Academic identities re-formed? Contesting technological determinism in accounts of the digital age (0065)

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Abstract

This paper will deconstruct ideas of the digital age from the perspective of the lived experience of academics and explore how relatively mundane technologies such as e-mail are multiple in their effects, disrupting aspects of identity and exerting increased managerial surveillance, while simultaneously (in the same in-box) providing a solace, research ideas, friendship, and politics. Drawing on the work of Barbara Adam the paper will contest linear accounts of the experiences of time assumed in theories of space-time compression, and suggest that attention needs to be given to the times of the body and the experiential which co-exist and interpolate the speeded up times of digital technologies.

Paper: Academic identities re-formed? Contesting technological determinism in accounts of the digital age

In this paper I want to trouble the idea that technologies relate to identity in any simple way, and as such contest a strand of technological determinism present in popular and some academic accounts of information technologies. It is not my intention to claim that the technologies we use have no effects. Rather I want to make strange some of the claims for new technologies, tease out some of their underlying theoretical assumptions, point to the discursive impact of 'cyberbole' (Woolgar 2002)

and reflect on how it positions academic work and time, and use these insights to think about academic identities (Clegg 2008a & b). Academic identities are simultaneously disrupted and reinforced in the discursive framing of debates about technology and through the ways different technologies are incorporated into the routine social practices of academic work In previous writing we used the metaphor of the 'emperor's new clothes'(Clegg et al 2003) our intention was to disrupt the notion that there were no choices to be made in adopting new technologies in teaching and to puncture the emerging narratives of inevitability and efficiency. In this paper I want to remind us that the bricolage of newer and older technologies and social relations that make up academic work is open to negotiation and contestation in relation to how we re/assemble them and make meaning.

The paper is makes four arguments. The first concerns the claims which are associated with a cluster of terms which are used to describe the impact of new technologies on society - the digital age, the information society (Woolgar 2002; Wajcman 2008). The second concentrates specifically on associated theories of time and questions the idea that newer forms of time supersede the old (Adam 1995, 2004; Adam and Groves 2007). Drawing on Adam I argue that what we seeing is the simultaneity of different experiences of time; the time of the body co-existing with speeded up time of the future imagined as open and waiting to be filled with new projects. The third argument concerns academic identities in the making. Finally I look at the ubiquitous and mundanely present practices of email (McKenna 2005) and argue that email usage (using multiple devices) entrenches audit and managerialism and facilitates the display of new 'transparent' forms of identity, but also enables the

elaboration of older forms of intellectual self and facilitates academic exchange (both 'real' and 'virtual').

It is clear from the wider literature about higher education that academic identities are in flux and being re-made as the nature and number of higher education institutions and their students change. Universities, while appearing to be unchangeable, have been remarkably fleet of foot in re-orientating themselves to government policies of the day. In this confused pattern of influences questions of technology might appear mundane, but this is in part because academics have been so adept at embracing and incorporating it. The story is not a simple agentic one, however, the seductions of technology and the need to respond are all part and parcel of governments' dominant framing of higher education as feeding the 'knowledge economy'. There are an increasing number of other actors in higher education who have grasped the affordances of technology to accelerate audit, to concretise, standardise, and regulate processes which are more easily accomplished through the operation of the virtual, not in contradistinction to the real, but as part of it.

It is not that technology does not have effects, but we are not quite sure what they are. For the privileged space-time compression might indeed be a feature of academic life and identity, and in so far as this is the case it might reinforce an agentic sense of the intellectual self not undermine it. For those lower in the hierarchy the constant demands for information might make preserving the sense of oneself as an academic more difficult, in both instances gender is highly relevant. The cultural studies literature has been bolder in exploring the extended possibilities for personation and playful creative desiring than the higher education literature, but the codes with which

people create their personal space are already colonised by the modalities of the market, and I am reluctant to speculate further in this direction. Indeed because of the centrality of the *curriculum vitae* to academic life and success it would seem likely that playing with different identities is likely to exist on the margins of academic identity not be central to it. My scepticism towards the grand narrative of 'the digital age' or 'the information society' does not preclude an acknowledgement of potentially transformative processes, but it does preclude thinking in the singular and rejecting the 'the'. We need to think about technology as embedded practices which co-exist with on going embodied selves and with multiple lived experiences of time. We need to reject linear tales of irreversibility and learn to work with and against, which is what I suspect many academics (and their students) are doing.

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Biography

Professor Sue Clegg heads the Centre for Research into Higher Education at Leeds Metropolitan University. She has written about the 'personal' from a feminist perspective and explored students' understandings of personal development planning and the significance of temporality for understanding higher education. She has recently published work on academic identities and research exploring how teaching and learning have become an object of scrutiny.