

Exploring Cybercultures: Critical and Constructivist Studies on the Internet

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The essay lays the sociological grounds in understanding the phenomenon of cyberculture in the age of information and communication technology. The frame of the paper is limited to constructivist and critical studies found in books and other journals. This essay particularly examines the debate on defining Internet culture and the many possible worlds and spaces it occupy in the lives of Internet users. It describes the beginning of research on the Internet and thus explains the dearth of materials in other paradigms. The paper recommends exploring other domains of interrogating the Internet as it evolves and matures through the years.

Keywords: Internet, cyberculture, Internet in the Philippines, information & communication technology, constructivism, Marxist critique of technology

The mythology of cyberspace is preferred over its sociology. I have argued that it is time to relocate virtual culture (or cyberculture) in the real world. . . . Through the development of new technologies, we are, indeed, more and more open to experiences of de-realization and de-location. But we continue to have physical and localized existence. We must consider our state of suspension between these conditions. We must de-mythologize virtual culture if we are to assess the serious implications it has for our personal and collective lives.

—Kevin Robins, (1995, p. 153)

THE BEGINNING OF INTERNET REVOLUTION

Quite remarkably, the sweeping success of the Internet has had tremendous impact on modern life and society. There is a revolution happening now amidst the technologically

mediated experiences and consciousness of people glued on the powerful computer screens and hooked up in a place called “cyberspace”. It is called the Internet revolution. How big and decisive is this revolution, which poses and demands critical scrutiny from different sectors of our society?

Around the world there are 2.4 billion Internet users and China alone has 538 billion Internet users or almost 50% of the total estimated internet population (Internet Usage Statistics, 2012). Per geographic region, leading Internet users in the world are in Asia with estimated 1 billion internet users followed by Europe and North America with 500 million and 273 million internet users, respectively. In the Philippines the estimated Internet users have reached to 30 million (Internet Usage in Asia, 2012).

The impact of the Internet, which gave rise today a “cyberculture” contingently or totally different from our socio-cultural reality, becomes an eye opener for social scientists to situate its contested site within the matrix of social relations. Often called in many names and labels, the Internet as “cyberspace,” “virtual space,” “World Wide Web,” the “net,” and many others has spawned literal and theoretical debates regarding the notion of time and space, community, devices, machines, and the self. A quick glance on the beginning of this phenomenon would reroute us back to the so-called revolution in the field of science and technology. Langdon Winner (1984, p. 98) once remarked that “countless books, magazine articles, and media specialists . . . step forth to proclaim “the revolution” way back in 1962. It is commonly called simply as the “computer revolution” or “information revolution.” Community of scholars, business gurus, and scientists upheld the notion of “revolution” as it treks and changes the social terrain of people in all walks of life. As the steam engine represented the industrial revolution that caught the beginning of economic progress across Europe in the 18th century, so did the IBM computer of the United States in the 1950s that marked the dawning of a new social transformation brought about by technological advancement. John Feather (1998) speculated that the stark contrast and comparison between the steam engine and the computer is all about man’s quest to perfect communication and memory, which are central to human experience. Historically, situating this phenomenon would entail locating it in the modern epoch since the technology

of the Internet started in the age propitious to contemporary society. In fact, Arthur Borgman (1984) characterized modern life succeeded by technology as the era of the “device paradigm.” According to him, the machinery where the device comes from is concealed to the public as consumers but what is visible is the proliferation of devices as commodity (Borgman, 1984).

The birth of the Internet takes into consideration the precedence of a cloak and dagger attitude of Western superpowers, the United States and the former U.S.S.R., to race against each other for global military supremacy. Dery (1996) explained that the science and technology race of these two powerful nations started when the Soviet launched Sputnik in space. Herbert Marcuse (1964), a leading member of the Frankfurt School, wrote in his book, *One-Dimensional Man*, that there was ambivalence of a seeming and apparent paranoia that emanated during the Cold War. To say the least, it is in this context of great political and social upheaval spreading across the world due to the Cold War that the Internet was born. The year was 1969 when the United States Defense Department put up the Advanced Research Projects Agency that functioned primarily to ensure military communication in the event of nuclear attack (Dery, 1996). This agency produced the prototype Internet known as the ARPANET. In 1983 the ARPANET was divided as Milnet and Arpa Internet for military and civilian use respectively. Then the US National Science Foundation took over the civilian function of the Internet in collaboration with US universities like the University of California in Los Angeles and the University of Utah for research networking purposes (Dery, 1996). The year 1990 saw the cessation of ARPANET and it eventually evolved into what we now know as the Internet.

DEFINING THE INTERNET AND CYBERCULTURE

Technically, the term internet is an abbreviation of “internetworking” which means the networks

of computer networks. There are two sides of the definition of Internet: the tangible and the ethereal (Bell & Kennedy, 2000). In the tangible context, we define internet by the presence of three elements: the computer hardware, the software, and the internet users. On the other side of the definition is the term “cyberspace.” This is an abstract concept, which appears initially in William Gibson’s (1984) sci-fi novel, *Neuromancer*. Gibson defined this as “consensual hallucination” (1984, p. 69). According to Michael Benedikt (2000), the novel depicts urban decay, a life of pain, disdain and paranoia. Using Benedikt’s explanation, the term is further elaborated as:

... a new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world’s computers and communication lines. A world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form . . .

. . . accessed through any computer linked into the system: a place, one place, limitless, entered equally from a basement in Vancouver, a boat in Port-au-Prince, a cab in New York, a garage in Texas city, an apartment in Rome, an office in Hong Kong . . . a laboratory on the Moon.

. . . a common mental geography, built in turn, by consensus and revolution, canon and experiment; a territory swarming with data and lies, with mind stuff and memories of nature, with a million voices and two million eyes in a silent, invisible concert to enquiry, deal-making, dream sharing, and simple beholding.

Cyberspace as just described does not exist. (2000, pp. 29-30)

Cyberspace is the imagined space of the Internet where interaction and relations take place between and among groups of people. Nonetheless, it is too hasty to generalize that it does not exist. David Bell (2000, p. 2) asked the question: Where is cyberspace? “Cyberspace exists in the

network of computers, modems, communication links, nodes and pathways that connect users into something . . . like the WWW (World Wide Web), the internet”. Considering these virtual places, in what functions do they manifest? The Internet provides multifarious applications and features like email, search engines, World Wide Web (a virtual library), instant messaging (chatrooms), social media, and countless others. Another way of looking the immense power of the Internet is by basically knowing its barest function. Christine Hine said that:

At the most basic level, the Internet is a way of transmitting bits of information from one computer to another. . . . The capacity to sent information from one computer to another can therefore be used to provide many different ways of communicating. Communication can be synchronous or asynchronous, it can consist of private messages between known individuals or discussions among large numbers in relatively public forums, and it can be textual or audio or visual. (2000, p. 2)

Hine gave two views regarding the Internet. The first view, she said, is to look at the Internet as a place, a space and location “where culture is formed and reformed” (2000, p. 9). The second way of looking at it, she argued is that the Internet is a cultural artifact and that it is in this respect that other scholars and researchers alike neglect and understand its nature.

With these explorations about the meaning of cyberspace, we can locate within the rubric of previous discussions what cyberculture is. Simply put, cyberculture is Internet culture. It is the constructed lifeworld of electronic and digital flow and exchange of communication and information where people meet, interact, fantasize, dream, desire, express emotions of guilt, love, freedom, certainty, uncertainty, pain, and disbelief. Robins and Webster (1999) described this as virtual culture—a culture, believed to be real, inhabited by a community of people. Robins

and Webster (1999) explained what Pierre Levy, a French media scholar, intended to mean when we talk about cyberculture. "Levy describes the emergence of a new 'knowledge space' that is in stark contrast to an older knowledge space that was characterized by its linearity, hierarchy and rigidity of structure. This new space . . . is distinguished by its open, fluid and dynamic qualities: it is a space of creative profusion and disorder" (Robins & Webster, 1999, p. 222). If the Internet or cyberspace is the phenomenon itself then it needs a ground for contextual and definitive location for its practices and valuations. It is in this sense that a social space is imagined and constructed to mean none other than the existence of a cyberculture itself.

INTERNET INDISPENSABILITY RESEARCH

The research of Hoffman, Novak, and Vankatesh (2004) considered the idea that the internet is more becoming an essential tool to families and to the society. "The idea is that the internet has become so embedded in the daily fabric of people's lives that they simply cannot live without it" (Hoffman et al., 2004, p. 37). Trends in the Internet usage in the US vary. "The study design included national probability samples of 906 and 1,200 American households for the years 2000 and 2003, respectively" (p. 38). According to the survey conducted, college students are the heaviest Internet users. Internet has become for college students as integral part of education. Research for them is the primary use of Internet. "It is used for managing all aspects of their academic and social life" (p. 38). In 2000, 47 million users and in 2003, 63 million users are for educational use. Caucasians are the number 1 users of the Internet with 63% in 2002 and 64% in 2003 followed by English-speaking Hispanics and African-American with 62% and 51% respectively in 2003 (Hoffman et al., 2004). The study conducted by National Science Foundation (Hoffman et al., 2004) showed that in 2000, 77%

of computer-owning households have Internet connection in homes and by the year 2003, this grew to a staggering 94%.

In 1998, researchers at Carnegie-Mellon University (Kraut et al., 1998) found evidence of what they labeled "The Internet Paradox." The study concluded that Internet use was associated with decreased psychological well-being and social involvement. Three years after this study, the HomeNettoo, spearheaded by Linda Jackson et al. (2004) was conducted to find whether there was a change of perception. In order to test validity of both contrasting assumptions and to find out which of the two is recently upheld, the researchers used unique samples consisting of low-income African-Americans and Caucasians using the Internet at their homes for the first time. The findings showed these:

1. According to the study "the 3-year follow-up indicated that the negative psychological and social effects of the internet use had dissipated by the third year, with the exception of stress" (p. 43). Internet use has no effect on the psychological well-being and social involvement of low-income AA (67% of the participants) because they were unlikely email users; and
2. apparently, participants never embraced the internet as a communication tool but they viewed it as an information tool.

CRITICAL STUDIES ON THE INTERNET

Simply put, the critical oriented research paradigm leans heavily on the Marxist or Neo-Marxist analysis of society and technology. Early debates on the field claim the domineering, oppressive, and exploitative nature of the mechanization or technologization of society. Quite fortunate was the arrival in the United States of some members of the Frankfurt School from Germany during the onslaught of Hitler's militarization and conquest of Europe

during World War II, one of which was the popular Herbert Marcuse who dealt with the excesses and emptiness found in late capitalist society like the United States in the 1960s-70s. Marcuse (1964) denounced the loss of critical thinking, the ability to negate the contradiction of rationality forcing the sublime, passive, and one-dimensional regimentation of social life. This he believed is due to increasing tendency to proclaim and seek forward the triumph of technology. In his attempt to critique modern society, Marcuse spoke of the artificiality of life conjured and mystified to make people happy and satisfied with commodified and fetishized living yet left empty inside and wanting. Another point to consider is Althusser's (1970) analysis of ideological apparatuses, which is a mind-game domination. Using Althusserian analysis, technology therefore is part of the superstructure, which is overdetermined by economic mode of production and relation of production and has become part of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). As such, information and communication technology demands the overproduction of reproduction of the subjects (unfree & subjugated) to ensure the viability of systemic and inevitable social control. From these analyses, the critical approach is carried on different debates recently in Kroker's (1996) critique of virtual capitalism. He blatantly attacked the restructuring of global capitalism that inheres a dominant inscription of virtual conquest celebrated in the emergence of the Internet. The information society and cyberculture is overdetermined and defined by social and economic structures (Loader, 1998). The technology of the Internet enjoys a relative autonomy in the matrix of social and global landscapes. With the same Marxist rhetoric of unmasking the dread of (post)capitalism, Kroker asserted strongly that:

We now live in the age of dead information, dead (electronic) space, and dead (cybernetic) rhetoric. Dead information? That is our cooptation as servomechanisms of the cybernetic grid (digital superhighway)

that swallows bodies, and even whole societies, into the dynamic momentum of its telematic logic. (1996, p. 170)

In short, virtual capitalism is characterized by the deadening of individual identities and social formations. This deadening regimentation however is reproduced in the digital superhighway, the Internet. One interesting claim however is the apparent rise of a new class, the virtual or technological class similar to the rise of the bourgeoisie during the early stage of capitalism. Kroker (1996) defined this class as "not a passive class, but aggressive and predatory, the technological class has an immanently global strategy for its swift coronation as the leading class of postcapitalism" (p. 172). Kroker claimed that the struggle between the virtual class and the working class continues in a different dimension called cyberspace.

The working class depends for its very existence on shielding itself from the turbulence of the nomadic vector of the recombinant commodity by securing its political foundations in the sovereignty of the nation-state; the technological class, politically loyal only to the virtual state, thrives on the violent passage of the recombinant commodity. . . . Deeply antagonistic and with immanently warring interests, the working and technological classes are the emblematic historical signs of the beginning and the ending of the twentieth century. (Kroker, 1996, p. 175)

The clashes of classes in the so-called virtual capitalism are motivated by the continuing upsurge of digital and electronic commodification of communication and information. Far from its democratic and libertarian ideals of pluralizing voices between and among different cultures, the Internet then, at this juncture becomes a wall dividing the West and the East or the North and the South. The cyberculture as we know it falls prey in the transcapital and neo-imperial claws

of a cultural industry reminiscent of Adorno's and Horkheimer's (2000) critique. Hence, the so-called digital divide becomes apparent. Since the Internet began in the United States and its proliferation maintained and supported by rich nations in the West, the balance of power therefore is biasedly tilted on this side of the world. Hence, a digital remapping of world political order is at hand. This divide is a gap between information rich and information poor countries (Feather, 1998; Dordick & Wang, 1993). "Information technology and modern telecommunications have made global aggregation of firms possible, have made the dream of worldwide monopoly capitalism a reality" (Dordick & Wang, 1993, p. 5).

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST RESEARCH TRENDS

The basic assumption of a constructivist view is an understanding (*verstehen*) of the phenomenon. This understanding proceeds into reconstructing the experience or representing the phenomenon as a text and a discourse. Hence, the methodological issues are grounded on a subjectivist and value-laden judgment of the phenomenon where its concomitant interpretations consider the hermeneutic circle of one's culture, language, values, beliefs, and social system. In short, a researcher dwells and participates in the unfolding of the experiences of his/her informants using the abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2000). In this respect, "ontological assumptions can be regarded as 'relativist' rather than 'absolutist'; the idea that there is single social reality is rejected in favor of the idea that there may be multiple and changing social realities. The implication is that there is no independent or neutral way of establishing the 'truth' of any of them, each social reality may be 'real' to its inhabitants" (Blaikei, 2000, p. 117).

Early research on this view values the contribution of humanistic studies especially in the fields of literature and film. David Bell

(as cited in Bell & Kennedy, 2000) explained the extent of a cultural analysis of cyberculture. According to him, "an important component of a cultural approach to cyberspace is to find it in our imaginations, to read its symbolic forms and meanings, to cross-reference to the ways in which it is represented" (Bell & Kennedy, 2000, p. 3). The precursor of an imaginative construction of social reality enmeshed on technological state of cyberspace is the classic novel of William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, published in 1984. This book sparked the much controversial discussions on the utopian/dystopian promise of a digital world. Michael Featherstone and Roger Burrows (1995) took center stage the importance of this novel in their analysis of technological embodiment of cultures. Frequent mention of terms like cyberbody, cyborgs, virtual reality, cyberpunks, and many others are some of the many neologisms written on sci-fi novels and seen on Hollywood movies. In film, famous of which include the *Net*, *Lawnmower Man*, *Robocop*, *The Terminator*, *Star Trek*, and *Blade Runner* (Bell, 2001, p. 3), an analysis of thematic content and significance is symptomatic of theorizing the spectacle as conveyor of fantastic narratives and hallucinating depiction of futuristic projects. Recently, we can add the cult popularity of the *Matrix* trilogy that captured the imagination of the viewing public regarding a different story-telling but common theme about the origin, sin, fall, and redemption of men (and women) in the age of hyperreality.

PHILIPPINE INTERNET EXPERIENCE

With the coming of the Internet spreading like wild fire in developed countries, the technology it offers has reached Asian countries like the Philippines. The Philippines has an estimated 30 million internet users (Internet Usage in Asia, 2012), aside from the fact that Filipinos are among the top Facebook users in the world (www.checkfacebook.com). Since the first public global connection of the country in March 29, 1994 via the Philippine Network Foundations

(Minges, Magpantay, Firth, & Kelly, 2002), Internet research had spawned dramatic numbers of empirical studies in leading universities in the metropolitan Manila. Evidently enough, these schools were the first academic institutions that offered computer science and information technology courses in the country. The present volume of empirical researches is composed of theses and dissertations initiated by students in the University of the Philippine Diliman, De La Salle University-Manila, and Ateneo de Manila University. The empirical research works though outnumbered the discursive and theoretical formulations, one reason of which for the dearth of critical materials is the dominant intellectual discourse that offers no alternative for local theorizing.

Cabral (2001) delineated the importance of the web development in the growth of internet related jobs and opportunities. According to her findings, there are 1.1 million personal computer users in the country with 75 million people in the year 2000. The most common feature of research in the academe in the initial stage of internet boom in the Philippines are project implementations on designing websites for different areas and purposes: education (Tung, 1998; Silva, 1999; Miller, 2000), arts, literature, and culture (Reynoso, 2002; Bantug, 2000), and e-commerce (Chu 2002). Meanwhile, an integration and implementation project study to test Bayanihan.net was conducted in Ateneo de Manila University (Sarmenta et al., 2003). Veloso (2003) conducted a research on the feasibility of online education and discussions on the modern modes of delivering knowledge in the digital age. In her essay, Janet Tauro-Batuigas (2004) talked about the dominant language of cyberspace, which is English, and its hegemonic linearity to overshadow other languages. She claimed that English as a dominant cyber-language is a neocolonial and neo-imperial supremacy of the Western technology and culture transgressing the local languages of post-colonized societies like the Philippines. She called forth for writing and designing websites in Filipino. The book

Sanghiyang sa Mundo ng Internet (Nuncio, 2010) explored Philippine internet culture using the metaphor of fire dance (sanghiyang) to explain Filipinos' affinity with cyber-technologies and to critique the inappropriateness of postmodern theories to account our daily internet experiences.

CONCLUSION: LIMITATIONS OF STUDIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What is apparent though in most research in the West is a zealous sweeping switch of concerns to the postmodern orientations in discussing the theoretical and paradigmatic themes of the Internet. No substantive material so far has problematized the possibility of convergence between empiricism and theory, between the Anglo-American and Continental way of doing research as far as the Internet studies are concerned. As expected, the American schools of research are empirically grounded while the Europeans are too abstract and theoretical. It is with this problem that this researcher would like to contribute regarding a possible dialogue of the two traditions and to come up with a research reflective of the transactional and dialectical formulations of the debates based on local setting and circumstances.

Another thing is an overemphasis on the textual and hermeneutic foregrounding of the Internet based on Hollywood movies. These movies posed a very limiting ground for researchers in countries who have not seen the movies. While it is true that the imaginative reconstruction is important in detailing the interpretive paradigm, the approach may also defeat the relativist and subjective positions of local Internet users like in the Philippines whose concerns are less on cinematic and literary interpretation but more on the sociological and cultural accounting of the phenomenon under investigation. In line with this claim, no novels and films in Filipino setting have been written and made with the Internet or cyberspace as the theme or the narrative of these representations. Perhaps an encouragement for

our writers to attempt to write on topics regarding cyberspace, virtual worlds, and technological society is not enough. A writer's workshop on sci-fi storytelling and writing would be a fresh start.

A slow assessment of the negative effects of the Internet both critically and empirically is evident. There may be some slight attempts but the Internet is often packaged as an "all-good, be-good" technological tool stripping off the possibility of its wrongs and its abuse of use. It is recommended that an empirical study based on the impact and reception of users be made in the near future to document and account for this phenomenon.

In the Philippines, the lack or few critical discussions have never reached intellectual or scholarly momentum deserving of an audience and a proper forum in a debate workshops, seminars, and conferences. It is in these academic endeavors that the climate for critical and empirical research would have a snowball effect in varying degrees of success. It is recommended to organize seminars and conferences solely on the issue and topic of cyberculture in the Philippines.

The recent trends on Internet research have interrogated the acceptance, feasibility and growth of E-learning in academic institutions. It is referred to as the use of information and communication technologies varying from computer or gadget mediated instructions, virtual & interactive learning environment (Yee, Luan, Ayub & Mahmud, 2009). Even the use of blended or hybrid modality is used to enhance learning, which in this approach it uses the face to face student-teacher interaction as well as virtual engagements using the Internet (Arcinas 2011). In the global scene, UNESCO through the Alexandria Proclamation of 2006 has capitalized on the importance of communication and information literacy. In its commitment, the organization describes information literacy and lifelong learning as the "beacons of the Information Society, illuminating the courses to development, prosperity and freedom. Information literacy empowers people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information

effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals. It is a basic human right in a digital world and promotes social inclusion in all nations" (Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning, 2006). The Philippines should take bold steps to realize these goals.

Again in the Philippines, the state of quantitative and empirical research, no reliable and credible agency or institute provides information regarding the estimated number of Internet users in the country and its overall demographic profile. What we have are piecemeal and small-scale data culled from theses and dissertations. With the social and empirical import of internet in the lives of many people especially the young people of the 21st century, Filipino scholars should continue to inquire, philosophize and conduct more intellectual discussions, research and publications.

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