THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURE IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: THE CHALLENGE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

ABSTRACT

This paper considers transmission as a model for cultural relations, rejecting it as a 20th century paradigm predating the ICT revolution. It proposes an alternative way of looking at Cultural Relations, focusing on the nature and quality of the relationships built rather than the 'sector' or commodity that is the vehicle. Public Diplomacy, as a concept, can at times bring the business of Cultural Relations closer to government than is comfortable: but it also itself requires the future-orientated relationship-building that is not always easy for officials, particularly in controversial sectors. New Technology is a vital part, but a part only, of the business: once internalized (by a younger generation) it is itself relationship-orientated, as witness the current rise of social networking technologies. For CR practitioners, there will always be a need for human contact at the core: the e-world is an echo box – vital, but in isolation, dead. Migration and globalization have subverted the vertical silos that defined the modern world: transnational, horizontal networks are typical of the early 21st century, and they are wired as well as human. These – diasporic and young – networks are the stuff of future Cultural Relations; and success will be judged on how they and we conduct ourselves (the ethics of communication) even more than on what we communicate (the substance).

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Transmission – that's not what we do

I have many problems with the phrase 'the transmission of culture'. I don't believe culture can really be transmitted. I'm not sure that a projectile approach to Cultural Relations is very useful, even if culture can be transmitted. I doubt that there are many Cultural Relations agencies these days which see their mission as the transmission of their national culture. Transmission, in terms of my business, is a concept that pre-dates the age of modern ICT: the image is one of broadcasting, suggesting competing offerings to a passive and undifferentiated audience. The implied invitation is 'turn the dial: switch from that other old culture you're paying attention to, to *our* culture.' Culture is envisaged as a coherent series of (largely high) cultural phenomena that can be packaged, and can represent a nation.

Culture

But culture isn't like that. It isn't limited to the self-conscious artefacts of high culture, and it is less and less confined by national boundaries. It is an anthropological-historical phenomenon, a series of relationships, ways of seeing and ways of doing. I recently came across a definition of culture I rather liked as 'the adaptations of human neurophysiology to a changing post-Lithic environment'. In this sense, our culture is not simply what we consciously produce, but the largely unconscious ways in which we produce.

What we do

This is not to say, of course, that the British Council doesn't *do* culture in the high cultural, traditional sense. We do, though much less than we used to:

some of you will recently have seen Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* at the NAC, with which we were heavily involved. But we certainly don't see the movement of British cultural artefacts as our ultimate rationale. Our job is the building of relationships.

Changing nature of PD/CR – audiences

In the last few years, the phrase 'Public Diplomacy' has insinuated its way into the business of Cultural Relations. It has dangers and virtues. Its dangers lie in the close association with government implied in the idea: Public Diplomacy is often defined as the way governments speak directly to mass audiences in other countries. Its virtues lie in making us think clearly about *why* we do our work, what are our ultimate long-term objectives. It is no longer sufficient, if it ever was, to export a nation's cultural productions in the hope that this will raise profile and create sympathy. We are investing, pragmatically, in the future.

I recently heard a senior State Department official say this: 'There are three phases of Public Diplomacy. The first is dealing with today's press. I call this *reactive* Public Diplomacy, and it's about 80% of what we do. The second is anticipating tomorrow's press, and the next day's, and that's about 20% of what we do: I call this *proactive* Public Diplomacy. The third phase, *preactive* Public Diplomacy, is about building the relationships that will cushion us from the impacts of the day after the day after tomorrow. We don't do any of that.' Well, speaking for the British Council, *we* do – and I have little doubt that this is the core business of Cultural Relations.

Millions more

The ICT revolution of the last couple of decades is apt to leave us a little breathless at the possibilities of scale that it offers. Suddenly all sorts of new vehicles are available to us – an accelerating array, at first from e-mails and databases to the internet and then (today) podcasts, blogs, vlogs, social networking tools, web 2.0 and all sorts of other things which I am too old to understand properly. That's not *just* a self-deprecating joke: there is much in this e-universe that my generation can learn to *use*, but will never *internalize* as our children do, effortlessly. And this is my point: 'transmission' as a concept is my generation's dinosauric reaction to the possibilities of today's ICT. But our children don't transmit – they relate. And while I may think the relationships they make purely in their virtual worlds to be poor, thin things, they are real enough in their way. They constitute a culture – and a culture which is alive because it is relationship-based.

E a substitute for real?

Some of our kids think e-relationships are enough by themselves. This is a snare, too, for Cultural Relations practitioners. They may be relationships, but they are meagre ones, with a tendency to entropize into transmit-mode. Onora O'Neill, the British philosopher, once put it like this: 'It is a typical modern fallacy to think that putting information in the public sphere constitutes communication. It doesn't.' And for Cultural Relations practitioners, the e-world is never more than an echo-box, an extension of our activities. At the core is what Ed Murrow called 'the last three feet', the moment of human contact.

Horizontality

One of the defining characteristics of our age is what I think of as 'horizontality' – the subversion of the silos of nationality, hierarchy, race and habit which have 'fixed' humanity in discrete intra-communicating groups for millennia. Today these walls, once largely impermeable, are diaphanous, and the combination of globalization and its ICT outriders are largely responsible. The nation state may have more life left in it than some commentators suggest, but it is very far from being the defining cultural unit of our time. The pretence that it is defining in this way belongs in the age of bakelite telephones and newspapers printed on India paper, arriving in distant countries a week after publication. Quite other communicative patterns are establishing themselves. Horizontality describes the relationship patterns of diasporas, plane-spotters, 419 fraudsters, pornographers, MMORG on-line game players, academics, Chinese gay men, Sa'udi women poets, supporters of democracy in Burma or Iran, terrorists and police forces. It is neutral, and astonishingly potent. And it has huge implications for Cultural Relations.

Thinking about diasporas

At a human level, the movement of people has become an enormous, global phenomenon. It has several new characteristics, the most salient of

which seems to me to be its stickiness: where once people moved and assimilated naturally over two or three generations into their new physical and human environment, this is no longer automatically the case. Arguments (all too common in Britain and in Canada) about whether 'non-assimilation' should be 'allowed' or 'encouraged' are beside the point: it is the nature of migration today that the degree to which one enters into a new environment and a new identity is a matter of conscious choice.

To take an example close to my home, a Bangladeshi or a Pole in London will watch Bengali or Polish satellite TV; communicate by e-mail; use virtually free fixed telephony, or Skype, to speak to family and friends in Sylhet or Krakow; remit money by orthodox or heterodox electronic routes; keep in physical contact with cheap air travel; visit Bengali or Polish websites and chatrooms, download the national press - and so on. It would be foolish for us as Cultural Relations practitioners to think in old silos when the world doesn't. A British diplomat commented recently that an interview he gave at Lahore airport as he left to return home after a visit was all over the London Urdu press before he reached Heathrow: home and abroad are no longer hard distinctions, either.

Thinking about the young

As for the young, we are seeing an evolutionary leap – the emergence of a cyborg generation which thinks *with*, not *about*, IT. Even the phrase 'IT' is a bit of a puzzle to my children, who see it not as an external phenomenon, but more like the air we breathe. It is often funny to see non-IT professionals over the age of about 20 struggling with youth communication. We just (as they'd say) don't get it. However deft and clever my generation becomes with applications and tools, they remain external and self-conscious: we are like that long genealogy of mediaeval and early modern readers who moved their lips and murmured quietly to themselves as they read. This says to me that we are likely to get it wrong unless we let go and rely on our audience to make the running – a surprisingly difficult thing to do, if we can judge by the sheer woodenness, the static nature, the obsession with design and discipline, of the internet offerings of most Cultural Relations institutions. The young are our prime audiences, and on the whole they talk to each other, not to us.

New shapes of competition

So where does this take us? At a banal level, it means that we do things like opening a British Council office in Second Life (which we have recently done, and quite successfully), and these are in their way very useful developments. But the bigger challenges are not in following visible trends like this, usually a little after the leaders; but in letting go. In moving from a Command Culture to a Permissive Culture – because this is where culture is going, and if we don't follow, we are irrelevant.

By this I mean that we need to shift our sights away from controlling the outcomes of conversation, towards facilitation, participation and being prepared to be surprised by the destination. Away from the nationalization of culture towards an understanding of the transnational networks in which culture actually lives and thrives. Away from understanding our culture as a commodifiable export, towards understanding that our culture lies in *the way we conduct* these, and any, conversations. The tools – social networking is today's vogue, of course – are important; but the ethic is what matters.

This then is my final and most important point. Technological change is making us face up to the fact that we have understood culture in a very narrow sense. I see cultural relations organizations in general (and the British Council in particular) as pushed, inexorably, by a changing world into new and constructive roles which we are only beginning to understand. These roles are about empowering and stimulating those who wish to converse, often in places where access to the tools is difficult; listening to what they say; and understanding with a certain humility that our culture is about how we listen, not just about how we talk.

It's just another (to return to Daniel Smail's definition of culture which I quoted above) in a long series of 'adaptations of human neurophysiology to a changing post-Lithic environment'.