

# Media studies and social geography : a combination of theories in an empirical qualitative research

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## MEDIA STUDIES AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY: A COMBINATION OF THEORIES IN AN EMPIRICAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The aim of this paper is to present the intersection of two different research approaches, made explicit in a field research on media uses, activity spaces and identity.

The theoretical background brings together two main disciplines: media studies – in particular studies on media use and consumption and audiences, and social geography – in particular the interest given to activity spaces and travels. These approaches have been combined with an empirical research based on qualitative method.

Starting with the idea of a central role of media in constructing identity, and the importance of places occupy by people and travels they make, the research project aims to understand how the identity in a trans border region is influenced by that. The first-stage analysis of data collected will make it clear.

Empirically, it has been carried out at ethnographic research, using a preliminary questionnaire, time-use diary, media list, map and in depth interview. The paper points out the relation between different theoretical approaches, and their combination in an empirical research, in relation with the national identity matter.

*Keywords:* media uses, activity spaces, identity, ethnography.

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Communications technologies have “the simultaneous capacity to articulate together that which is separate (to bring the outside world into the home, via television, or to connect family members, via the phone, to friends or relatives elsewhere) but, by the same token, to transgress the (always, of course, potentially sacred) boundary which protects the privacy and solidarity of the home from the flux and threat of the outside world” (Morley 2000: 87).

Robins’s assertion “issues around the politics of communication converge with the politics of space” (1989: 146), clearly highlights the connection between media and spaces, in other words the suggestion to combine theoretical approaches on media studies and social geography.

This study consists in a qualitative research, based on different techniques, which attempts to understand the relation between media uses, activity spaces and identity in a border region. It tries to find out whether the use of spaces, places and media consumption contributes in the formation of identity.

As Morley and Robins (1995: 174-175) argue, “[i]t has been frequently observed that mass communications have played a fundamental part in the historical development of national cultures and identities. Print and then broadcast media brought into being mass publics who began to imagine the community of the nation and nationalism”.

This study refers to Switzerland – and in particular to the Italian speaking canton named Ticino – where we still have some problems in fitting Morley and Robins’s arguments to the national reality. We can consider Benedict Anderson’s idea (1983) of the nation-state as the product of ‘print capitalism’. The linguistic diversity in early modern Europe has been reduced by the print capitalism, which consolidated many spoken languages into a much smaller number of written ones. Anderson identifies newspapers as a way to unify people. Newspaper-reading created an “extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption (‘imagining’) of the newspaper-as-fiction.” This ceremony “is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or million) of others...” (Anderson 1983, 1991: 35).

Nevertheless, talking about Switzerland, a big question arises: how might Anderson’s reflections apply in a country where there is not one national newspaper? Who is sharing this ceremony with who? Here the problem is about language: since the country has four official languages, it seems to be hard to identify a unique community within its borders.

In particular, the small community of Ticino, is more likely to look beyond the border – in Italy, and find something to share.

The first issue, which needs to be addressed, is the identification of the population of the region, which my analysis focuses on. It is evident that there is a connection between Ticino and Italy but we need to know how this relation is built up. Where are people's roots and 'routes'<sup>1</sup>? With what do they identify? Are the media helping them in constructing this identity?

"Thanks to developments in transport and communication technologies, interconnections between people and places around the world are increasingly dense. People can therefore have transnational or diasporic identities in that they do not identify with or have a sense of belonging fixed to one nation state" (Valentine 2001: 313). Which kinds of identity are the Swiss Italians taking from media? If "...the 'magic carpet' of broadcasting technologies plays a fundamental role in promoting national unity at a symbolic level, linking individuals and their families to the 'centre' of national life, offering the audience an image of itself and of the nation as a knowable community..." (Morley 1996: 328), what is then happening in Ticino?

"...[N]ew communications technologies are mobilized in the (re) creation and maintenance of traditions, of cultural and ethnic identities that transcend any easy equation of geography, place, and culture, creating symbolic networks throughout the various communities in Diaspora" (Morley 1996: 338).

The so defined Social (and Cultural) Geography relates the role of space, place and culture (more generally spatialities of society) in relation to social issues, aspects of daily life, consumption and identity. Although it is quite evident that media are already included in some of those categories, will be further highlighted afterwards the direct link/connection between the approaches.

In particularly I am looking at activity spaces and places and their relation, which have lately been widely investigated. If Manuel Castells (1989: 348) argued that "the historical emergence of the space of flows, superseding the meaning of the space of places", Allen and Hamnet introduced the notion of social space as arising from 'stretched out' social relations (Massey 1995: 54). I am assuming Doreen Massey's point of view, who defined "the activity spaces of something" as "the spatial net-

<sup>1</sup> See James Clifford's article of 1992.

work of links and activities, of spatial connections and of locations, within which particular agent operates. [...] Each of us, as individuals, also has our own activity space” and “the idea of activity spaces gives access to thinking about the spatial organization of society” (1995: 54-55).

Every one of us has a variety of activity spaces and, if we were to think on a macro scale, it is easy to imagine how complex the interconnections that link the whole world are. One possible interpretation of the increase of the activity spaces has been proposed by Castells (1989: 349) when he says that “social meaning evaporates from places, and therefore from society, and becomes diluted and diffused in the reconstructed logic of a space of flows...”. Massey (1995: 58) suggests a possible response to these developments: “to abandon the notion altogether of uniqueness of place, and particularly of place as a source of *identity*”. The situation of Ticino, and especially the behaviour of people living there, seems to be a good example of interconnection between the variety of activity spaces, connection and interrelations. Moreover the border’s context, with strong trans border movements, represents a proper setting to observe and map the use of space. Additionally, it is possible to try to understand whether the variety of activity spaces, which can be depicted within a trans-border community, has any link with the idea expressed by Castells (1996) concerning the lack of identity, in this case the national identity.

After discussing activity spaces, in physical terms, I regard the mediated spaces, which can be reached through media. Thus I consider the possibilities of travelling elsewhere using the media. This means that the space we occupy while watching TV or reading a newspaper is mediated. The interest has focused in seeing where people “go” through the media and especially what the goals that they try to achieve are. As Moores (2000: 36) says, “[b]roadcasting...brings us into intimate contact with events in faraway locations and makes available different identifications with its ‘territories of transmission’ at a regional, national or trans-national level”.

Nowadays, with new communications technologies, the possibilities to get anywhere around the world are increasing, and this is affecting the idea that media play a role in constructing a national and cultural identity. “There is a substantial body of evidence that broadcast television constitutes a significant cultural resource on which large numbers of people depend, to a greater or lesser extent, to supply their needs, both for information and entertainment. [...] The key issue concerns the role of the new technologies in offering a changed (and varying) menu of cultural resources, from and by means of which we will all be constructing

our senses of self-identity” (Morley & Robins 1995: 68-9). Therefore, once again, investigating what contributes to the construction of identity in the Italian part of Switzerland appears to be worthwhile given the pretty strong influence of Italian media in this region<sup>2</sup>.

Another kind of space with regards to media must be added: the space of transmission. As Rath wrote in his 1986 article *The Invisible Network: Television as an Institution in Everyday Life*, there are two “structures which televisual communication projects into the everyday, namely political-administrative and socio-geographic”<sup>3</sup>. He noted that “the interrelationship of two types of mass formation is involved here – that of the political mass, and that of the ‘TV mass’. One is constituted by a sense of national unity (passport, taxes, military service...) the other in terms of intervention in the network of TV, ignoring national boundaries.” As a consequence: “frontiers of national, regional, or cultural kind no longer count; what counts much more is the boundary of the territory of transmission”. Rath talks about the ‘space of transmission’ which “cuts across [...] the geographies of power, of social life, and of knowledge, which define the space of nationality or culture”. [...] While cable precisely delineates a territory of distribution (and thereby is controlled by national sovereignty), a satellite covers regions which are not identical with national territories. Insofar as its signal is strong enough, those who inhabit its electronic space can have a part in its broadcasts” (Rath 1986: 202-203). Moreover, in Switzerland the terrestrial trans-border transmission has to be taken into account, as well being extremely close to Italy actually allows Ticino to receive certain Italian terrestrial TV signals. This is the rationale, for which I regard the border reality as a good field for investigation.

Both old and new media of communication, like letter, telephone, fax, print media, TV and Internet, represent in a different way a supplement for physical transportation. If we refer to Urry’s category of travel: “the physical movement of *objects* which are brought to producers or to consumers whose physical travel may be consequently reduced; *imaginative* travel, to be transported elsewhere through the images of places and

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, considering the restricted supply of Swiss television programs in Italian language, looking at Italy seems to be in a certain way a constrained condition.

<sup>3</sup> He takes the example of a particular TV programme that I am not reporting here, even if it should be interesting for my specific case. It concerns the research of criminal with cooperation of TV and police. What it is remarkable is that the program have spectator in Germany (where it is actually made), Austria and Switzerland and there are studios in Munich, Vienna and Zurich.

peoples encountered on radio and especially the ubiquitous TV; *virtual* travel, to 'travel' often in real time on the internet with many others, so transcending geographical and often social distance; as well as the physical, *corporeal* travel of people, as being 'on the move' has become a 'way of life' for many" (Urry 2002: 256).

I suggest to look at imaginative and virtual travel as substitute (we can send a document to someone, rather than delivering it personally), supplementary (talk on the phone with a friend that lives next door) and as preliminary sometimes to physical travel (for instance, we can meet someone in a virtual chat room and then decide to travel to meet him personally).

"I switched to Sweden,' says a respondent when interviewed about yesterday's viewing. She is obviously referring to what she did with the remote control ('I switched'), but she actually describes a movement in space: by her action she moved to another location ('to Sweden')" (Larsen 1999: 113). The way we watch TV seems to be a real travel: we move from a place to another; we stop somewhere, we go around. The screen gives us the possibility to go around, even if we are still sitting in the living room.

We can therefore talk about imaginary travels and even about imaginary spaces. But why do people use media to go elsewhere? And where do they go? I consider which kind of people live in the Italian part of Switzerland and to where they are connected. Do media help them in keeping relationships and contacts?

We can take into account the argument of Meyrowitz (1985: 143-4) concerning electronic media and places, with an idea of openness. However, I would say that television does not remove the viewer from their physical locales but gives them instead the possibility to experience of being in two places at the same time: physically in front of TV, imaginatively in the place of TV shows. "... through practices of electronic media use, place is instantaneously pluralized" (Moore 2003).

I examined people in their everyday life and rituals, and I attempt to map the "complex, *collective* production of 'popular culture' across the terrain of everyday life" (Radway 1988: 368). Firstly, I began by considering the nature of the individual's involvement to the place, as I think it is important to understand why people are there and what relationship they have with where they live. Secondly, I examined relationships maintained with others, together with movements (their physical activity spaces) and, finally, how they relate themselves to media and, of course, the access which media can provide to different kinds of 'activity spaces'.

Since it is a qualitative research, the selected sample is fairly small, favouring the depth of the analysis rather than its statistic relevance. For that reason, as an alternative to the use of socio-demographic variables, the sample is “generational stratified” (Aroldi & Colombo 2003). Life experiences, consumption motivation, way of consuming, are marked by the various historical moments. In this research context, everything can be influenced even by the national/borders backgrounds of people. Therefore, the sample selection enclosed the entire area, with a variety of ages for both the gender, thus covering different generations: 30 people, according to the place-of-residence criteria, the age and the motivation

The analysis began with a long preliminary observation that allowed me to formulate some hypothesis about why people are in Ticino, what they do, which sense of identity they construct, how they perceive the closeness with Italy, how they relate with the Swiss context. This phase has been helpful to outline the initial hypothesis and the initial methodological choices. More precisely, the empirical research has been developed in the form of an ethnographic study, based on the use of different methodology techniques. The aim is to analyse attitudes and behaviours towards the media use and activity spaces in details.

Being Italian, my point of view is obviously the Italian one; I try therefore to understand if the Italianisms at the linguistic and cultural level can be found even in the sense of identity.

*Table 1: Methodology, goals and results of the empirical study*

METHOD	STRUCTURE	GOALS	RESULTS
Preliminary interview <sup>4</sup>	A semi-structured questionnaire with demographic and general information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to collect general information about the interviewee</li> <li>- to sketch people's background</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- creation of a general frame of the interviewee's life</li> <li>- first opportunity to get the interviewee used to talk about him/herself with the researcher</li> <li>- collection of information about the cultural context, in which the people grew up</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> The data coming from this first questionnaire allowed me to make a categorisation of people living in Ticino. More precisely, I found out that in that area there are mainly six different kinds of people, arranged by origin: Italians: people that moved into the region for various reasons (e.g. job); Swiss Italians: people born in the region, with families who have always lived there; second generation Italians: people born in the region, but with Italian parents; Swiss French: people moved into the region for various reasons; Swiss German: people moved into the region for various reasons; others: immigrants not from Italy.

Diary	A week's diary about activity spaces taken up, physical travel done, virtual travels (where he/she went by Internet), imaginative travels (place reach by TV), phone call made (where and who)	To collect a portrait of a typical week, useful in order to come to acquaintance with the interviewees	- complete and useful picture of interviewees week, even though the activities recorded were almost the same day by day, with few exceptions in the weekend - portrait of spaces occupied, and all kind of travels, with reference to location (Ticino, Switzerland, Italy, other) <sup>5</sup>
Diagram	List of place (in Switzerland and in Italy); the interviewees drawn the physical distance between them and the places	To demonstrate if there is an objective physical perception of places, or if, because of a high number of travels or a stronger emotional relationship, the physical perception was altered	- no matter of the origins, people have a much higher knowledge of the surrounding reality compare to the rest - Swiss not from Ticino lay in a good way places in Ticino, perfectly places in Switzerland and not really well the ones in Italy - Italians show a better competence concerning places in Italy than the ones in Switzerland - for the "Others" the length of time spent in Switzerland appears to be crucial <sup>6</sup>
Media list	List of the media (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines) available and use in Ticino. The interviewees marked which ones they use and in which measure ( <i>never, seldom, often</i> )	- to create a frame of the <i>media diet</i> <sup>7</sup> of every interviewee - useful data to understand where the media benefited come from and the media diet of the interviewees	- importance of Italian TV channels, no matter of people's origin - people in Ticino mainly listen to local radio and read local newspapers - local magazines supply is very limited; people have to look beyond the region border (Italy), in other parts of the country or in the neighbour countries
In-depth interview	Semi-structured interviews, with open questions, a kind of informal conversation	- to focus on aspects scarcely emerged from the other methods - to deep identity matters, habits, feelings, ...	- specifications about media use - definition of self national and cultural identity - interesting elements about similarities and differences between Ticino, Italy, rest of Switzerland <sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Generally speaking, I found the diaries an interesting way to collect data, with a quite strong limit: time. Sometimes a week seemed to be a too short period of time, with not enough information recorded. The other way round, asking people to fill in a diary for a longer time can let loose in accuracy and reality. After a while people may lose interest and motivation; since the diary is a self-completion modes, activities can be recorded without accuracy and data will be unrealistic.

<sup>6</sup> The analysis was quite problematic: in fact I found out there are latent variables to take into consideration. First of all geography knowledge: some interviewees did not know how to localise some of the mentioned places, no matter if they were in Italy or in Switzerland. Secondly, in some cases the interviewee misunderstood the idea of "sheet of paper like a geographic area" and for that reason the proportion were not applicable. And finally, I found that people's background cover a very important role, in the meaning of general knowledge, living experience and job. The analysis needs to take into consideration where people have been living and which kind of job activity they do. In fact, people which travel for job might have more competence than others.

<sup>7</sup> Metaphor of diet. It has often been stated that it is possible to survive feeding only on a small number of foods, but only by varying the foods are we sure to have all the nutritional elements we need. Moreover, only by eating a variety of foods it is possible to overcome a crisis caused by a sudden shortage of the foods we depend on (Censis 2003: 21). This principle is valid for the media as well. The consumption of one medium can influence and modify the use of another medium, changing the composition of the media diet.

<sup>8</sup> The gathered information has not statistic relevance, considering the manifold of answers obtainable. I tried therefore to cluster the main subjects, based on the position of interviewees.

I began this paper underlining the important role of media in relation with cultures and identities and I added to that the consideration of space, place and culture in relation to social issues made by the Social geography. The theoretical framework showed the possibility of linking together different approaches and the compatibility of the theoretical approaches appears clear. The diaries, the diagrams and the media list have already shown a certain degree of theories mix and they gave me a good set of valid data, deepened with conversational interviews.

The border region taken into consideration allows me to stress once more the tight relation between media and spaces, consumption and activities, Switzerland and Italy.

“...language, symbols, rituals, and stories – culture, in a word – bring individuals and families of varying circumstances and backgrounds together in a collectivity with which people may strongly identify, take primary meanings from, and find emotionally satisfying. [...] But if culture has been self-consciously used as an instrument of national integration, it is neither its sole condition nor a sufficient condition” (Schudson, 1994: 64).

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