

New Ways of the older World: Cyber Culture

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Abstract:

The increasing popularity of the various modes of engagement as postulated and made possible through the internet, or the information age, has a significant impact on language, culture, and psychology of the user and the using world. In enabling a world of virtual connection and atypical—to the world that saw itself through ‘real’ presence—responses, internet and its use has revived an interest in personal and social, unimpeded by spatial and ‘practical’ relations, which in turn sparked academic debates that have drawn together from Cybernetics, Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics, Economics, and Literature. One of the major concerns of Cyber culture studies is the problem of potential theoretical continuities and the alternate space where the theories breakdown, especially with regards to the traditional notions of social-personal-private equations. If one were to treat the platforms that are available globally online as a continuation of non-networked lived realities as opposed to a revolutionary rewriting of expectations and expressions, the question arises: how are these social replications sustainable in a period where data is consumed and produced self-consciously and critically? The rapidly growing range of theoretical and practical questions therefore raised by the shift encompass questions of selfhood and cyber presence, communities constituted entirely of online selves, the relevance of RPGs of Role Play Gaming and its possibilities in expression and withdrawal, the social inequalities that infiltrate the supposedly neutral cyber reality, and the ways in which our imaginings of the world has had to work to include social and cyberculture and the networked nature of either space. The question then would be whether the questions that were raised in the past on the nature and function of self by itself or embedded in a network are the right questions to raise, or whether they have automatically been understood to be different as the questions themselves are understood to be different in the face of the Information Age. This paper attempts to address these questions, and if not arrive at a resolution, then at clarifying the various ways of asking them.

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INTRODUCTION

The world as we know has been constituted through social, personal, and private interactions and processes of knowing one’s self and others, expressing itself through tendencies and tradition. The increasing popularity of the various modes of engagement as postulated and made possible through the internet, or the information age, has a significant impact on language, culture, and psychology of the user and the using world. In enabling a world of virtual connection and atypical—to the world that saw itself through ‘real’ presence—responses,

internet and its use has revived an interest in personal and social, unimpeded by spatial and ‘practical’ relations, which in turn sparked academic debates that have drawn together from Cybernetics, Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics, Economics, and Literature. The product of this collusion, Cyber culture Studies has attempted to delve into, and in the hopeful fashion that is only human, speculate upon the future of the internet, as it is preoccupied by its presence. In a manner rather unique to the discipline, cyber culture studies, its practice necessitates an exploration of the contradictions that

present and propagate themselves online and the ways in which it filters into the practice of everyday life and forms a feedback loop of altered habits.

One of the major concerns of Cyber culture studies is the problem of potential theoretical continuities and the alternate space where the theories breakdown, especially with regards to the traditional notions of social-personal-private equations. If one were to treat the platforms that are available globally online as a continuation of non-networked lived realities as opposed to a revolutionary rewriting of expectations and expressions, the question arises: how are these social replications sustainable in a period where data is consumed and produced self-consciously and critically? The speed and span of networked interactions and spaces complicate the process of dissemination as well as the nature of the content exchanged are not just an expansion of the current world model, but also a complication. Further complicating it is the presence of economic forces, capitalism as an example, social, global, political, and aesthetic interventions and influence on the internet. Indeed, these elements, particularly capitalism, as may be evidenced in the way advertisement and promotions have actively evolved in response to the altered worldviews present and proliferation: ecologically sound and vegan products littering the market space, where some brands take up a social cause such as racial and sexuality representation as a way to promote its product. This enviable adaptability inevitably alters the nature of cyberspace, an initially open and neutral platform, and presents an evolutionary sequence which is a study in consumer psychology as well as identity production .

In fact, there would never have been a utopic space that had transcended all unfair social restrictions, as the long list of banned accounts/threads on Reddit , a relatively open social media platform would testify. Content moderation has been very much necessary since the advent of the information age, so that 'community standards' maybe maintained and smoothen out the general user experience. The

criminal or unpalatable parts of networking platforms, in being assigned so, began the socialization of these platforms and dissolve any delusions as to the possibility of any practical, materialized utopia on or offline. Any new community formed online reinforces socio-cultural standards and boundaries, if transcending notions of spatially and culturally limited interaction and thereby fragmenting the traditional concepts of community

NETWORKING AND IDENTITY PROJECTION:

The term networked individualism, the essay claims, is a historical shift in emphasis from long term loyalties to family, friends and place based communities to a more fluid and dispersed social networks. In assuming a dichotomy, one reduces the complexities of interpersonal interaction and in assuming continuity, dismisses a break in the conception and practice of selfhood. The hardware that is involved in the participation of an internet culture and their role as an extension of what carries personhood make it a function extension of personal expression and keeper of private selfhood. Micro-level interactions (personal interaction and its nature) and macro-level phenomena(the ways in which information flows in society) are naturally uploaded into the cyberspace and therefore becoming part of order of operation and are exhibited as phenomena.

The rapidly growing range of theoretical and practical questions therefore raised by the shift encompass questions of selfhood and cyber presence, communities constituted entirely of online selves, the relevance of RPGs of Role Play Gaming and its possibilities in expression and withdrawal, the social inequalities that infiltrate the supposedly neutral cyber reality, and the ways in which our imaginings of the world has had to work to include social and cyberculture and the networked nature of either space. The question then would be whether the questions that were raised in the past on the nature

and function of self by itself or embedded in a network are the right questions to raise, or whether they have automatically been understood to be different as the questions themselves are understood to be different in the face of the Information Age. A tentative answer to that question was presented by Beer and Burrows in the article “Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0: Some Initial Considerations” (2007):

We are of the view that the discipline would do well at the present juncture to (...) embrace a renewed interest in *sociological descriptions* applied to new cultural digitisations (...). At a time of rapid sociocultural change a renewed emphasis on *good – critical, distinctive and thick – sociological descriptions* of emergent digital phenomena, ahead of any headlong rush into analytics, seems to us to be a sensible idea. We need to understand some of the basic parameters of our new digital objects of sociological study before we can satisfactorily locate them within any broader frames of theoretical reference.

The necessity of producing a new language to discuss the networked, self-involved reality of the cyberspace is the emerging point of cyberculture studies, where the language of the medium and the language on the medium differentiate the grounds of perception and engagement. The materialities of the cyberworld include those of the lived, situated spaces of the real world and physical body, aligned, traversed, and experienced differently than the internet. Kate Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior describe these differences in *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives* (2013) and further illustrate the concept of materiality and describe it to go beyond the lived, located actions and to include the users’ engagement with networks through smart devices, which act as a the window which allows the user to ‘look through’ their hands. The ways in which smart devices have been integrated into our daily life and the practice of a digitally mediated life is a ‘thick engagement’ with the realities of cyberspace.

The constant presence and engagement with portable smart devices such as mobile phones, smart watches, etc., as well as the popularity of augmented reality makes it critical to draw attention to the need to remake the conceptual understanding of what constitutes experiential reality and subjectivity formation, personhood (particularly in light of the role-play-like nature of social media where one may adopt as many persona as one pleases across the different platforms), social networking as it adapts to technology and what it means for the user and grounded, ‘real’ networks. In social network analysis, the nature of the subject, the production and assimilation of meaning-symbol operations and their use, and the nature of the network as it moves from processes to being, as it would in identity production.

The paper proposes to examine first, the nature of ‘co-presence’ and the ways in which the integration of cyberspace has influenced strong and weak tie networks, a phrase borrowed from Mark Granovetter. Secondly, leading from the conversation on co-presence, the paper will investigate presence, and therefore identities and how they are imagined and practiced in cyberspace, considering them an extension of real life practice and expression.

Co-presence in the traditional, social sense implies the physical presence of the participants, their interest in the shared activity, as well as a resulting influence which may be passive or active. An example would be a reinforced role within and outside of the setting and the circle, which may be passive or active depending on the nature of the participants. Co-presence has been theoretically deemed a critical factor in personhood development, as the personal is affirmed and assured in the social. Intimate, positive co-presence had been deemed necessary for the development of a ‘healthy’, socially present and active self. This applies primarily to children or child-like cases as with autism or mental illnesses, while for adults, networking carries a more practical than necessary

sense. In creating and compounding networks, social spaces allow for connections in the interest of professional growth and romantic endeavors. The romantic element in co-presence will be elaborated upon later in the paper, as it exemplifies the link between networked spaces and the lived reality through smart phone cultures.

The intimate relationships and their orientation affect children and adults alike, in the former, working as a template for further future networking and bond-building. 'Love languages' are an example of how a child may develop and deploy the patterns they have been exposed to, the first point in the developing of a psychology of patterns. Depending on the nature and frequency of the social intervention in the making of personae as well as the private self, identity practices are compiled and engaged in social settings. This less than simple process of complex loops of information processing and its psychological impact has been made more complicated by the introduction of a cyberspace, which provides a difference which maybe only manage to re-affirm the social self.

IMMERSION AND IDENTITY MANAGEMENT:

To meaningfully engage with the immersion as experienced in a lifestyle closely involved with the use of the cyberspace, one much first look into the use of media that came before it and how the transition from monomedia to multi and later transmedia works with senses. Our perception of the world we occupy is two-dimensional, even though we interact with a three dimensional world. From art to television, there has been an attempt at mimicking the world as the three dimensional, a trickery that was internalized and became a part of global social perceptive habits. The word 'immersion' therefore carried --- of interactive attention, and therefore becomes a mental exercise. With the advent of networked spaces, the concept of immersion complicates itself to include the hardware involved in its accessing—especially the smartphone as a

personal device, notifications, as well as its status as practically a part of the modern body. In *Bodies in Code*, Mark Hanson discusses the body as constituting a physical reality which is the product of mental compilation of its existence through senses/the experience of the body and French philosopher Raymond Ruyer's dismissal of the body as a merely scientific—that is, objectivized and external—entity, a kind of epiphenomenon of (radical) subjectivity:

technically-generated gaze of others, by the images of ourselves (including images through which we see ourselves) produced by and through society and the media. Hawkinson's (critical) intervention into the terrain more or less owned by Lacanian theory is singular because of its rigorous commitment to sustaining the collapse of the boundary separating the empirical and the transcendental. (x)

This anticipated interest is also prone to manipulation by the forces of capitalism, as had been mentioned earlier in this paper. Social media Influencers live a watered down version of the celebrity lifestyle, endorsed by brands big and small and with a follower count in millions. This difference in approach in marketing also allows an analysis of the way users connect to their social networks. A smart device is an extension of the modern body, and the gestures that are involved in its use familiar, and evocative of comfort zones. In presenting market spaces that use user data to personalize the commodities and presented through fellow users of social media who are after all not all that different from the user, while assuming the glamour associated with celebrity style living. Thus, the promotion promises simple upgrades that would affect lives drastically, and is the key to cyberspace marketing. In such spaces, a body is imagined by the user and projected onto the photographs and ideals of the social media, creating a gullible buyer and complicating the formulation of self on unstable spaces. The body thus divorced from its physicality becomes 'uploadable' in the sense that it is now

possible to present it on networked platforms and is subject to perceptive practices:

the inescapability of a co-functioning of “natural” perception and technically extended perception; it thus appropriates (or better, restores) the external imaging of the body as part of the body’s constituting power. We are therefore, like all beings, pure subjectivities. Our organism (excluding the nervous system) is a set of subjectivities of a different order from conscious subjectivity. (x)

The interaction of the immaterial body with the immaterial (yet material, just as the empirical reality of the body) networked spaces therefore is the beginning point for an enquiry into the digital-social self making. In returning to the concepts of co-presence and the implications of a network space as an overlay to the traditional traversed space, the questions of networking and the digital space’s influence on the expression and development of personae need reconsideration. Continuity of expression as expected in the movement between social and digital may be considered through an examination of social media operations, where networking, intimacy, persona formation, and marketing come into play. Visually inclined social media such as Facebook and Instagram for instance, works through sharing largely amateur photography and captions, unraveling a personal history in reverse chronology. Through careful management of media related to one’s account, use of filters either to create an aura of seriousness or gaiety, tag or untag pictures and locations, adding a sense of collective, shared experience: first within the picture through the presence or absence of others and in locating it in the real world, and as part of a post feed on the views page and in the timeline of the user. The activity of the user within the platform, including their subscriptions, the textual component of the post, etc., is also self-consciously maintained. A factor that does not go dismissed is whether the timeline favors the user’s preferred projected self or not. The possibilities afforded by social media

operations with respect to identity projection are endless and are treated as such. Lynn Jamieson, in “Personal Relationships, Intimacy and the Self in a Mediated and Global Digital Age” goes on to discuss the nature of intimacy and presence on social media:

(...)when ‘small talk’ or phatic communion is an important aspect of being part of a relationship, friendship group or community, then the mobile phone and the social networking website can enable those who are physically absent to nevertheless take part. Not surprisingly, given the high rates of adoption of mobile phone use as a supplementary or complementary means of communication, those who are socially rich in face-to-face personal relationships are often also rich in digital relationships. (26, 27)

The point where inequalities assert themselves is here—the ‘socially rich’ are enabled through existing social advantages such as familiarity with the technology, as well as the means to further this familiarity, cultural capital which is an instrument of polarization on social media platforms, along with the knowledge to navigate and differentiate between different platforms, presenting subtle differences that emerge as currency. An example would be the recently popular meme format, as shown in fig.1:



Fig. 1

Republished in Independent UK as part of a series in the article “The Best ‘LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, Tider’ Memes as Dolly Parton Sparks Viral Trend”, the meme exemplifies these differences in accepted presentation, where the user might as well be unrecognizable. Interestingly, it follows a sequential increase in intimacy with the viewer, where the LinkedIn section has Mark Ruffalo looking away from the viewer, inviting the gaze to evaluate him, as is expected in a such a profile. Facebook is the more social space oriented around community building and identities responding to the requirement: ‘eye’ contact with the viewer, a neutral gesture and casual clothes. Instagram, a space of freer equations, uses the bodies of the individuals to convey status; the relaxed air, the use of selfie or point of view photography, playful posturing, etc. break down the barriers of the screen and invites the viewer to imagine being a part of the group. The last section, captioned Tinder, which is an app that a location-based social search mobile app and Web application most often used as a dating service, that allows users to use a swiping motion to like or dislike other users, and allows users to chat if both parties like each other, has Ruffalo posing as though he were fresh out of the shower, playful, and teasing. These differences allow for a nuanced engagement with the content on social media and this knowledge also works to identify and ostracize those not fluent in these operations.

CONCLUSION

The pre-constructed and conditioned operative pathways that allow us to read the language of the cyberspace also allows for an appropriate response. These pathways are not defined only through the primary user, but exist as a network which filters out the supposed inadequate from points in culture to social systems. In such a space, identity making and projection is an independent, but culturally driven arrangement, drawing from social norms and mores in order to subvert or practice them. The possibility of continued socio-cultural and economic differences and the influence they exert on identity projections

may be discouraging news to those who had hoped for radicalization of socio-cultural systems along with the standard reading of the ways in which identity formation on networked spaces, but there also remains a space for normalization of previously deemed unimportant, demonized, or ostracized elements of social life such as issues regarding gender and sexualities, platforms for expressions of differently abled/equipped living, etc. While far from being wholesome, even if one disregards the encroachment of capitalistic imagination on all things sacred, cyber space allows for hope in the practice of subjectivities.

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