

“Using specific examples, consider the social and cultural implications of the Internet.”

The birth of the Internet was a turning point in the evolution of communication and media. It has provided humanity with a powerful tool of great potential. We witnessed the emergence of a tangible form of cyberspace, a *“notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs”* (New Oxford American Dictionary, 2005-2009). The concept of cyberspace was no longer exclusive to Science-Fiction; and it has over time become a major element in our everyday life. The internet is now a mass medium, and since its breakthrough, discussions have arisen concerning its implications for society.

Can the effect of the Internet on society be seen as positive or negative? What consequences does it have on individual and communal levels? Is the Internet’s potential too weighty?

Firstly we will look into the benefits of this system and consider the aspects of the Internet as a tool for freedom and information. Secondly we will observe the harms the Internet causes and the danger it poses to social structures and human relations. We will focus mainly on the examples of real-time communities and multi-user domains in the light of politics and psychology.

The internet was quickly considered by some as an important tool for change in politics and society. This is what can be referred to as the civic networking movement. While *“technological innovation alone does not facilitate social and political*

change" (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, Bryan, 1998; p. 2), the hopes of the movement rely on certain technological developments that improve the Internet's potential for change. These include the introduction of high-speed connections, digital compression technologies and the digitalisation of data. The belief is that this new media helps "*reverse the decline of public communication due to commercialisation and bias*" and that it offers "*new possibilities to surpass all that was previously achieved using old media*" (Ibid., 1998; p. 6). The main arguments are the efficiency and ease of direct access to information and the possibility of participation in communal matters. In this sense, the public has more power and "*talk about moving from centralized to decentralized systems is usually characterized as a change from autocracy to democracy*" (Turkle, 1996; p. 178). We can talk of the concept of 'teledemocracy'. (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, Bryan, 1998; p. 6)

The Internet caused the birth of electronic communities where large numbers of people can interact in real time. One example of these communities is the Digital City of Amsterdam whose principal aims were to "*stimulate democratic processes and participation*" and to "contribute to the development and dissemination of knowledge" (Ibid., 1998; p. 24). An important matter with these types of communities is the permeability of their borders to the 'real' world, the fact that they can contribute and support people in their 'off-screen' lives. One electronic community called WELL saw for example three different doctors from three different physical locations discuss CAT scan images of a child with a tumor in order to confer about a possible medical treatment. (Turkle, 1996; p. 246)

We can therefore notice the potential for interaction that the Internet offers. This is a service that official organisations make more and more use of. The use of the Internet can "*improve the responsiveness of political institutions and allow for more direct citizen participation in public affairs*" (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, Bryan, 1998; p. 125).

Governments and many organisations praise the Internet for its *“potential for broadcasting”* (Ibid., 1998; p. 147).

The *“democratising effect”* (Ibid., 1998; p. 134) that the Internet has caused an important increase of the diversity of content available to the public. One can access information from a wide variety of sources and can therefore be introduced to a larger selection of opinions. One example is Alex Jones’ news website called www.infowars.com which provides the reader with alternative views on current affairs and reveals information that might not be available in the mainstream media.

The fact that the content of the Internet is hard to control can definitely be seen as a positive aspect since it supports freedom of expression. The Digital City of Amsterdam shows off the proverbial Dutch tolerance by applying *“freedom of expression and self-regulation”* (Ibid., 1998; p. 36) as basic philosophy.

When people are interacting and navigating on the Internet, they are no longer alone and passive, they are trying to ‘retribalize’, as Marshall McLuhan said. (Turkle, 1996; p. 178) Online one can correspond with people from all over the world, through e-mail, bulletin boards, chat forums, etc. We can connect with people *“who would otherwise be inaccessible”* (Ibid., 1996; p. 247). The Internet becomes a global social network.

Multi-User Domains (or MUDs) are text-based games in which thousands of people create their own characters and lead complete virtual lives. Everything is customisable, from the physical appearance of a character to the layout and functions of a room. (Ibid., 1996; p. 10-11) This is a very different level of network community. This is a place where people *“can gather for the pleasure of easy company, conversation, and a sense of belonging”* (Ibid., 1996; p. 233), in the words of anthropologist Ray Oldenberg about the “great good place”. Here they can be part of a community, sometimes to make up for a lack thereof in ‘real’ life. It is a form of psychological escapism and entertainment in the

same way women often enjoy reading romance novels to compensate for the lack of fulfillment in certain domains in everyday life. (Ibid., 1996; p. 241)

Other people connect to these MUDs in terms of resistance, also linked to the limitation of the 'real' world. Rather than for a matter of compensation, they express their views in this environment in order to feel "*political empowerment*" (Ibid., 1996; p. 242). Citizens in these virtual worlds can band together to run local governments and be in complete control. (Ibid., 1996; p. 243) There is a real sense of Teledemocracy and it is a great source of community building as people get more understanding of how things work. This is "*the symbol and tool of a postmodern politics*" (Ibid., 19986; p. 243)

In a virtual community, people seem to be more confident and free. Many people are more prone to be themselves as they don't have the pressure of direct physical contact with their interlocutor. (Ibid., 1996; p. 179) In this sense, they have the potential of getting to know themselves better.

Furthermore, users can create any identity they want. Identity is seen as "*a set of roles that can be mixed and matched*" (Ibid., 1996; p. 180). This construction and reconstruction of self characterises postmodern life. (Ibid., 1996; p. 180) We no longer exists as unitary selves, but as "*terminals of multiple networks*" (Baudrillard, 1987; p. 16).

Although the Internet presents a huge potential, both politically and socially, it does have a considerable amount of drawbacks. A major issue, which applies especially in the use of the Internet in a political context, is the problem of exclusion. Indeed, "*even the Internet has a fast lane and a slow lane*" (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, Bryan, 1998; p. 15). Certain groups of people cannot, or simply do not, participate in civic networking or even general Internet usage. It is often a problem of social and economic inequalities among

citizens. *"The terms and conditions for access to information technology 'increasingly define one's right of access to information per se ... information that is particularly useful, relevant, timely information, is increasingly tied to complex electronic technology'"* (Ibid., 1998; p. 170). People don't necessarily have access to, or the skill to use, computer and internet technology.

Another issue (this time indeed a problem) is the difficulty in controlling the flux of information on the Internet. There is a very high level of obscene and illegal material on the World Wide Web. The main example is the pornography industry, both legal and illegal. For the Digital City of Amsterdam, the problem is not pornography, but copyright and racism. (Ibid., 1998; p. 36) There is however a very fine line between trying to control information and infringing on freedom of expression. We enter here on the domain of censorship. In the context of electronic communities, filters are sometimes used to block specific types of information and access is often even refused to people behaving 'inappropriately'. Furthermore, the Digital City occasionally blocks the accounts of certain citizens using false identities. *"A controllable name and address is now a first prerequisite"* (Ibid., 1998; p. 37) All personal information is therefore stored on a database. This could be seen as an invasion of privacy. This applies to the largest part (if not all?) of the World Wide Web, as the security of personal details is often questionable (especially concerning popular social networking websites).

Moreover, on a political level, the Internet's potential is not fully exploited; *"politics in this form remains more of a model of convincing through the dissemination of information than of communication and discussion"* (Ibid., 1998; p. 174). There is therefore a severe lack of democratic content. This use of the Internet by political parties and other organisations implies that *"it is a monologue not a dialogue which is being facilitated by technological developments"* (Ibid., 1998; p. 12). This undermines the concept of teledemocracy.

Our Internet use is controlled in a subtle indirect way. We are subjects to power in the form of discourse; this power is, according to Foucault, *“the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society”* (Foucault, 1987; p. 93). In the context of the Internet it is applied through laws, censorship and self-surveillance, since *“modern society must control the bodies and behaviors of large numbers of people”* (Turkle, 1996; p. 247). Since traffic on the Internet is constantly monitored with the use of databases and filters, in the way that a city is monitored by CCTV, what matters, according to Foucault, is not how often censorship is used, but people’s knowledge that *“the possibility is always present”* (Ibid., 1996; p. 248). One applies the power of self-surveillance and self-censorship. This censorship takes three forms: *“affirming that such a thing is not permitted, preventing it from being said, denying that it exists”* (Foucault, 1987; p. 84). Therefore, *“power is everywhere”* (Ibid., 1987; p. 93) because it comes from everywhere. Following these principles, the Internet can allow for change, but only in a limited way. Foucault states that *“where there is power, there is resistance”* (Ibid., 1987; p. 95); but since one is always “inside” power, resistance is thus similarly always within the works of power. One can argue that resistance is merely an illusion.

Sex has been placed by power and discourse in a binary system, differentiating the licit and illicit, accepted and taboo, etc. (Foucault, 1987; p. 83) This applies also in electronic communities such as the Multi-User Domains where characters (people?) can have virtual sex with each other. But there are indeed other facets to this; some users manage to ‘hack’ into another user’s commands and virtually ‘rape’ that person’s character. (Turkle, 1996; p. 251) There have been discussions concerning the seriousness of these acts and their consequences, and the argument emerged that in MUDs *“the body is the mind”* (Ibid., 1996; p. 253). This shows that this type of games tend to be taken too seriously as people get strongly attached and addicted to the virtual world. This points to French social theorist

Jean Baudrillard's theory of the 'Disneyland effect', that *"Disneyland [...] is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland"* (Ibid., 1996; p. 234). Our perceptions are relative as we make denatured and artificial experiences seem real. For example, *"after playing a video game in which your opponent is a computer program, the social world of MUDs may seem real as well"* (Ibid., 1996; p. 236). The boundaries between representation and reality become porous. Thus, people turn to the Internet and electronic communities in search for an easy fix, replacing off-screen life and face-to-face interactions with a seemingly more satisfying and pleasurable virtual world. This applies to personal and social everyday problems, as people avoid them and choose to live in unreal places where they feel safe and successful. *"The personal computer revolution, once conceptualized as a tool to rebuild community, now tends to concentrate on building community inside a machine"* (Ibid., 1996; p. 244). A new reality within reality. In this age of computer networking, the individual is placed in a figurative bubble, isolated, *"in a position of perfect sovereignty"* (Baudrillard, 1987; p. 15). The physical human body thus becomes superfluous, according to Baudrillard. We are, just like the schizophrenic, victims of the world's obscenity and transparency, due to our *"absolute proximity to and total instantaneousness with things"* (Ibid., 1987; p. 27).

The Internet has proven to be a greatly useful tool in the dissemination of information and in interaction between people. Whether for just navigating the web, taking part in real-time electronic communities or seeking pleasure in entertaining Multi-User Domains, the Internet has brought a positive change in human relations and our access to information. Anyone and anything are accessible at anytime; this broadens our access to

knowledge and assists us in community building. This virtual re-creation of reality moreover promotes the discovery of the self.

We have seen the Internet to have, however, a number of disadvantages. This freedom of expression can tend to materialise in the form of obscenity and illegality; this often leads to organisations violating people's privacy and infringing on freedom of expression. We find ourselves in the works of censorship. Furthermore, the opportunity for pleasure that the online communities and virtual worlds offer, can easily become addictive; people then find themselves renouncing the real world and instead centering on easy online fixes.

The postmodern reality of cyberspace blurs the boundaries between the real and the virtual. We are in a world where any 'reality' can become our reality.

Although the Internet finds itself in a position combining benefits and harms, one has to find a balance in the middle: appreciate what the Internet has to offer whilst acknowledging and avoiding the damage it may cause. The balance is therefore set not in just a single reality, but equally distributed over the multiple facets of postmodern life.

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