DISCUSSING MEDIA, MIGRATION AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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These open discussions were set up in the framework of the Training Workshop on “Methodologies for Research, on Migration, Media and Intercultural Dialogue”. The title for the first discussion was “The Role of Media in Interdisciplinary Research on Migration”; while the second was entitled “Intercultural Dialogue and its relevance to policy formation on Migration”. In accordance with the work traditionally carried out by CIDOB’s Intercultural Dynamics Programme, the aim of these two open discussions was to provide a meeting space where ideas and concerns about methodologies could be pooled together, by people who are actually dealing with these specific challenges in their everyday research work.

The first session was introduced by Dr Parvati Nair, director of the Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility of United Nations University (UNU-GCM), who reflected on the connections between migration and media, with special regard to the implications of this relation for research. The second session, meanwhile, was presented by Dr Tendayi Bloom and Dr Valeria Bello, both Research Fellows at the Institute on Globalization, Culture and Mobility of United Nations University (UNU-GCM). They presented some of the methodological problems they encountered when, within UNU-GCM, they were asked to look at intercultural dialogue and, more specifically, to give some policy recommendations on intercultural dialogue. In both cases, after the brief introduction of the topics, the floor was given to the audience for them to contribute to the discussion from their own research experience.

What follows is a summation of the main ideas raised in the discussions. They have been structured in an attempt to build a coherent whole, even

if it must be acknowledged that the ideas offered multiple possibilities of organisation. The article is organised into six thematic chapters, which are very much interlinked: 1) methodological approach and interdisciplinarity; 2) policy vs. politics; 3) the power of language; 4) media as data source for research; 5) the relation between media and migration, questioning the “third space”; and 6) a sort of conclusion on some possible trends in the future of intercultural dialogue. The aim of this article is not to thoroughly develop very specific ideas, but rather to stay true to the discussion and give some food for thought on a broader range of topics.

Methodological approach and interdisciplinarity

Some considerations might be made prior to explaining the ideas that were discussed in these sessions. First, the fact that—as it is usual when talking about intercultural dynamics— the audience’s composition was very diverse, not only in terms of topic, but also with regard to disciplines and methodologies employed in the research. More specifically, the disciplines of the participants in this open discussion ranged from linguistics to sociology, art history, international relations and communication. Given this diversity, the issues touched upon were also very varied. In the case of the second discussion, for instance, what was presented as a policy-oriented debate ended up taking its own path and becoming a discussion that went beyond policy to tackle issues that might not be directly related to policy but which are equally necessary for a broader approach to intercultural dialogue.

There seemed to be a wide consensus that the combined use of different methodologies and interdisciplinarity are distinctive features of research on topics that may fall into the category of intercultural dynamics (intercultural dialogue, the relation between media and migration...). Among the audience, there were young researchers working on varied topics from very different disciplines: universal patterns of language evolution; Chinese contemporary Art; inter-faith Israeli-Palestinian marriages; Brazilian foreign policy; integration of minorities –Copts in particular– in Egypt; and lesbian representation and visibility in the media, among other topics. What is more interesting is that, despite this variety, they all considered that intercultural dynamics were somehow involved in their work, even in the cases in which this relation does not seem so obvious.

In practice, all the participants were using a varied range of methodologies and some of them also included an interdisciplinary approach in their research. Apart from this diverse methodological and disciplinary reality among the audience, the methodological approach was explicitly mentioned at certain points in the debate. It was stated that “there are no bad or good methods or methodologies; there are only methodologies that are a useful tool to examine one question”. With respect to interdisciplinarity in research, it was described as “1) using practice and experience in different areas to understand what questions needed to be answered and 2) just using methodologies as tools, the best tools to answer the particular problems that seemed to be presented”. Thus, the multi-methodological and interdisciplinary approach is not only a reality for the students who took part in the discussion, it is also a matter they consider it is worth reflecting upon.
Policy vs. politics

As previously mentioned, the question of how theory and practice can be analysed to influence policy was raised in one of the open discussions as a specific way of examining the relation between theory and practice, which is considered part of the researcher’s responsibility. The point was that sometimes researchers have to “analyse their concerns but in terms of how may they be relevant to policy makers and in terms of understanding ways in which they need to be framed to become relevant to policy makers”. In relation to that, it was also pointed out that, when advising (or trying to advise) policy makers, it is crucial to know who they are making those policies for (for the UN, a specific State, the European Union, an NGO, etc).

At this point of the debate, the issue was raised of to what extent researchers on Intercultural Dialogue should be concerned about policies. In other words, the question was: “why do we focus so much on policies, which are top-down solutions, instead of looking more into bottom-up solutions”, that is to say, “things that people propose to respond to the problems that affect them”. There were some different viewpoints regarding this issue.

On one hand, some believed that “there has to be a policy framework which allows this kind of organic process [people’s self-organisation in the face of a problem] to happen”. The case of Brazil, which just had a discourse about what demonstration means, was mentioned as an example of the different policy frameworks in place to allow these bottom-up processes. From this perspective, those processes could not “just happen”. The opposing position to this one considered that it is not a policy question, but a politics question; since “there are many policy elements in place designed to suppress what is real politics, the intelligent politics of people”, as could be seen in the protests that took place in Turkey during summer 2013. According to this viewpoint, this is a question of cultural politics and not simply of cultural policy and, therefore, not everything can be fitted into policies.

Bringing this issue of policy vs. politics into the intercultural dialogue arena, a misleading reading of this last argument is considering that states have nothing to say when it comes to intercultural dialogue; that it is something that happens between people, individuals, and not states. That was more or less the position of the United States in the UN Security Council documents that had been analysed and were presented at the opening of the second discussion. This way of understanding intercultural dialogue might be perceived as “a way to sort of move the issue to societies”, so that states do not assume their responsibility. The United States’ perspective—it was argued— is a very liberal one, “based on the idea that there is no civil society, but civil society is made up of individuals negotiating among themselves”.

However, taking into account and acknowledging this liberal inheritance, there might be mediation between bottom-up and top-down approaches with regard to intercultural dialogue. For that intermediate position to be possible, “it is necessary to be aware of the way in which political problems are talked about” and, in the case of intercultural dialogue, recognising the “different power relations in play and the asymmetrical nature of a
"It is not simply about coming up with policy statements to meet the world, but thinking about how political problems are talked about, and this can sometimes be translated into policy statements".

**Power of language, framing discourse and ideology**

On a different note, the power of language was also a recurring issue in the debate. That is particularly visible in the case of the concept "intercultural dialogue" itself, where—as shown in the analysis of the use of the concept in UN documents—"the framing of the discourse is affecting the way in which international policy is being developed". More specifically, in one of the reports analysed, "the words used to describe intercultural dialogue seemed to be different in the different linguistic versions of the document. The word 'dialogue', used in all languages that come from the Greek word *dialogos*, has the meaning of 'talking across' but also the baggage of Socratic or Platonic dialogue, which is a pedagogical process of reaching truth, the knowledge of one bringing the other's to truth. In the case of the Chinese word for dialogue, 'duì huà', it was originally used in theatre to mean the discussion between actors on stage before a traditional theatre piece begins". With such different cultural baggage behind the words, it does not seem pertinent to assume that the concept is simply understood in the same way everywhere.

Not only a word or a set of words may have different meanings in different languages, but a concept also evolves and, therefore, the meaning of words changes: "while between 2000 to 2007 intercultural dialogue discourses were very much linked to the issue of racism, after this, and particularly after 2005, they started to be very much linked to the issues of security and terrorism".

The use of words can be a determining factor when conducting a research study, too. One of the participants in the open discussion explained the problems she encountered during an on-the-ground research study on businesses and cities that worked together to help migrants in different cities (Nairobi, Kuala Lumpur…), when trying to explain the locals what they wanted to find out. This takes us again to the idea of "the importance of words to be used and how different people may interpret how we speak". On some occasions the words may even entail a given mindset that conditions the very research work. That was the challenge, by way of example, for one of the participants, who was researching on Chinese Contemporary Art: "What I am kind of dealing with constantly is the use of Western concepts to describe something Eastern. (...) It is kind of difficult because there is no Eastern way to describe them. For example, recently I read a book, it is called 'Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History' and it was a very interesting book because basically
what it says is that we apply Western Art History to other types of art being Arabic or Mediterranean or Chinese. But, can we really do this? And actually there is not solution to it because for example in China there is no Chinese Art History that can be applied to Chinese Art”.

The ideology behind the use of words is also particularly visible in the field of research on Migration. In this regard, the differentiation between migrants and expats was pointed out: “British people living or working abroad are not migrants but expats; in Malaysia, migration entails a sense of settlement, so they are called foreign workers or expats. Behind this differentiation lies the idea of the desirable and the undesirable people”. Within the field of Migration, the use of the word diaspora is also significant, since it is always linked to developing countries and not often applied to other contexts of people moving from one place to another. In the same way, migration is often studied in its relation with development, so that migrants are considered as walking wallets, as a factor that mobilises economic resources; however, this approach disregards the fact that “not every migrant can be an investor”, and that there are many other possible reasons or motivations behind a person’s decision to move from one place to another.

**Media as an essential source of information**

The role of media in research on intercultural dialogue has multiple dimensions. On the one hand, media are seen –and so it was noted in the discussion– as a valuable source of data; especially when, due to the topic’s nature, there is not much bibliography on it: “in the case of Israeli-Palestinian marriages, I have not a lot of bibliography because it is a controversial issue that is usually hidden, so people do not talk about it. So I suppose that I will have to use some tools or non-official documents [such as media] to get the information”.

Nevertheless, media as a source of information also presents some limitations. One of these limitations is linked to the issue of media property and production and the interests at stake, which may influence the audience/public opinion in a given direction. By way of example, it was mentioned that “if the owner of a media is against a certain nationality or identity –due to ideological or religious beliefs, to economic interests or to any other reason–, that media may represent that particular group negatively”. In this regard, it seems that researchers should always bear this in mind: “whatever media you are working on, you always have to consider the issue of sponsorship, because money never comes for free. There is always a larger agenda, sometimes it’s a very simple one, sometimes it is more complex. Knowing where a media is coming from, how it has been created and why it is being made… all of them are important initial questions to give you the full picture of what you are studying”.

Media may also, on some occasions, help to spread a one-sided view of the world; thus reinforcing the already-mentioned assumption that the messages are received and interpreted in the same way everywhere: “TV series and films are produced in very specific regions, and then circulated elsewhere and received elsewhere, which may lead to cultural problems of intercultural dialogue”. This is an issue of major concern for researchers, since it may condition the research itself.
With regard once more to the limitations that the use of media as a data source entails, one of the participants argued that “It is very tempting to use media as a source for research because now with digital media you have a huge amount of data, just by looking into a social media. However, it is risky because it might leave out those who are not connected to that particular social network, and take those who are as the whole”. Then the question about where to place the focus as a researcher –on the production or on the reception– was discussed, since some considered that a research study that looks only into production “may not be representative”.

Some researches have been recently carried out from this perspective, that is to say, by focusing on the reception, on the audience’s experience. One of the participants in the Training Workshop, in particular, was approaching the representation of lesbian women on the media from the viewpoint of the watchers of a given TV series. The interviewees—which included men, women, homosexuals, heterosexuals....— were asked about their identification with the characters. The results—preliminary since the PhD research is still ongoing at the moment of writing this summation—show that “Identification depends on the characters’ personality, regardless of their sexual orientation; people identify with characters when they feel as the characters do. The audience understands that the most important element in characters is the way they act in terms of morality (if they are good, bad...); that is what makes the audience identify themselves with the characters or not. They are able to empathize with characters if the character is a good person. It depends on how the character acts, not on her sexuality”.

Last but not least, media can also help to increase the visibility of minorities and, therefore, to raise awareness about their rights. As one of the participants pointed out, that is the case, for instance, of the lesbian community: “We started looking at lesbian representation because we thought that it was important to analyse the visibility of minorities in the media, so that we could find ways to improve this in a positive way. The problem is that minorities are always represented in the same way on TV and on the media in general; but if you have more visibility with a positive representation, you can get rights”.

In the following quote, one of the members of the discussion mentions some elements that a researcher has to keep in mind when using media as a source of information: “As researchers working in the field, we do not need to know only about the role of the media in migration, we actually need to be aware of the centrality of the media, the reliance on it, and also the contingencies of the media; as well as of the different media and different languages”.

**Media and migrants representation: Is there a “third space”?**

The relationship between media and migration, it was argued, “Begins with the fact that all thoughts/knowledge come to us through media”. Consequently, key attitudes towards the ‘others’ are highly influenced by the construction of this ‘other’ in the mainstream media. Indeed, the issue of representation very much affects the migrant’s inclusion/integration potentials; it influences the way in which audiences perceive and
then interact with the newly arrived migrant community. As someone stated in the discussion, “There is a very important role that the media plays in terms of migration, which affects the attitudes to the ‘others’; this construction of the ‘other’ in mainstream media is very important in order to establish or confirm a sense of a collective self”.

The interaction between migrants and the host population has been also tackled by many scholars from the immigrant’s perspective and in relation to intercultural communication. One of the PhD students depicted, in the open discussion, how this communication manifests in immigrants’ actions “On two levels of communication or through two channels: one is interpersonal communication, and the other is through mass media communication». Basically, that particular research showed that, “In order to avoid cultural conflicts, immigrants tend to choose two options: cultural integration or compartmentalization. If the migrants are integrated into the local culture, they can avoid the cultural conflict. If they cannot, or immigrants feel that it is not necessary, they would choose to compartmentalize. In this context, the mass media work as an obstacle for immigrants’ integration, because if the migrant community is largely settled in the local environment, immigrants may choose to stay away from the local culture. Apparently, this phenomenon is something contrary to the functioning of mass media, because we would normally think that mass media contribute to the global cultural integration”.

At this point, a methodological issue was pointed out: how to measure compartmentalization? In response to this question, some variables used – focused on the concept of cultural identity – were indicated: “Democratic, social, economic variables, like gender, class, occupation, social status… but specially the sense of identity, the sense of belonging and, what is more important, personality variables and media usage”.

Talking about compartmentalization led to a questioning of the existence of space between these ‘compartments’. This question seemed to be very much debatable. Some may argue that the third space really exists, especially among the second generation who feel “neither Oriental nor Occidental”. However, considering that identities are in a constant process of change, some of the participants found it difficult to define what this third space would be. In response to the question “Does the third space exist?” , one of the participant’s answer was: “I do not know and, even if it does exist, I am not sure if I like the concept or not. It is not so easy to say that one person is Catalan or Spanish or a ‘third space’. The fact is that identities are individual in the end, they are persons, and you cannot really categorize them”.

What future for intercultural dialogue?

While 20 years ago intercultural dialogue – or interculturality – was seen as something exotic that simply happened when two people from different ‘cultures’ encountered each other – especially if the dimension North-South was involved – the phenomenon experienced a boom when, in 2008, the European Union celebrated the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The topic became suddenly a priority for many governmental and non-state actors, which saw in this event an opportunity for gaining funding. “It was really a fashion, there were intercultural festivals and events organised everywhere”, one of the participants pointed out.
Considering the importance of the use of words, it might be taken into account that the idea of dialogue has been used and abused, so that its initial signification is sometimes forgotten: “When talking about dialogue, the pre-condition is that there is a disagreement and both parts have to reach a consensus (...) Maybe previous to the dialogue we could enter into conversation: because in conversations there are common elements, and that makes you get engaged in something. Conversation listens to difference, not considering it as a form of pollution, without the obsession of assimilating it and, at the same time, committing yourself to the other’s experience: from a shared something (something that we know) and with a certain degree of curiosity for what we ignore”.

Research is certainly a way to encounter the ‘other’, and this encounter is particularly conditioned by the sense of identity developed within the nation-state paradigm. Iain Chambers connects this identity construction to “The refusal to interact with the interrogation posed by a seemingly foreign body” (p. 18 of this same publication). Kevin Robins, meanwhile, suggests addressing and confronting “The possibility of encounter (...) in its ‘real’, immediate, and therefore often difficult and painful senses” (p. 27 of this publication).

Considering the different approaches to the encounter with the ‘other’, as well as reflecting on the meaning of intercultural dialogue, the elements behind the words we use, and on the potential and limitations of communication, they are all crucial issues for researchers to escape from the dynamics that try to impose a single and biased look on media, migration and intercultural dialogue.