

DIGITAL MEDITERRANEAN AND NEW MEDIA DIALOGUE

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Is it possible to realize a new social and cultural Mediterranean dialogue through media technologies? How does it change the practice of conversation, exchange and dialogue in the digital era? How do art and creativity operate, interact and influence in the “Digital Mediterranean”?

A new media landscape – transformed also by art and creativity - is defining and challenging the social relationships and interactions within the Mediterranean area.

The convergence between art, creativity and new media in the contemporary global framework offers a different way to think about the community with its local connections and intercultural relations. In the Mediterranean context this new way of thinking is currently developing a renewed awareness of concepts like “mobility,” “representation,” “mutual understanding,” “connection,” “dialogue,” “exchange,” “network” and “flux” that help to foster an increasing production of ideas, artworks, seminars, researches and new forms of encounter.

The fields of study and research, the practical applications of creativity, and the cultural production within collaborative spaces are all becoming more and more transversal, hybrid and ambitious. The opening of platforms to share projects and visibility where participants can meet, learn and discuss about the intersections between art, new media and socio-political changes are essential experiences that are seeing an impressive and constant growth.

Intercultural communication is extending and developing itself through multiple mechanisms: we seek, we find ourselves and we interact more regularly through technological tools and social networks that act as platforms for gathering, disseminating and sharing knowledge. Online participation experiences, festivals, exhibitions and virtual galleries, research and dissemination of free information, platforms of social and political criticism, etc., are just some examples of the stages where art, creativity and new information and communication technology meet and converge. Thus the Internet becomes the continent where *multiple cultures, one humanity* coexist (Bauman, 2008), where the in-between element of the border disappears.

As stated by Biserka Cvjetičanin:

“Cultures develop through complex dialogues with other cultures. They cannot develop “next to each other”, but through dialogue and interaction. In today’s digitalized, competitive and conflicting world, no country or region, no society or group can subsist by itself.” [1]

Communication without borders and the encounters between different cultures create new models of plurality and new forms of sociability. The social value of technology and the potential of transcultural networks are generating a new way of intercultural relations and exchange, a new flow of ideas and information, a new sensitivity about global challenges and a better understanding of different cultures. According to Cvjetičanin:

“Today, the entire field of international relations involves the activities of transnational and transcultural networks. They have an important position in redefining global communication and cooperation. (...) Through their non-hierarchical, heterogeneous and horizontal character, and their flexibility, networks foster the exchange of different cultural values and facilitate intercultural dialogue.” [2]

A global transformation in terms of communication and exchange is taking place. The territory of the Mediterranean is now experiencing a deep social change and a new form of interaction between people, places and cultures. The raising use of digital tools and Internet in the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East is an evidence of these changing realities:

“There are even studies that affirm that the Middle East has the second fastest Internet traffic growth in the world with a growth rate of 97% a year since 2005, below that of South Asia (...) The growing use of the Internet was initially shaped by the demographic structure of the region, intimately linked to youthful protagonists of the region who have perceived the net as a window to the world.” [3]

Equally contemporary art practices have been deeply influenced by the evolution of communication tools and processes and, therefore, have experienced a transformation of their way of perceiving and representing the world. In the universe linked to artistic practices, collaborative models have emerged, and new spaces have been built to meet and to create relational platforms. The current changes, especially in the hybrid territories between art and communication, are many and complex and that is why it is necessary to study and analyse these phenomena from different perspectives.

Thanks to the complexity of the Internet and the enormous popularity of the participatory tools of new media - which belong to the 2.0 generation and model – more and more artistic and creative festivals, exhibitions and events are organized online. Within the 2.0 model we need to mention the “Online Arts Festival” organized by EMYAN (Euro-Med Young Artists Network), whose main objectives are to promote information and communication technology (ICT) tools in relation to arts and creativity. The EMYAN Network proposes a virtual meeting among young artists and researchers in the Euro-Mediterranean area, thereby challenging current problems of borders and mobility. As its organizers explain and highlight:

“The idea of the Online Arts Festival is to nourish the values of social and cultural coexistence of the cultures of the Mediterranean via new media technologies. One of the fundamental aspects of enabling a platform where young artists can participate with their creativity within the Mediterranean arena is the fostering of knowledge, values and perceptions of each other in the region.” [4]

Other exhibition projects, virtual galleries, and e-conferences like the Web Biennial, organized by the Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum, or the Padiglione Internet, linked to the Venice Biennale, are changing the panorama of the art production and its dissemination.

In this new landscape, if we focus on the Mediterranean area, we can find other activities like the online dialogues on art and science in the Mediterranean that take place through the YASMIN list: a “network of artists, scientists, engineers, theoreticians and institutions promoting communication and collaboration in art, science and technology around the Mediterranean Rim.” The need to create new spaces to debate, to share ideas and projects between art, science, communication and technology is also manifest in the mission of IMÈRA centre in Marseille, a place where the Mediterranean became a research space without disciplinary or cultural borders.

Multiple projects coming from the Southern Mediterranean – like the Arab Media Lab or the Arab Platform for Art and Technology (APAT) – contribute to draw a new map and a new language that will challenge and transform the picture of the entire Mediterranean.

There are many questions that arise around this topic:

Is it possible to promote a new social and cultural Mediterranean dialogue through media technologies? How the new media dialogue changes the mutual understanding and knowledge? Is Information and Communication Technology (ICT) a new stand and tool for intercultural education and understanding? How does it change the practice of conversation, exchange and dialogue in the digital era? How do art and creativity operate and interact and what kind of influence do they have in the “Digital Mediterranean”? How have artistic practices, curatorial exercises and cultural production in the Mediterranean changed thanks to new media, digital tools, ICT? What kind of social and political impact have they introduced?

As the Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto said:

“Art does not become a policy to express sympathy with an ideology or a system or a party control but rather develops the mission of creating a space that does not yet exist, because we still have to discover how to exist together without conflicts. For this to happen a new way of thinking is necessary, which does not have its origin in a defined system, but in creativity, capable of creating a new fabric of relations between the many beliefs, religions and powers.” [5]

There are several projects that combine real presence and virtual communication between “relational aesthetics” and the tools of Web 2.0. The ambition of these projects concentrates in finding different ways to create connecting points where different Mediterranean cultures and people can meet and share their visions, and their creative expressions and thoughts.

A new media landscape, transformed by art and creativity, is currently defining and challenging the social relationships and interactions within the Mediterranean area.

Digital bridges are converging into a new “Mediterranean Agora” where thought processes, language structures and relational dynamics are involved in a deep structural transition.

References and Notes:

1. Biserka Cvjetičanin, “Networks, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue: new horizons,” in *Networks: The Evolving Aspects of Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Biserka Cvjetičanin (Zagreb: Culturelink/IMO, 2011), 262.
2. *Ibidem*, 262.
3. Rut Gomez Sobrino, “The Arab Media and New Media Landscape,” in *Arab New Media for Peace and Dialogue*, ed. UNESCO (Barcelona: Centre UNESCO de Catalunya, 2010), 21.
4. Jerneja Rebernak and Islam Muhammad, “Artistic Interactions and Intercultural Competences in the Mediterranean,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, no. 12 (2009): 148.
5. Michelangelo Pistoletto, “Art at the Aid of a Policy for a Mediterranean without Conflicts,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, no. 15 (2011): 147-148.

