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Communication and Culture: Signing Deaf People Online in Europe

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Abstract

Deaf people are using the internet for the usual purposes hearing people do: socialising, entertainment, learning, business, etc. Evidence is emerging that they too are using the internet to forge new links and alliances both nationally and internationally. From these links may be emerging a new sense of ‘Deafhood’, with common experiences of being Deaf in a hearing-speaking world uniting signing Deaf people from all around the world into a ‘Deaf-World’ which transcends national and geographic barriers.

This paper reports a study of the online links and activities of Deaf individuals and sites on the internet in Europe. It examines Deaf-related blogs, vlogs, Facebook, Second Life and other social networking sites to determine themes of Deafhood and evidence of the development of more contacts that are weakly tied to the internet user that emerge in the online communications and activities of Deaf people.

Key Words: deaf, internet, communication, culture, Europe
Communication and Culture: Signing Deaf People Online in Europe

Notions of what constitutes community and culture are changing, due in part to the effect of changing communication technologies allowing easier connections among people far apart. These changes date from the increasingly widespread use of the telephone during the 20th century through to the development and expansion of electronic communication methods of several types: for example, mobile telephone messaging and computer mediated communications such as email and internet techniques such as blogs, vlogs, and social networking sites. This paper provides evidence of how signing Deaf people are participating in communities supported by such communication technologies and considers whether barriers between Deaf people and Deaf and hearing people are being reduced through their use.

The Deaf Community

It has become commonplace to consider signing Deaf people as members of a minority social and linguistic community united by their shared experience of education and life as a Deaf person, and especially by their use of a common sign language—different for each country (Ladd, 2003; Lane et al., 1996; Sacks, 1989; Padden and Humphries, 1988). Because of these shared experiences of life in a hearing/speaking community Deaf people have a very strong sense of ‘fellow feeling’ with other Deaf people, exemplified in the title of Schein’s (1989) book, At Home Among Strangers and Breivik’s (2007: 204) observation that, ‘Participation at transnational Deaf gatherings … are … referred to [by Deaf people] as “refill experiences” and as “being at home”’.

Despite differences in their national sign languages Deaf people quickly develop a lingua franca that enables them to communicate quite freely about everyday matters. This can be in the somewhat codified ‘International Sign’ which borrows signs from European sign languages and American Sign Language. It is used at more formal international meetings such
as the World Federation of the Deaf Congress, the Deaflympics and other international gatherings. When travelling and socialising internationally Deaf people use a negotiated mixture of their own sign languages which suffices for most communication needs.

The New Technologies and Deaf People

The impact of new technologies is greater and more widespread within cultures and groups which have the resources and education to exploit them. Barriers between the haves and have nots derive from the confidence and knowledge that come from education and the cost of equipment. A so-called ‘digital divide’ thus extends previously existing barriers that divide members of societies (see The Digital Divide Network: http://www.google.com.au/search?q=digital+divide&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a). There is evidence (Karchmer and Mitchell, 2003) that many Deaf people often have difficulties with written language, so it would be expected that widespread use of communication via text messaging and text on web-based sites would disadvantage some Deaf people so that the digital divide might be even more pronounced for those disadvantaged by relative lack of resources and education.

Cohesive Ties in Deaf Communities

The strong cohesion in Deaf communities may sometimes work against their best interests. Deaf communities can be regarded as ones in which ‘strong ties’ (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) predominate. Granovetter argues that ‘the strength of a tie is a … combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie’ (1973: 1361). Stronger ties ‘involve larger time commitments’ and Granovetter reports ‘empirical evidence that the stronger the ties between two individuals, the more similar they are, in various ways’ (1973: 1362). He argues that ‘our
acquaintances (*weak ties*) are less likely to be socially involved with one another than are our close friends (*strong ties*) (1983: 201). Granovetter suggests that ‘weak ties’ between people encourage not only wider diffusion of information among them but also that people with more weak ties are open to more information and hence new ideas than those whose friendship and social networks are composed of strong ties. Granovetter suggests that

individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends. This deprivation will not only insulate them from the latest ideas and fashions but may put them in a disadvantaged position in the labor market (1983: 202).

This is particularly important in the case of strongly cohesive communities. In his 1973 paper Granovetter used as an example of strong ties the Italian community in Boston’s West End, described as ‘cohesive’, members of which were ‘unable to even form an organization to fight against the “urban renewal” which ultimately destroyed it’ (1973: 1373; italics in original). Because their socializing was done in groups of family and friends they had mostly strong ties and did not join outside organisations where weak ties to other members would have led to wider connections and more chance of finding and sharing information of common interest and support. On the other hand, Charleston, a similar working class area of Boston, was able to resist the city’s urban renewal plan because its ‘rich organizational life’ developed connections to many more groups as sources of information and support (they had more weak ties) than just their family and close friends.

This paper examines evidence that the internet and new communication technologies will be embraced by Deaf people because: (1) they offer wider possibilities to strengthen existing strong ties within particular Deaf communities and extend their weak ties with other Deaf communities, and (2) they offer wider possibilities to connect with others who are not Deaf and to make with them the weak ties that provide connections to ideas and people
outside the Deaf community. However, as noted above, these opportunities could be limited by lower literacy skills, lack of knowledge about how to use facilities and equipment, and cost constraints that limit access to equipment (Boeltzig and Pilling, 2007; Pilling et al., 2004).

Thus this paper predicts that there will be some tension in Deaf people’s adoption of new communication technologies because promoting forces and disrupting forces will pull in different directions. Those forces which promote greater connection within Deaf communities will be those which enable Deaf people to communicate visually in the ways in which they have been traditionally accustomed to in face-to-face situations with other Deaf people—that is, by signing with other Deaf people who can understand their local sign language. In Granovetter’s terms these forces will reinforce strong ties among members of Deaf communities. Disrupting forces will be unleashed by access to new communication methods such as SMS and internet text-based communication technologies which will open up a larger pool of potential informants who will form bridges (weak ties in Granovetter’s terms) to people with different and wider information and interests.

Method

In order to examine the use of electronic communication technology by Deaf people in Europe and its impact on their lives and activities, a number of internet search engines were utilized to survey sites related to Deaf people. Sites surveyed included Deaf-related blogs and vlogs, mailing lists, newsgroups, online service and information sites as well as social network sites such as Facebook, Second Life and Camfrog.

Findings

Deaf People Using the Internet

The internet is extending the activities and reach of existing Deaf organisations. Most countries have national associations of Deaf people. These associations have mostly established an internet presence. There are many ‘Deaf’ national websites (e.g., Germany: 
Most of these national activities have international counterparts: the European Association of the Deaf (http://www.eudnet.org/), the World Federation of the Deaf (http://www.wfdeaf.org/), the Deaflympics (second only in age to the Olympic Games; began in 1924, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deaflympics) and the very large ‘The Deaf Way’ international cultural festival (The Deaf Way I, Erting et al., 1989; The Deaf Way II, Goodstein and Brown, 2004; both of these volumes provide extensive coverage of Deaf culture, community and history).

Deaf People and Telecommunications

As the voice telephone (whether fixed line or mobile) is the most frequent means of telecommunication in modern communities for personal, social and vocational purposes, Deaf people whose preferred means of communication is a community sign language have been seriously disadvantaged by their inability to use such telephones. Since the 1970s this has been partly remedied by the use of the Telephone Typewriter (TTY; known also as Minicom, Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) and other names in various countries). This has been convenient, if slow and non-synchronous for Deaf people communicating with one another via TTY or with hearing people and services via relay systems which now exist in many countries (European Relay Services for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Speech Impaired — http://www.european-relay.com/; M. R. Power et al., 2007; Pilling et al., 2006; Kleeb, 2000). More recently, the use of mobile telephone Short Message Service (SMS), email and
other electronic means of communication have also gained popularity among Deaf people (Pilling and Barrett, 2007; D. Power et al., 2007; Bakken 2005; Breivik, 2005; Power and Power, 2004). These facilities enable Deaf people to communicate telephonically with other Deaf people and hearing people and services on a more equal footing than before.

A recent advance that will enable deaf and hearing people to communicate directly with one another has been the development of SMS-to-voice and voice-to-SMS technologies, albeit not designed for Deaf people, that will 'translate' SMS text to voice and vice versa. ‘This means that SMS messages can now be sent to a land line number, the text is converted into a voice and left in the voice box or the phone is rung and the message read out’ (Abrahams, 2006, ¶¶ 3, 4). ‘Speech to text’ and ‘text to sign’ systems which will be of similar benefit to Deaf people are becoming available for email internet sites also and are further discussed below.

A recent project which would enable ‘real-time’ text messaging where each character would be displayed to the recipient as it is typed by a sender and would speed up more flexible communication for Deaf people is the formation of the ‘Real Time Text Task Force’ by the Internet Engineering Task Force (Corner, 2008). The aim of the project is ‘to ensure that real-time text is as available for all users as voice is’. Focussed mainly on the needs of Deaf people, this development will also be useful for hearing people who will find it useful in noisy environments, when privacy is required, and for sending such information as addresses and telephone numbers, etc. The availability of this facility is eagerly awaited.

Greater availability and use of video telephones, both freestanding and via the internet, would allow them to be used by signing Deaf people for direct face-to-face communication and also to access video relay interpreting services for communication with hearing people and services (Adams-Spink, 2004).
Deaf People Online in Europe

Deaf people have taken enthusiastically to new activities available on the internet. For example, Deaf individuals are active on Facebook, Second Life, Camfrog (http://deafnn.wordpress.com/2007/06/13/camfrog-allows-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-to-use-sign-language-live-over-the-internet/) and online services such as those for shopping (e.g., eBay). There are also specialized sites oriented to Deaf people, including members of signing Deaf communities (including Deaf Camfrog sites, e.g., http://www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=5076545834&ShowSims=Y, Deaf newsgroups, e.g., http://deafnn.wordpress.com/), Deaf email lists (e.g., Bernd Rehling’s http://www.taubenschlag.de/), and information seeking sites (e.g., the British Google site which lists many deaf-related organizations (http://directory.google.com/Top/Regional/Europe/United_Kingdom/Health/Conditions_and_Diseases/Communication_Disorders/Deafness_and_Hearing_Impairment/Organisations/).

Access to online services is especially important to enable Deaf people’s utilisation of government services and has been the subject of a European Union project (‘eAccessability’; http://archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/resources/eaccessibility/section_1.asp) and the British Government’s Central Office of Information has provided Guidelines for ‘Delivering Inclusive Websites’ (http://www.coi.gov.uk/).

Recently Deaf blogs (http://www.deaf-blogs.com/) and vlogs (http://www.deafread.com/category/culture) have emerged. Many of these sites originated in the United States of America, but such is the internationalisation of the internet that European Deaf people are also using these sites as well as initiating sites based in European countries.

There is also increasing use of the internet for educational, research and recruitment purposes. Both adult and school educational projects have been undertaken. The German SMILE project is developing a range of interactive internet-based learning materials (Straetz
et al., no date) and there are e-learning projects using sign language and text in Greece (Drigas and Kouremenos, 2005), the ELGE project in Austria (http://www.eppractice.eu/cases/ELGE) and the ‘Visiocom: Video Supported Online Communities’ project in Slovenia (Debevc and Dugonik, no date) under the aegis of ‘Bitema’, which includes Slovenia, France, Iceland and Denmark (http://www.bitema.unimib.si/Description.htm). There are similar projects in several other European nations.

An example of the use of the internet for research is the ECHO project which enables the sharing of sign linguistics data across several languages (http://www.let.ru.nl/sign-lang/echo/docs/ECHO_SL_challenges.pdf).

To attempt to recruit Deaf people into the mental health nursing profession the British ‘Deaf People’s Access to Nurse Education Project’ used online materials; http://jarmin.com/demos/resource/nurse/print.html.

A recent innovation is the use of signing ‘avatars’ (‘digitally created people’) which are capable of signing text and speech. Avatars are now available for a range of national sign languages and the number is rapidly increasing, as is the sophistication of the software which generates them and their increasing naturalness (http://www.informationweek.com/news/management/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=201806222). Examples already available include the British eSign system (http://www.visicast.cmp.uea.ac.uk/eSIGN/Introduction.htm and http://www.bbc.co.uk/accessibility/win/hearing/at/sub_2.shtml), a French system (Elsi; Filhol et al.: http://www.limsi.fr/Individu/filhol/files/MFilhol-GW2007.pdf) and Dutch (Verlinden et al., 2002), among others.

To overcome the lack of information aspect of the Digital Divide several projects in the European Union and individual member countries have been established to attempt to make Deaf people more aware of the benefits of electronic communication and internet access
and to train them in how to obtain and use such access. Among these are the PRISMA ('Providing Innovative Service Models and Assessment'; Clarke and Concejero, no date) and WISDOM ('Wireless Information Services for Deaf People on the Move';


The European Association for the Education of Adults presented the 2007 Grundtvig Award for ‘an outstanding project in adult learning’ to the ‘Deaf are Not Deaf’ project which had as its

long-term objectives … improving the position of Deaf and hearing-impaired people in the community, helping them to break out of social isolation and developing their social skills. The project aims to improve their basic competences for better quality participation in society, and more dialogue with the hearing world. It also aims to enable Deaf citizens to take full advantage of the benefits that new information technology can offer, as a factor of social integration and improvement of their quality of life, including mobile phones, Internet, text messages, text phones, Minicoms, and so on (http://www.eaea.org/index.php?k=14611).

Deaf People’s Lives in an Internet World

We can see from the sites and sources listed above that there are many opportunities for Deaf people to use the internet and that in addition to seeking of information and possibility of connection with others which are available to both Deaf and hearing users, Deaf people have initiated a range of specialist websites which provide information aimed at their needs and opportunities to connect with other Deaf people.
In addition, the internet may be contributing to the internationalisation of the ‘Deaf World’. Breivik (2007: 42), speaking of one of his Deaf interviewees says, ‘With her important transnational experiences from the Internet, she clearly points to a transcending social and personal identity—and the transnational character of the deaf community‘. As one of Breivik’s interviewees says, 

I use Internet and e-mail on a daily basis. Most of my deaf friends use e-mail, as well as hearing friends and contacts. … Almost everyone has access, and we mail each other frequently. It is very nice, and we are certainly experiencing a new era. In the old days we waited in excitement for the postman and the letters he dropped in our mailbox, with the handwritten and personal type of letters. The times have really changed (2007: 142).

Many Deaf people online do not say that they are deaf (M. R. Power et al, 2007). Again, one of Brevik’s interviewees, 

One of the good things with this is that you can pretend to be a hearing person, and many of them write worse than I do. But most of the time you can be anonymous and I like it. You can talk about whatever you like to anyone (2007: 117).

There are a few difficulties though: the technology can catch people out on occasion, ‘[Being anonymous is fine] until someone challenges me to come closer by saying “I have a mobile phone next to me, I want you to call me now”’ (2007: 102).

Sign language is still preferred to text and people look forward to the wider availability of videophones:

I miss the opportunity to make use of sign language directly, so a good videophone would be the optimal solution. It is livelier and I could express myself better through that. It is OK to write Norwegian through the fax, TTY and email, and e-mail, but not
one hundred percent. With a good videophone, I could have concentrated on one thing, the transfer of thoughts. When writing, this is more difficult. (2007: 143)

Despite these developments, as we have seen above, there is concern that many Deaf people fall on the wrong side of the ‘digital divide’, and thus are ‘information poor’. Because of this many Deaf people are unable to take full advantage of these opportunities, either because they cannot afford the necessary equipment and connection charges, ignorance of the services’ availability and usefulness for personal, social and vocational purposes, and unfamiliarity and hence nervousness about trying to learn to use computers and other electronic communication devices (Clarke and Concejero, no date). In addition, many Deaf people have limited facility with their local spoken/written language and are hesitant to use systems based upon speech and/or text.

Access to speech is beginning to be overcome by the emergence of real-time ‘speech to text’ systems such as that envisaged by ETSI’s Duplex Universal Speech and Text (DUST) project (Mellors et al., no date: (http://209.85.175.104/search?q=cache:NStpLGvcrUJ:www.hft.org/HFT06/paper06/10_Mellors.pdf+speech+to+text+deaf+europe&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=13&gl=au&client=firefox-a) and a PowerPoint presentation with system diagrams at http://www.google.com.au/search?q=speech+to+text+deaf+europe&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a). These can be used both for person-to-person communication and in public settings where speakers are difficult to see and sign interpreters are not available (Brooks, 2000). In addition, captioned telephones are becoming available where real-time text conversations can be carried on much like on a voice telephone (e.g., http://www.captionedtelephone.com/). These services currently use a speaking intermediary, but will shortly be entirely automatic speech to text. A conference on these matters was held in Brussels in 2004 (Access to the Information Society for Deaf and
Hard of Hearing People: Towards a Common European Strategy in Broadcasting and Telecommunications) and the Proceedings with some useful papers are available online: http://www.ictrnid.org.uk/euc/proc.html.

For those Deaf people who do not wish to use text at all the emergence of signing avatars as mentioned above will prove very helpful. Systems are becoming available which will convert text to signs and speech to signs: e. g., IBM’s SiSi (‘Say it, Sign it’) method (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6993326.stm, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RarMKnjqzZU and http://www.fsdb.k12.fl.us/RMC/training/techtools/voice2text2sign.html.

Conclusion

This investigation shows that Deaf people are active users of the internet and of new communication technologies which are expanding their connections both within the wider national and international Deaf cultures and with the broader community. The former could make their strong ties (Granovetter, 1973,1983) stronger, while the latter could increase their weak ties, giving them access to a wider range of information and influences. However, choices to live in either or both of a more closely connected Deaf community linked by technology or to form more connections with people who are not Deaf through accessible communication technology will not exist to the same extent both for those whose literacy skills are not high and for those who for some reason are restricted in their knowledge about and access to the technology. Much work is still needed in education and access provision to make the benefits of modern communication technologies available to all Deaf people.


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\^ We use the usual convention of ‘Capital-D: Deaf’ to indicate members of a cultural and linguistic signing Deaf community.