A Call for New Approaches to Identities in a Crisis World – A Review Article

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-Gauntlett, David (2007). *Creative Explorations: New Approaches to Identities and Audiences*. Milton Park, UK & New York: Routledge.
-Lull, James (2007). *Culture-On-Demand: Communication in a Crisis World*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

The endorsement on the cover of James Lull's book comes in the form of a quote by Irshad Manji (author of *The Trouble with Islam Today*): "This is one gospel worth preaching", and herein lies its main dilemma, for it raises the question of who it is preaching to. Lull's book can be summarised as a passionate plea for greater tolerance in a conflict-ridden global context. He calls for cooperation rather than conflict, and for open-minded communication rather than fundamentalist pronouncements. This in itself is of course a noble and worthy message, but it is doubtful that the potential readership of the book would disagree with this basic premise. However, it is in its underlying assumptions where Lull's book is at its most problematic, for these assumptions form the basis of the central arguments of the book, which lead to the 'informed optimism' that Lull urges 'us' to adopt. These underlying assumptions are captured in the following passage:

> Fundamentalist Islam looms as a distinct and compelling case, because most of the Islamic world – especially the symbolic center of the Islamic universe, the Middle East – has yet to undergo a transition that even vaguely resembles what Europe and North America underwent during the Enlightenment 300 years ago. Consequently, many Muslim societies have not benefited sufficiently from science and reason to be able to confidently relegate religion to a less conspicuous, more personal, and generally peaceful role (p. xiv).

Despite a series of disclaimers, Lull establishes a well-worn Enlightenment trajectory, where 'Muslims' are 'behind' on the road to modernity. The implication is that the world's problems will be solved as soon as 'they' catch up to 'us', and it lays the responsibility for the current global crisis squarely at the feet of Islam as a generic entity. This is of course a classic 'clash of civilizations' argument, according to which Islamic culture is 'stuck in the Middle Ages', and it is precisely this argument about apparently irreconcilable cultural differences that has frequently surfaced in various European political anti-immigration contexts since 9/11. The underlying implication is that 'they' need to become more like 'us' for peace to occur, although this is rarely explicitly stated. Instead, it is wrapped in a more palatable (albeit rather selective) interpretation of Kwame Appiah's suggestion that 'a better way to overcome the well-guarded boundaries of cultural identity may require "imaginative engagement" and transcultural "conversations" that lead to gradual acceptance of unfamiliar ideas' (p. xxi).

Appiah urges that 'we should learn about people in other places, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another' (2006, p. 73).

Based on this idea, and after Karl Popper, Lull maintains that 'informed optimism' is a moral duty, and he firmly believes that positive social change will occur in the long term if 'we get more used to each other'. So while he acknowledges a sharpening of national and ethnic differences and conflicts, and especially a rise in various religious fundamentalisms, he identifies a number of simultaneous key developments that offer hope for increasing tolerance and decreasing violence, primarily in the form of the global communications media. 'The near universal ability of people to leverage an unprecedented range and quantity of information and cultural resources, and to help create those resources themselves, have become defining characteristics of the current era' (p. xx). In other words, the proliferating mass media, particularly the world wide web, provide the key. This is what Lull means by the 'culture-on-demand' in the title of his book. Despite the exponential growth and fragmentation of the global communications media, he argues that 'the potential significance and power of culture-on-demand transcends the limits of self-centered cultural conduct. Individuals and groups can also exploit communication and cultural resources in order to encourage and cultivate much broader kinds of human development' (p. xxii). However, when placed in the context of his arguments about Islam, the optimism is somewhat selective, for the implication of that earlier argument is that more openness in terms of media access, and therefore more opportunities to 'get to know each other' would logically lead to more enlightened social conduct and harmony. This is however undermined by Lull's own summing up of statistical information about religious beliefs in the US (p. 178). Given that the US has long been characterised by an open, highly accessible and deregulated media environment, the implication would logically be that the majority of Americans would be 'enlightened', rather than 40% identifying themselves as 'evangelical' or 'born again' (p.178). In short, the book sets up a cause-and-effect structure in relation to the global communications media, which it ultimately struggles to sustain.

While the above is highly critical of the basic assumptions that underlie its central arguments, this is not to suggest that the book is without value. The criticism is directed at the failure of the book to provide new and innovative ways to think about the important issues it addresses. On another level however, the book displays an admirable breadth in terms of the terrain it covers, and it draws on a wide range of useful examples and pertinent case studies to back up some of its claims. Even if many of these examples have been covered elsewhere, this still provides a very useful starting point for anyone interested in a comprehensive overview of current debates about global communications media. In addition, it is written in a highly accessible style, free of excessive jargon, and the chapters follow a logical structure. After clearly setting the context and outlining its central argument, the first chapter addresses media globalisation and the communication revolution. The argument here is that while there is a *perception* of widening gaps and fragmentation, due to global capitalism, the facts suggest that the world's poorest people in general are better off than ever before. Lull attributes this to global capitalism's role in the circulation of ideas, materials and expertise (p. 3), but cautions that it is not about facts, but rather about perceptions and how people experience globalisation. While media globalisation provides the context for a wider flow of information, it also makes economic gaps more visible to more people, and stimulates more reflection. This is then used to set up the book's central question: 'do current trends in communication and

culture only exacerbate [disconnectedness] or do they offer real prospects for broad human development of the increasingly connected, mobile, culturally aware, individualized inhabitants of the world?' (p. 22). The question is clearly rhetorical, as 'informed optimism' suggests that it has to be the latter. Chapter 2 focuses on human expression as that which makes us human, and freedom of expression is therefore increasingly recognised as a fundamental human right, '*even* for millions of Muslims' (p. 27, my emphasis). Greater opportunity for expression through global communications media is seen as the key here, for 'as the expressive potential is further unleashed, the capacity to foster greater tolerance grows through the emancipatory processes of communicative exchange' (p. 49). In Chapter 3, Lull proceeds to discuss the impact of increasingly fragmented global media, and its inherent contradictions. On the one hand it can lead to a perceived danger of outside influences and cultural imperialism (e.g. 'McDonaldisation'), while on the other hand it can lead to individualisation and personalisation of cultural experience. While this is a longstanding argument in relation to the traditional mass media, internet use has complicated these debates, as it is increasingly driven by social networking and creative expressive opportunities, which fits rather neatly into the above mentioned idea of 'getting used to each other'. However, despite its clear promise, recent research suggests that social networking tends to reinforce existing social networks, rather than create new social networks (boyd, 2008). For Lull though, 'the inherently social nature of the new forms of cultural construction [afforded by new media] ultimately offers the greatest chance for our common humanity to finally prevail' (p. 79). The final general chapter discusses the movement between the 'push and pull' of culture, where 'push' appeals to collective and public cultural identity, while 'pull' refers to individual agency and cultural practices. These two form a dialectic relationship with each other, which can lead to both a positive sense of belonging and a questioning of collective cultural identities.

The book then takes a turn in Chapter 5 to focus on 'globalised Islam'. This is a critical discussion of Islam, which develops the argument that Islam in a general sense has not 'progressed' and is culturally 'backward'. While this is later (in Chapter 8) followed by a wider critique of religious fundamentalism, Islam is here singled out as requiring 'special treatment'. It is in this chapter that the earlier mentioned underlying assumptions become most pronounced, and at times very explicit: 'To dedicate one's life to God in an extreme way encourages the Muslim to feel morally superior' (p. 107). This is followed by well-rehearsed arguments about gender inequality, male sexual repression and violence. Lull constructs a clear binary here between 'tradition' and 'modernity', which has the effect of essentialising Islam, but more importantly also contradicts the central arguments of his book. For example, he argues that the disorienting effects of modernisation become 'even more extreme when those men and their families migrate to the West' (p. 117). Fortunately however, 'mass media and the internet expose the unfairness and offer the possibility of reform' (p. 116). This fails to explain the radicalisation of some Muslim youths in the West, who grew up with the mass media and the internet. The chapters that follow further develop the case for 'cultural transparency', 'cosmopolitanism', 'open spaces of global communication', and 'the democratic secular imperative'. Ultimately, hope is to be found in 'human agency' and the cultivation of a 'universal moral code'. The onus however is squarely on Islam to come to the party, for as Lull argues, 'the

pressing question that arises in today's cultural landscape is whether mainstream Islam – as it interacts with the complexities and contradictions of national, regional, and global political and cultural realities – can ultimately respond productively to the challenges that modernity and globalisation will continue to pose' (p. 147). If not, it is clear who is to blame.

On the face of it, David Gauntlett's book *Creative Explorations*, has very little to do with Lull's book. However, the contrasts between them provide some interesting opportunities for comparison, primarily in the area of media and identity. Where Lull's book is based on a series of assumptions and inferences about identity construction, and the effects of the media on this, Gauntlett sets out to question such assumptions and to develop new approaches to identities and audiences, as the subtitle of his book suggests. To be fair, Lull never claims that his arguments are based on empirical evidence, and this is clearly beyond the aims and scope of his book. However, using Gauntlett's approach to test some of Lull's claims about identity (in particular Muslim identities) would make for an illuminating research study.

While Gauntlett's book reports on an actual research study, the results of this study are not discussed until Chapter 8 and 9, as the book's main focus is on methodology and approaches to social research. He draws on a wide range of disciplines from neuroscience to philosophy, and art history to social theory, to explore the ways in which researchers can embrace people's everyday creativity to understand social experience and identity. So while Lull mentions, in his chapter on the 'push and pull' of culture, that there is a dialectic relationship between collective public identities, and individual private identities, Gauntlett zooms right in on this relationship to explore how this operates in practice in everyday contexts. In the process, he sets out to develop new approaches to research into identity construction that go beyond the linguistic level of traditional interviews and focus groups. The main example in the book is a study in which he asked participants to build a model of their identity in Lego. Based on the results of this study which uses a 'creative reflective model', he argues that the model provides insights into how individuals present themselves, understand their own life story and connect with the social world. The creative reflective model itself is a response to the perceived limitations of trying to access identity (experience) through language. Gauntlett identifies two main problems with the latter: firstly, in interviews or focus groups, the researcher often tries to 'get people to put into words something which they had not previously considered in any detail, or verbalized' (p. 3); secondly, the researcher often preselects 'something as being of importance to people and then wants people to explain why' (p. 3). By contrast, Gauntlett's approach 'allows participants to spend *time* applying their playful or creative *attention* to the act of *making* something symbolic or metaphorical, and then *reflecting* on it' (p. 3, original emphasis). The Lego study in this book is not the first to use this method, and others have used for example video diaries, but this book offers a very well-developed rationale for using this method, and in the process of justifying itself gives a comprehensive overview of the relevant methodological debates. Like Lull, Gauntlett writes in a very accessible and at times highly amusing style, and the book's chapters follow a logical sequence.

As a starting point in the introduction, Gauntlett revisits his earlier published article 'Ten Things Wrong with the Effects Model' (1998), which is an effective way of debunking some of the claims made in the name of 'effects research', which is now widely discredited in the academy, but continues to have strong currency in the popular media. This sets the tone for a series of chapters (2 through to 5) which provide discussions about identity from wide ranging disciplinary angles, from psychology, via sociology and the philosophy of science, to brain research, beginning with a discussion about the self and creativity. Not only do these chapters develop the theoretical background and justification for the later discussed methodology, but they also collectively provide a highly accessible overview and synthesis of influential thinkers in the field of identity. Gauntlett playfully probes and questions individual theories, and in the process collects relevant bits to inform his final analysis. Some of these theories are discussed in Lull's book as well, but to much more of a polemic effect in his case. Rather than providing a synthesis of a synthesis here, Gauntlett's following summary of neurobiologist and philosopher of science Gunther Stent's 'eliminative view of cognition' can be seen as exemplary of his style in these chapters:

> If people make sense of the world through a process of destroying a mass of 'data' at high speed, and slotting it into established patterns and categories by which we can recognise what is left, this could form part of an explanation of many social phenomena from, for example, religion (which offers a set of ready-made structures to help people make sense of the world) to prejudice (which occurs when ready-made structures are imposed without reflective thought). To think about this neuroscientific finding in a different way, one could remark that if people are discarding most of it – it is amazing that we manage to end up with any compatible worldviews at all (p. 15).

This is then 'tested' against other theories in a style that follows Karl Popper's model of falsifiability, in which he 'wishes for a range of interesting and creative views to be brought onto the playing-field of knowledge, to be kicked around until the weaker ones are forced to retire to the sidelines' (p. 48). While Gauntlett's apparent playfulness and eclectic mix of theories and theorists may suggest a kind of postmodern 'anything goes, anything is relative' impulse, this is far from what this book is about. Each chapter is drawn to a close with a set of clearly laid out conclusions, which explain the justification of the discussion itself, as well as the relevance of various theories to the project the book is working towards. The main overall point here is that identity is a process, the meaning of which is far more accessible to researchers if their research subjects have been provided with time to reflect on it, than if they are asked to verbalise it on the spot

In the next two chapters, Gauntlett discusses a number of other relevant studies that are based on similar assumptions. This fits the main purpose of the book, which is to 'introduce new creative research methods – research processes in which people are asked to *make* things, and then reflect on them, rather than having to speak instant reports, or reveal themselves in verbal discussions' (p. 92). Examples of other relevant studies include Gauntlett's own 'Video Critical' study (Gauntlett, 1997), in which children were asked to make videos about 'the environment', and his 'Drawing Celebrity' study

(Gauntlett, 2005), in which children were asked to draw a celebrity they would like to be. In each case, the creative process was followed by an interview where participants were asked to reflect on and explain their creations. Other studies discussed include Bloustein's Australian study of teenage girls (Bloustein, 1998), which also used video, and the European Commission funded CHICAM (Children in Communication about Migration) project (De Block, Buckingham & Banaji, 2005), amongst others. The main final focus of the book is Gauntlett's Building Identities in Metaphors project, which was designed in collaboration with Lego Serious Play, a concept and methodology originally designed by the Lego Company to help 'organisations have more effective meetings to solve complex strategic issues' (p. 129). Theoretically, the process is based on Piaget's notion of constructivism, and it relies on providing a non-judgmental environment that stimulates a free-thinking playful process and state of what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow' (p. 131). Other assumptions underlying this method include the notion that a stable sense of self is arrived at retrospectively, and that people strife for a sense of unity (hence the importance of narrative) (p. 141). The participants were asked to explore how they viewed their own identities, and represented a range of people including professionals and unemployed people.

One significant conclusion to come out of the study is that 'metaphors are not merely useful tools for communication; they are central to understanding human experience' (p. 151). This is one reason why this method would potentially be so illuminating, if applied to test some of the assertions that Lull makes in his book. For his methodology, Gauntlett further usefully draws on Paul Ricoeur's concept of hermeneutics, which is based on the idea that the world cannot be known, but must be interpreted. This four-step process of interpretation (pre-configuration, configuration, emplotment, and refiguration) (p. 167) is reflected in what the participants in this study were asked to do, finishing with an interview in which they were asked to explain their creations. Central to how individuals thought about their identities were 'unity, sociability and a journey' (p. 180). Unity refers to a stable sense of self, based on a unified 'story', which includes elements that are normally not shared with others. Sociability refers to those elements of identity that are defined in relation to others, while a journey was a common way of explaining where they were at (temporarily 'whole'), and how they arrived there.

The final chapter in Gauntlett's book very clearly presents eleven main findings, which pull the whole book nicely together. All these findings are well supported and clearly explained, and would likely make Popper proud. Ultimately then, the book convincingly argues that create and visual research methods have a lot to offer, because they allow people to communicate different kinds of information; that the use of metaphors has always been considered important in a linguistic context, but in an explicitly creative and visual context metaphor gets elevated to central stage; that research participants need reflective time to construct knowledge; that the notion of 'identity' is a fully integrated part of everyday life for the participants in this study; that identities are typically unified, not fragmented; that people carve out their individuality, but within a social sphere; that media studies often places too much emphasis on the media, which bears no relation to the importance that people afford it; that people generally do not think that the media influences their identity much; however, that there is a role for media in thinking about

identity, namely as a 'vast laboratory for thought experiments' (p. 194) and as templates for ethical scenarios.

In his concluding comments, Gauntlett notes that academics often reduce identity to a set of generic categories such as gender, ethnicity, physical ability, or in Lull's case Islam. As one of his conclusions is simply that people are complex, he prefers in this book to approach the concept of identity 'by seeing *what identity means to people themselves*' (p. 195, original emphasis). Taking this approach as a starting point to test Lull's arguments and assertions, may present us with a first step on the way to 'getting used to one another'.

References

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