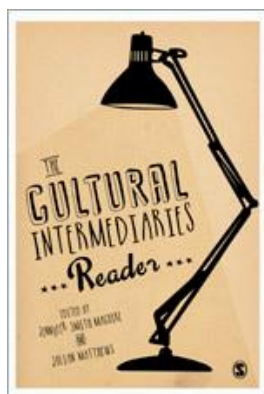


Maguire, Jennifer Smith & Julian Matthews, eds.,
The Cultural Intermediaries Reader
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Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at www.diversophy.com



Who is a “cultural intermediary”? While it would seem that the answer would be simple, this sociological role definition is quite difficult to populate. Hence, this small but significant collection of essays that seeks to examine those varied folk whose role is to embrace a product or topic and shape discourse around it so that rings credible and desirable to the cultural discourse of its intended users or audiences. These individuals who act as cultural intermediaries may be advertisers, marketers, designers, sellers and even the producers of what is being mediated.

“Creative seduction”? A “Creative Class®”?—yes, the term has even been made a registered trademark (itself a vehicle of cultural mediation). The presence and awareness of cultural intermediaries has been growing to the point where culture is beginning to be defined as “an endlessly growing resource capable of dynamizing society,” birthing “creative industries” with lots of money involved. One contributor, Toby Miller pillories this as “free-floating fornication and professorial promotion.”

Advertisers and marketers are seen as a bridge from production to consumption, but the list of participants professing this “profession” or labeled with it grows as branding, PR people, lifestyle and health gurus emerge in our everyday real life as well as clog the Internet and social networks in their efforts toward the qualification and singularization of consumables, in order to construct value. The identification of the participants in this profession is fuzzy, as it may range, on one hand, from those whose knack is to fly by the seat of their own pants (or skirts), on the basis of personal experience and their own cultural roots, to those, on the other hand, who immerse themselves in disciplined ethnographic, demographic and market research in order to define their roles and focus their skills as they produce the symbolic goods or “buzz” that validates products to end-users.

After introductory chapters that confront and attempt to make some sense of this meandering classification, the editors have chosen to produce, as the main fare of the book, individual case study chapters, viz., Advertising, Branding, Public Relations, Arts Promotion, Popular Music, Lifestyle Media, Journalism, Fitness, Clothing, Book Retail, and, finally, Food and Drink. In each the chapters examining these domains, though they may be subsets of each other at times, the authors attempt to identify what mediation looks like, who does it, and with what design and effect. They end each section with a look at the promising future directions for research.

As an interculturalist, I read this book in the light of the shifting definitions of culture in my own field, a shift from what are called essentialist perceptions of cultural qualities to a linguistic-based understanding of culture as an unending flow of discourse that shapes and reshapes our identity narratives. What fascinated me was that I begin to see more clearly the growing role of the social construction of discourse around the tailoring of consumable products and services to the identity discourse of individuals and groups. There was also curiosity on my part of how the role of cultural intermediary might shift or express itself in different cultures around the world, though the studies come largely from UK and USA Anglophone perspectives.

There is a particular focus on how products themselves are markers of class and social position. The term “cultural intermediaries” is young, dating from the work of sociologist and French public intellectual Pierre Bourdieu in the 1980’s, who identified its practitioners as a new *petite bourgeoisie*. However, several of the contributors do attempt to reflect how advertisers and others exercised a cultural mediation role prior to the setting in of the post-industrial age. While attuned at once to standards of aesthetics and popular tastes, it is clear that in many areas, classical tastes as social markers are now largely overturned by a kind of democratization of consumption practices and even by culturally-oriented production specialization. At the same time, traditional marketplaces in many cases are the privilege of the moneyed classes and no longer the bargaining stalls of rural growers and the less well-heeled.

In earlier paper, Smith Maguire raised the question of whether, in fact, we are all cultural intermediaries. In one sense, now that we understand how culture and identity are in fact discourse that we absorb and pass on as well as shape and express in our behavior, we can perhaps say that we have always been such. The question now is: How, with much clearer recognition of this resident function of socially-constructed culture and the fact that there are fresh payoffs for the creative class, do we want to exercise this role, aware that we must decide to what degree and with what standards or ethics and purpose we are motivated to consciously take it on?