns about digital media reinforcing the status quo and current political and cultural hierarchies. Yet, others turn to performativity to emphasize the possibility for resistance to such hierarchies in digital media (Cammaerts 2012). If identity is not natural, as claimed by Butler but also by most contemporary identity theorists, there is always a possibility for resistance to its inscribed substance—this is for example seen in the case of transgender identities that destabilize the binary man/woman and reveal that all identities are performed. When it comes to the media in particular, performative complexity becomes most visible in social media: for example, in cross-gender screen identities or, more importantly, in digital projects of self-making that challenge limits of identity. Onscreen performances and confessional narratives that appear on YouTube and blogs are powerful reflections of experimental articulations of the self and provide evidence of the continuous appeal of communities, though and importantly, not only of communities of origin but also of choice. Digital environments can be seen as providing

the evidence of shifting spaces of identity. Yet they can be more than that: they can both reflect and construct identity in its performative and imagined dimensions. Most importantly, digital media, like all media, reveal the relevance of identity as a concept used to understand but also to express claims to recognition, as a category of emotional but also political significance that captures and reveals the always incomplete struggles of individuals and groups for a place in the world.

Ideology
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Today, "ideology" is usually taken to mean a system of beliefs or a set of ideas that both constitute a general worldview and uphold particular power dynamics. Media are particularly significant in this context, as the stories they tell and the belief systems they promote can be powerful amplifiers of particular ideologies. For instance, magazine articles that repeatedly address or call to and "interpellate" us first and foremost as consumers—as buying subjects—are on some level promoting an ideology of *consumerism*. The promotion of such an ideology might be understood as variously helping to marginalize those who cannot afford to buy; to shape the subjectivities of those who can, by encouraging them to desire more and more consumer goods; to prioritize our identities as individual consumers above and beyond that of producers or citizens (by, for example, encouraging us to monitor our health via vitamin intake but not to campaign together for reduced working hours or against the wider problems of privatized healthcare provision); and, on a broader level, to contribute toward the atomization and "individualization" of our social relations and our ways of being in the world.

The disagreements over the extent to which ideology is a useful term and the different meanings ascribed to it can in part be understood as a product of its contorted history, in which it vacillates between a tool that can be applied to any position and a term of slander for those holding worldviews considered fanatical or erroneous.