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Media, Culture and Social Change. Between cohesion and collision: An introduction

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Media, Culture and Social Change. Between cohesion and collision: An introduction

The current special issue of *Social Cohesion and Development* aims at exploring the ongoing process of adaptation and reinvention of social relations and identities through media and contemporary cultural practices. The main hypothesis of this issue under the title “Media, Culture and Social Change” is the following: society and social bonds are not only based on cohesion but also on conflicts and tensions, often profound.

In the case of the media, the latter could be apprehended as an identity conflict, or as an intermedial struggle where traditional media, on one hand, try to maintain their position and adapt and, on the other hand, new media and mediations try to consolidate their legitimacy. This evolving situation which could be compared to a pendulum, goes beyond the unifying perspective that the broadly used term “media convergence” (Dwyer, 2010; Holliman, 2010) seems to imply as being comprising and central (Hay & Couldry, 2011, p.474). Henry Jenkins himself, when introducing the term “Convergence Culture” twenty years ago, observed and explained this coexistence which was not taking place without experiencing friction at many levels (2006). Yet, a certain downplay of any sense of collision or tension seems to be observed among academic and public discourses. What seems to prevail –often as a celebratory discourse– is the overwhelming power of platforms, social media and the technological evolution linked to various modes of mediation. The social imaginaries linked to the idea of media convergence are challenged by the perspective of “deconvergence”, a concept that sheds light on areas of conflict, contrasting trends and tensions (Peil & Sparviero, 2017).

When displacing the focus from media, social and cultural evolutions to the very epistemological methods analyzing the above intersected fields, there again, scholars find themselves in the floating position of merging and adapting methods and analytical tools in order to grasp evolving and often fluctuating phenomena that, also, call for a reflexive posture of the epistemological arsenal activated by researchers. For instance, as one can observe when reading the papers of the current issue, the use of netnography methods, combining on line participation and observation, archiving, network data collection and analysis (Kozinets, 2010 ;2015), or the combination of appnography as a specialized method for app based culture (Cousineau, Oakes &Johnson, 2019) coexists and completes more traditional methods of media analysis and social sciences, such as textual analysis, qualitative and observative methods; and in the same time, they challenge them.

The same contradictory movement, between modernity and tradition is, also, to be observed when negotiating mediated identities through social media and platforms. In these cultural practices performed on platforms and social media, we can observe mixed tendencies, including emancipative discourses, polarization, conservative discourses, etc., performed on platforms and social media. These oscillations in the platformized public discourse are being explored in the **first section** of the current issue through two studies. The first one, written by Aggeliki Gazi, Ifigenia Tepetidi and Zenonas Theodosiou, examines the interactions between social media, individuals and communities. Taking the on line Instagram community of “Live Tinted” as a case study, the paper explores the bridges between beauty industry discourses, the negotiation of identity and the idea of Otherness. Through a content analysis of the posts of “Live Tinted”, it appears that the digital storytelling unfolded within this Instagram community, offers the possibility to embrace diversity while sharing similar personal experiences that reinforce the sense of engagement.

The second paper aims at exploring the Greek “manosphere” as a digital social environment that produces and promotes ideas and values related to male identity. In her study, Matina Peppas analyzes the digital narratives and the content strategies depicting the space of “manosphere”. In a parallel context of digital feminist movements, such as the #MeToo movement -and on opposition to it- the digital narratives that develop within the “manosphere” construct gender representations focused on male identity through the polarization of gendered roles. In these online discourses, traditional perceptions of masculinity are highlighted whereas feminism is considered mostly to be incompatible both with national identity and Orthodox values. The adoption of a humorous and sarcastic mode of enunciation, such as a transparent opacity (Recanatì, 2000) of the narrative, tends to mask the level of polarized and conservative gendered positions and views.

In the **second section** of the current issue, cultural and consumer practices, as well as creativity, are manifesting a similar oscillation and negotiation of social and cultural norms, as they evolve within social conventions and in specific socio-historical contexts. We can observe the above as we examine social change consecutively in the fields of food culture, sustainable fashion and the role played by platforms in redefining the concept of creativity. These issues are developed in the three following papers, unfolding diverse areas of the struggle between social innovation and traditional patterns. In the first one of this section, Panayis Panayotopoulos and Stavros Kostas, through a sociological participatory observation and analysis of consumer practices taking place in a nutshop at the northern suburbs of Athens, demonstrate in what ways consumer attitudes forge the idea of “food authenticity”. The latter is examined as a social construction that needs to be apprehended in relation to socio-historical parameters. The research being situated after the outbreak of the Greek economic crisis in 2009, the authors examine consumer motives, significantly driven by symbolic gestures and attitudes. In the context of a symbolic manifestation of renegotiated and reconstructed national identity, a certain “return to tradition” is observed. The latter is expressed by seeking a kind of authenticity throughout a ‘return to roots’ movement, or as a “patriotic solidarity” following Freedman’s (2021, p. 83) analysis. Promoting the consumption of Greek traditional -and thus authentic- products, therefore becomes, the performance of an economic ethnocentrism and of the idea of national exceptionalism. Additionally, the search for ‘authenticity’ is also linked to the pursuit of an individualistic acquisition of prestige and symbolic capital, together with a cosmopolitan and democratic openness for foreign ‘authentic’ food, in opposition, one could say, to a certain ‘imperialistic food capitalism’ or a “McDonaldization” of food consumption, a fear that was very present during the last decades.

The next paper of this section draws from the field of sustainable consumption practices and fashion. Konstantinos Theodoridis analyzes the social media narratives that take place inside a civil society group of young people on Instagram in regard to sustainability issues and sustainable lifestyles. Through the thematic analysis of the posts, it is demonstrated how young people inside this Instagram community challenge unsustainable practices, educate consumers and promote alternative consumer lifestyles. Chryssanthi Tsalafouta concludes this section with a paper examining the relationship between artists in Athens and social media, using the lens of the “platformization” of Cultural Industries and questioning its role on the artists’ creativity. The study, based on in-depth interviews with artists, sheds light on issues related to creativity in the era of algorithms, followed by the sentiment of insecurity and the blurring borders between the figure of the artist and that of the content creator/influencer.

The **third area of study** of this issue consist in questioning media and journalism as significant pivots of social change, in close articulation with technological evolutions, as well as with social movements, questioning core democratic values in a complex contemporary

political landscape. This last section includes two studies. The first one, conducted by Achilles Karadimitriou examines the role of journalism and its evolution in the twenty-first century. The study thoroughly analyzes the reforms taking place in our contemporary platformized society by three parallel and crossed 'movements' shaping the news industry, that is constructive journalism, networked journalism, and AI-driven journalism. The central thesis of the study is that "transforming journalism culture depends on gradual social change rather than solely on technology". Through a solid theoretical overview of the scientific production on the field, the author demonstrates and highlights the parameters of the shift towards a "post-industrial" model of news production. These transformations that take place inside the news organization represent a promising call and a transformative potential for redefining and revaluing the role of journalism and its place in our contemporary democracies.

The second paper of the last section -and the closing paper of this issue- aims at examining the role of media in the representation of contemporary social movements. Stefanos Pnevmatikos conducts an analysis of the ways print media represent and frame social rage expressed by the movements of the *Indignants (Aganaktismenoi)*, during the period of the Greek economic crisis in 2011 and that of the Tempi movement, that followed the major train accident that took place in Tempi, Greece in 2023. The study investigates possible correlations between the journalistic narratives, the empowerment and the evolving dynamics of the two distinct movements, acting in different historical periods of crisis.

Overall, the common thread traversing all seven papers of this issue could be summarized as follows: in the intersection of media, culture and social change, the dynamics of friction is a significant element that matters and needs to be examined through a multiple prism. Considered as an engine of change through tension and divergence of attitudes and opinions, we acknowledge its presence in everyday life, in our engagement with news, media and the use of platforms, in cultural habits and trends, as well as in consumer practices. In that context, the endeavor undertaken by this special issue of *Social Cohesion and Development*, is, precisely, to contribute to an understanding of the role played by media and cultural practices in social changes and displacements that constantly take place, not without friction.

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Biographical Note

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