Intercultural Competence in the Digital Age

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The digital age has been characterized not only by increased opportunities for online communication across cultures and for building communities of practice within and across national borders, but also by an exacerbated desire for visibility and popularity. Facebook, twitter,　blogs have transformed the notion of cultural community and intercultural communication.　Intercultural competence (Byram 1997) used to be defined as the ability to be curious and open about other cultures,　to learn about social, cultural, and political values different from one's own, to mediate between one's own worldviews and those of others, and eventually to be transformed in the process.　The use of social media, by contrast, seems to have become for many the ability to make themselves heard and visible,　and to join in a community of like-minded individuals who all share the same global values. Communication across cultures, that used to be based on an effort to understand the Other, now seems to be based on unfulfilled desires of liberation and validation of the Self (Harcourt 2015) and on the value of communication for communication's sake (Castells 2009).

Thus today, intercultural competence seems to apply to two kinds of culture:　On the one hand, the local cultures that consist of shared traditions and values that can be studied through texts and other authentic materials. These cultures are no longer as homogenous as they once were; moreover, they have often become commodified by the media and the tourism industry and have become pretty stereotypical. On the other hand, the global culture of communication that thrives on multiplicity, diversity and change, and has its own discourse and values. I will try and tease out these two different ways of considering culture and intercultural communication. I will discuss the potential of each one for learning and teaching intercultural competence in foreign language education today.