cyberspace
Renaissance of
the Emotions
Cyberspace
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BINÄRE MYTHEN

CYBERSPACE ALS RENAISSANCE DER GEFÜHLE

BINARY MYTHS

CYBERSPACE – THE RENAISSANCE OF LOST EMOTIONS

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF INTERACTION IN ELECTRONIC COMMUNITIES

KONSEQUENZEN DER INTERAKTION IN ELEKTRONISCHEN GEMEINSCHAFTEN

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It seems quite commonplace to us that every technology has two sides to its consequences; on the one hand for every technology we develop in an attempt to improve life, we believe we also will, on the other hand, find life impoverished in some way. Such has been our experience with a variety of technologies, from nuclear power, with its capacity for generating electricity and for destruction, to the written word, with its capacity for preservation and dissemination of information and for its creation of silent readers. Once we are accustomed to a new technology we accept both sides, preferring, one suspects, to assume that as the technology is refined its negative consequences will also be better engineered. But our impatience shows through while we wait for those refinements, as this excerpt from a 1929 magazine article demonstrates:

> The average human being of today is not impressed by miracles....He reads in a newspaper that plans are being made to connect New York with Tokio (sic) by telephone. „I doubt that it's practical," he may remark. But the next day he discovers that the thing has actually been accomplished. The day after that he himself calls up Tokio and, if there happens to be a few minutes' delay in putting the call through, he complains bitterly about the service. (Sherwood, 1929, p. 1)

It is likely that you have had similar experiences. Once we see that something functions as it should, we believe it should function even better. And woe be it if does not function properly, as when a videocassette recorder mysteriously does not record a program for which we have set its timer, when we lose a connection while talking on our cellular telephone, or when our computer freezes and crashes. Our attention at that instant is absolutely riveted on the technology that has done the unexpected, that has thwarted our attempts to blend it with our activities, and our attention is drawn toward the object and away from ourselves and our own expectations. We are, simply, more likely to restart the computer than to think of alternatives to it, or of how it shapes and defines the activities we like to believe we solely define, or of how we (and not its designers) think it should work.

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Many of our everyday activities are dependent on the smooth functioning of our communication technologies. We are required to learn about them or be left behind. What modern businessperson, for instance, does not have need or use of a business card, fax, e-mail, etc., now standard business tools?

And so we find ourselves feeling as if we are in a time of revolution. Indeed, whether it be film, television, radio, the Internet, virtually any medium of communication that relies on technology will at one time or another find itself deemed to be causing a „revolution." And just as quickly one will find some segments of society in opposition to that revolution.

Such is now the case with the evolution of technologies for computer-mediated communication, particularly the development of the Internet. Backlash toward these technologies has begun already and some decry the loss of personality that often accompanies the mediation of

communication via computer; others lament the amount of time taken away from face-to-face interaction by technologies that require expertise, undivided attention, or even appear addictive. Clifford Stoll (1995) summarized the backlash best when he wrote, „bit by bit, my days dribble away, trickling out my modem" (p. 2).

One might think that Stoll's problem is that his life is but dribbling away and not speeding along his modem's connection. But it may also be that Stoll's problem is that his days go by virtually without him, time passes through his modem without him noticing it. In either case we are caused to ask: What is progress? What does this „information highway," as it is called, do to social life?

Before the modern highway there was the railroad, which, in America, as John Brinckerhoff Jackson wrote (1980):

> ...represented an important development in our whole landscape. They and the new farms surrounding them were not, even in theory, part of a pattern of independent social spaces: they were integrated from the beginning into a well-designed economic process, into a linear system vividly symbolized by the lines of track and their accompanying telegraph wires. (p. 68).

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The spread of railroads had sweeping consequences for social life even in areas that were not bisected by tracks. And now the Internet's development, similarly linear, though not symbolized by tracks and telegraph lines but by the personal computer, keyboard and mouse, does not create independent social spaces per se, as it also relies on an existing communication infrastructure and is integrated into current economic processes in the telecommunications industries. Is it any surprise that most people use the telephone system to access the Internet via modem, or that the promise of high-speed Internet

connections comes via existing cable television installations? Like the telegraph wires that accompanied the railroad tracks, and the roads that followed the railroad tracks, ad infinitum, the Internet follows paths we already know, ones we take for granted.

But when we are unable to avail ourselves of communication technology we no longer take it for granted: we are struck by the sudden intensity of the local, the immediate apprehension that we are in the here, and now, and unable to attend to matters beyond our physical reach. Space is at that moment something we inhabit rather than something through which we move. We feel it „close in" around us. And what startles is that very physical presence of space, that feeling of something, or some absence, pressing against you when the lights go out.

Ordinarily, however, we „feel" space as a fish likely "feels" water. It is our own physical medium, a part of us to such an extent we do not even notice it, though we move through it and exist within its presence. Usually something startling must happen for us to recall our presence in a space, some bad news, perhaps, such as the collapse of the Reichsbruecke, or Niki Lauda's car crash. Your memory is not only of that news, but of where you were when you heard it.

Other times we notice space much less. Indeed, we take the individual's unrestricted motion through space to be an absolute right. We also believe we have a right to things like friendship, community, interaction and public life. Are these rights, privileges, or the very basis of our humanity? If we do not get such things we are less likely to look at our selves and more likely to look toward technology as the culprit that withholds them from us. As J. MacGregor Wise points out in a forthcoming work, we have developed the belief that political, moral and

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social problems are the result of a lack of communication, and that if we improve communication with technology we will also solve the various problems that plague modern life. The Internet would thus make community better. It would construct community from communication, rather than inhabitance and being, which do not guarantee communication. As Douglas Schuler put it:

> The old concept of community is obsolete in many ways and needs to be updated to meet today's challenges. The old or „traditional" community was often exclusive, inflexible, isolated, unchanging, monolithic, and homogeneous. A new community – one that is fundamentally devoted to democratic problem-solving – needs to be fashioned from the remnants of the old. (p. 9)

Schuler goes on to describe these new communities as having „a high degree of awareness...and principles and purpose" (p. 9), and focused around action, around „doing." In this conception, one growing in popularity, communities are not places to be, to engage in conversation (from the mundane to the momentous), they are groups of people seeking to achieve particular goals.

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But certainly communication that is not goal-oriented can be enjoyable too. And, what happens to these groups once their goals are achieved is open to question. In general the call for new communities seems more like a call to form committees, or at best teams, and democracy itself is defined as problem-solving and not as a way of life. It is conceived of as a means to a material end rather than a set of moral values, as doing instead of being.

Such rhetoric gives different meaning to the modern nostalgia for community. Instead of merely criticizing the deterioration of communities in modern life, it evokes a sense of lost opportunities that need to be

again made available, if only we would work harder (or have more money with which to buy online access to community). It is a response to the fragmentation of modern life along the lines of space and time, as it seeks to rally and reunite us in action and activity. But we should not overlook that is we who, in our rush to overcome space and time, instead fragment them, and thus cause the ruptures we want healed. Once we overcome space, once we are all connected in Cyberspace we are then infinitely distant from one another when we are not communicating. And we cannot, of course, constantly communicate.

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In terms of time, the Internet is the latest in a series of mechanical developments arising from „the demands of industry on time" (Innis, 1951, p. 74). It is part of a process that has intruded into everyday life, into the social (see Lewis Mumford's writing for poignant examples), that demands efficiency and results in fragmentation and what Innis termed an „obsession with present-mindedness" (p. 87). Perhaps its best description, and one that links the Internet's bias toward time to computing generally, is that of a software engineer who stated, „real time (is) no longer compelling" (Ullman, 1995, p. 133).

Our sense of history and our imagination are necessarily related to our conception of time, for we see ourselves as moving through time, and to some extent outside of it, rather than living within it. It is well-illustrated by the hold on our imagination of editing technologies, ones that allow us to manipulate images and sounds, space and time. The Internet's insertion into modern life represents a further displacement, or divergence, between our sense of „lived" time (the time that passes according to our senses, the time of „being") and our sense of „social" or „functional" time (the time that we sense as a form of obligation, or as time for „doing," for „captu-

ring" or what Stoll feels is being „dribbled away" against his wishes). And we should of course know that different cultures measure, know and experience time differently, regardless of whether the computer measures it in seconds or nanoseconds. Computer makers continually speed up their machines, but few people I know find that accelerated CPUs save them much time, or, better, minimize their time for „doing" toward time for „being." I usually spend more time with faster computers, rather than less time.

What we hope for, the solution we seek, via the Internet, to the fragmentation of life along the lines of time is to commune with each other, or, as Harold Innis wrote: „The general restiveness inherent in an obsession with time has led to various attempts to restore concepts of community such as have appeared in earlier civilizations." (p. 88).

But why restore community and the social? Because we require repose, intermission, without deliberate, purposive, action and activity, the time that allows for restoration and rejuvenation. As Lewis Mumford (1962) pointedly illustrates, the development of the clock and subsequent industrialization of life processes has meant that even at moments when we may feel we have „time on our hands," we find activities with which to use that time, or we feel guilty for „wasting" it.

John Perry Barlow (1996) noted that natural cycles provide such intermissions (a rancher, for instance, must patiently wait for a cow to give birth to a calf, or a farmer must wait for rain to end before working in the field) but that time too is often filled with work. The fragmentation of modern life is felt not as simply a „filling up" or a „speeding up" of time, it is felt as a loss of time with others, a lack of „being" with them. Instead of time as a continuity, as a movement with regularity that grows from and in turn builds up our sense of interac-

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tion, time is experienced as atomistic and discontinuous; time is not spent with others, it is spent on or for others, or even for ourselves. „Time" needs to be filled, for its passage is precious and to waste it is sinful. But how do we fill it via our use of the Internet? And, once filled, how do we make space for more of it?

One way is to adopt Schuler's recommendation and create some form of „work group" and use our time for action and activity. There is little doubt that such activity can have positive practical rewards, but again, it is often difficult to distinguish from frenzy – and what happens when one is done with it? Are we to simply move on to another „project," as if life were simply a series of them? To do so is to give in to the industrialization of which Mumford writes, and it is a sure way to narrow the options the Internet may bring for social relations. Though action and activity may bring their satisfactions, what of sustained, reflexive, personal intimacy? Internet users ought to shout this question loudly.

It is likely that what we consider as Internet communities are similar to the type of assemblage Benedict Anderson believes was brought about with the advent of the newspaper in America:

> Early gazettes contained – aside from news about the metropole – commercial news...as well as colonial political appointments, marriages of the wealthy, and so forth. In other words, what brought together, on the same page, this marriage with that ship, this price with that bishop, was the very structure of the colonial administration and market-system itself. In this way the newspaper...quite naturally, and even apolitically, created an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers, to whom these ships, brides, bishops and prices belonged. (p. 62)

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Similarly Internet users provide evidence that they feel the Net and its contents „belong" to them (McLaughlin, 1985, p. 102), creating an inversion of traditional community power and possession. No longer do we, as members of the group, belong to the community, rather the community belongs to us. Our sense of identity is not only derived from our identification with the group, it is derived from our understanding of the group identity. In this sense the Internet continues a trend toward marketing initiated by the development of the printing press and sped forward by additional communication technologies, creating what Beniger (1987) has called „pseudo-communities," the integration of diverse groups by means of mass communication and mass production. Though to some extent this may feel like community, it is not, at least as we have thus far known it in our history, for community relies on „inhabitance," as being not just in the same place at the same time in interaction with others but as being a part of that place, as if one is a part of the landscape. But instead of inhabitance there is recognition, the understanding that, first, there are others like us, and second, that others know we exist. Consequently, if we are to create a sense of community beyond mere recognition, we require far more than its construction, physical or virtual – we also require human occupancy, commitment, interaction, and living among and with others.

To put it another way, on the Internet community is what happens when one is making other plans. We are struck, as we use the Internet, by the sense that there are others out there like us. That sense is amplified by the coincidental increase, brought about by our consumption of other media, of the feeling that the world „out there" is growing ever-stranger and is less likely to resemble us as time goes on. The Internet brings to us, in our homes and offices, a sense of connectedness, but it is an aimless connectedness, a kind which reassures that

between „us" and „them" there may be some common ground after all. And, once reassured, anything more brings us too close to having to go „out there."

That aimless connectedness may make Internet communities no better or worse than offline ones, but it does make them different. As Anderson noted in Imagined Communities, „Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (p. 6). The Internet's communities thrive on the „meanwhile," they are forged from the sense that they exist, but we rarely directly apprehend them, and we see them only out of the corner of our eye. As my colleague Joe Schmitz has pointed out, in many instances they can be of great significance to people. Of course the popular press is fond of publishing reports of people whose personal lives crumble as a consequence of their life online. Naturally we understand online life only in relation to its offline counterpart, and so our comparisons are somewhat limiting as is, therefore, our ability to measure „significance" in these terms. We think, and sometimes feel, we belong to Internet communities, but we are not sure quite how or in what ways, or whether or how belonging matters.

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There are those who are finding at least some, if not all, of the community interaction and belonging that they are looking for in the interactions they experience online. If there is any doubt of that one need only examine some of the chapters in my own book, CyberSociety (Jones, 1995). The Internet does have its own „everyday," its customs, rituals, and manners, and those need to be understood, for, as John Pauly (1986) entreats, we are:

situated between the private experiences of consumer culture and the public structures of multinational power, between the proximate communities of everyday life and the everywhere communities of popular culture,

haunted by the echoes of our pre-industrial past, mesmerized by the images of our post-industrial future. (p. 103)

These issues are a reflection of some of the most compelling debates in social theory, ones that arise from what Jensen (1990) terms „the community/society dichotomy." Though writing about America, Jensen's words are significant beyond its shores, in part because they strike at the heart of modern social theory throughout the western world, and in larger part because they illuminate the hopes and desires of Internet users to achieve community and connection:

> Communities are defined as shared, close and intimate, while societies are defined as separate, distanced, and anonymous. „Atomized" is the most common descriptor of relations in mass society – each individual operating separately, connected loosely if at all.
>
> What is at stake in this dichotomy...is the issue of connection – how we are to link up with each other....Do the ties of family, religion, ethnicity, or geography bind us...what does connect us? Can patriotism or civic life flourish in a mobile, multicultural society? What kind of self is cultivated in an impersonal society? What kinds of loyalties, morals and character can exist if one is born without communal values and experiences? (pp. 71–72)

We must look first to ourselves, and second to our technologies.

These are the questions we should all ask, they are not ones just for Internet users. We must look first to ourselves, and second to our technologies, for the fulfillment of our social imperative, for what are essentially human needs and desires. What matters is not how we achieve them, what matters is that we know what they are and that we do so. The Internet can provide us with the means, but it can also make us more needy, and unless we are critical and careful, the latter is more likely than the former.

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Zusammenfassung

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF INTERACTION IN ELECTRONIC COMMUNITIES

Konsequenzen der Interaktion in elektronischen Gemeinschaften

Internetgemeinschaften sind zwar anders als reale physische Gemeinschaften, aber sie sind niemals ohne diese physisch realen zu verstehen. Eine Besonderheit der Internetgemeinschaften ist, daß wir uns in einer solchen Gemeinschaft nicht nur als Teil dessen fühlen, sondern wir auch das Gefühl haben, diese Gemeinschaften zu besitzen. Wir gehören nicht nur als ein Mitglied einer Gruppe der Gemeinschaft an, sondern die Gruppe gehört uns. Wir brauchen also zum Aufbau solcher Gemeinschaften mehr als im physisch realen Leben die Initiative der Beteiligten und ihren Wunsch, miteinander zu agieren. Internetgemeinschaften sind kurzlebiger und spontaner.

Technologische Entwicklungen tragen seit jeher Positiva und Negativa in sich. Die BenutzerInnen gewöhnten sich im Laufe der Zeit an ihre Nachteile. Mit dem Internet ist es heute nicht anders. Wir hoffen, daß die Nachteile einmal verschwinden werden, wenn die Technologien verbessert sein werden. So hoffen wir auch, soziale, moralische oder politische Probleme, die wir als Grund für die mangelnde Kommunikation ansehen, durch elektronische Kommunikation lösen zu können. Doch wir müssen zuerst uns selbst beobachten und so diese Probleme lösen, erst in weiterer Folge können wir uns den neuen Technologien und ihrer Aufgabe zur Lösung dieser Probleme widmen. Wir müssen vorher wissen, inwieweit sie zur Befriedigung menschlicher Bedürfnisse und Wünsche dienen können. Das Internet kann uns zwar zu diesem Zwecke dienlich sein, aber es kann uns auch erst recht bedürftig machen, wenn wir uns der Materie nicht kritisch nähern.

Wir hoffen, soziale, moralische oder politische Probleme durch elektronische Kommunikation lösen zu können.