

An inappropriate sense of place

Torill Elvira Mortensen
IT University of Copenhagen
Denmark
toel@itu.dk

Abstract

This is a discussion of how mediacity influences the understanding of communication, based on Joshua Meyrowitz' work *No sense of Place*, where his concepts are used on digital communication through a discussion of two examples of inappropriate communication online. This discussion reactivates his understanding of how media changes society, while it underlines the extent to which digital media have changed society.

The media reality Joshua Meyrowitz addressed in 1985 no longer exists. Since then print and electronic media have converged in and been altered by digital media, and the sense of place has changed. It is still vital for the understanding of communication to understand how mediacity changes the settings – the very stage on which we perform as everyday actors.

This paper addresses the original concepts of Meyrowitz' theory through empirical examples, which will be analysed with a firm eye to the applicability of some of his core concepts. The following exemplifies the discussion, which will be expanded on and explored more deeply for the conference presentation.

Keywords:

mediacity; gameculture; place; trash talk

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Inappropriate behaviour in a new infrastructure: Old Grandma Hardcore.

Old Grandma Hardcore is a console game player presented in a weblog by her grandson, describing the gaming adventures of an elderly woman. Old Grandma Hardcore plays video games while her family go on with their lives around her. The weblog displays her extremely inappropriate language, but is it so bad? Gamers are famous of their harsh and indelicate language, as the recent attention to sexual harassment in gamer communities documented, as shown in an article by reporter Amy O'Leary in the New York Times from August 2012 (O'Leary, 2012).

On the one hand, Old Grandma Hardcore is shocking because she is an elderly woman, supposedly raised in a time when women didn't swear. The standards we expect from a woman like her do not include yelling, swearing and repetitions of "Fucking *Bitch*, get out of the way when I'm shooting!" (CtrlAltDelete, 2005). On the other hand, her language is a charming quirk, aimed mostly at pixels and passing youngsters who walk on the lawn. This is a contrast to the sexual harassment in gaming communities, which can get very personal and threatening. One example is the case of Anita Sarkeesian's kickstarter project *Tropes vs Women*, documented on her weblog Feminist Frequency (Sarkeesian, 2012). Old Grandma Hardcore can be safely displayed as her lovable eccentric self, because she yells at the screen. The harassment girls and women are subject to in the gaming community is obviously unacceptable and not lovable, but why does it then happen at all?

Reconfiguring meaning

Still, the language Grandma Hardcore uses isn't much nicer than the language argued against among the gaming community. So why is one cute, while the other is deeply offensive to the point of being criminal harassments and threats?

One of the reasons for this is found in how meaning is reconfigured through mediacy. Meyrowitz makes it evident how sarcasm, irony and humour often misfires: “Sarcasm, teasing and other nuances of meaning are easily lost in letters and books. This is why even intimate love letters tend to have a “formal” quality, while many business meetings or telephone conversations seem quite intimate and personal” (Meyrowitz, 1985:101). With the advent of the digital media, print may have received an immediacy that it did not originally have, which makes it appear to be acceptable to use responses which would otherwise only be oral. Julie L. Rowse demonstrates this in her article on trash talk in fantasy football leagues (Rowse, 2010). While her examples are fairly mild, in many cases trash talk is sexual in tone, and gender-biased, as shown in Delamere and Shaw’s article ““They see it as a guy's game”: The politics of gender in digital games” (Delamere & Shaw, 2008).

Trash talk changes meaning as it changes context, and using Meyrowitz’ discussions of the transference of meaning from the medium to the message, we can get a clearer understanding of the difference between the oral, the proto-oral of the immediate dialogic written language of games and instant messaging, and the written word.

Reconfiguring participation

Grandma Hardcore’s play-style and Anita Sarkeesian’s explorations of the meaning of gender in games both reconfigure our understanding of participants in online communities, through the way they force a new consideration of participation. Among many of Meyrowitz’ thoughts on electronic media, he particularly mentions two interesting states of reconfiguration that can be used to understand each of these two phenomena. The first is about social and physical place. “Electronic media destroy the specialness of place and time. Television, radio and telephone turn once private places into more public ones by making them more accessible to the outside world. And car stereos, wrist-watch televisions and personal sound systems such as the “Sony Walkman” make public spaces private” (Meyrowitz, 1985:125).

In a society where the elderly are invisible, displaying the playing activities of Old Grandma Hardcore is a strong example of the private gone public. Anita Sarkeesian’s questions about games should not have to bridge quite that wide a gap, but several of the responses to her questions are overwhelmingly negative, an indication that she has gone beyond established boundaries and broken some unspoken contract.

It may be that she has demonstrated that a place that is often experienced as private and exclusive is not, that it is public and exposed, and as a result the language from one arena spills over into another, creating great discomfort among all of the involved.

The other reconfigurations concern the hunters and gatherers of the electronic age, where people cross boundaries with the disregard typical of hunter/gatherer cultures (Meyrowitz, 1985:317-318). In this part of his book Meyrowitz briefly touches on the hacker culture and how it makes children cross over into the sphere of the parents through their use of computers, an adult tool. This cross-over through total disregard of boundaries may perhaps be the truly nomadic behaviour of the digital age, not acts of the digital nomad. Meyrowitz’ understanding of the nomad, which he further elaborates in his 2004 paper “Global nomads in the digital veldt,” is restricted by his presentation of the “digital veldt” as mainly a place where traditional media boundaries collapse and different states otherwise separate blur (Meyrowitz, 2004:27). Rather than discussing the *digital* nomad as one that works in different contexts and locations with the help of digital media, Meyrowitz discusses the *global* nomad as one transitioning between states of information.

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