

The Practices Perspective in Communication, Consumer and Cultural Studies: A Post-Heideggerian Narrative

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Abstract : This paper sets out a practices perspective or practices theory, which has become pervasive from business to sociological studies. In doing so, it locates the perspective historically (in the work of the philosopher Heidegger) and provides a contemporary illustration of its application to communication, consumer and cultural studies as central to this conference theme. The structured account of practices (as articulated in eight 'axioms') presented towards the conclusion of this paper is an initial statement - planned to encourage further detailed qualitative and systematic research in areas of interest to the conference. Practice theories of equipped and situated construction of participatory meaning (as in media and marketing consuming) are frequently characterized as lacking common ground, or core principles. This paper explores whether by retracing a journey to earlier philosophical underwriting, a shared territory promoting new research can be located as current philosophical hermeneutics. Moreover, through returning to hermeneutic first principles, the paper shows that a series of spatio-temporal metaphors become available - appropriate to analyzing communication as a process across disciplines in which it is considered. Thus one can argue, for instance, that media users engage (enter) digital text from their diverse 'horizons of expectation', in a productive enlarging 'fusion' of horizons of understanding, thereby 'projecting' a new narrative, integrated in a 'hermeneutic circle' of meaning. A politics of communication studies may contest a horizon of understanding - so engaging in critical 'distancing'. Marketing's consumers can occupy particular places on a horizon of understanding. Media users pass over borders of changing, revised perspectives. Practices research can now not only be discerned in multiple disciplines but equally crosses disciplines. The ubiquitous practice of media use by managers and visitors in a shopping mall - the mediatization of malls - responds to investigating not just with media study expertise, but from an interpretive marketing perspective. How have mediated identities of person or place been changed? Emphasizing understanding of entities in a material environment as 'equipment', practices theory enables the quantitative correlation of use and demographic variable as 'Zeug Score'. Human behavior is fundamentally habitual - shaped by its tacit assumptions - occasionally interrupted by reflection. Practices theory acknowledges such action to be minimally monitored yet nonetheless considers it as constructing narrative. Thus presented in research, 'storied' behavior can then be seen to be (in)formed and shaped from a shifting hierarchy of 'horizons' or of perspectives - from habituated to reflective - rather than a single seamless narrative. Taking a communication practices perspective here avoids conflating tacit, transformative and theoretical understanding in research. In short, a historically grounded and unifying statement of contemporary practices theory will enhance its potential as a tool in communication, consumer and cultural research, landscaping interpretative horizons of human behaviour through exploring widely the culturally (in)formed narratives equipping and incorporated (reflectively, unreflectively) in people's everyday lives.

Keywords : communication, consumer, cultural practices, hermeneutics

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