

# INTRODUCTION

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And who in time knows whither we may vent  
The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores  
This gain of our best glory shall be sent,  
To enrich unknowing nations without stores?  
Which worlds in the yet unformed Occident  
May come refined with the accents that are ours.

Samuel Daniel, *Musophilis* (1599)

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## GLOBAL CULTURES: COMMUNITIES, COMMUNICATION AND TRANSFORMATION

Thus spake Samuel Daniel as he speculated optimistically about the spread of English to the “new worlds.” Daniel would indeed be ecstatic if he could witness the global avalanche of technology, sweeping with it established linguistic (English) patterns. (Then again, perhaps Daniel would bemoan the “corrupted” version of English that is entrenched in the vast majority of network applications!)

One of the key facilitators of a global culture is a global language, as it is global communication that drives the transformation of global communities — a dual process of globalisation of the local (top-down process) and localisation of the global (bottom-up process; Tehranian 1999). How will these seemingly paradoxical transformations impact our social, cultural, economic and political landscape? *Transnational communities*, and their sometimes befuddled yet entrepreneurial members, are today’s microcosm of the electronic *cosmopolis* — a global village wired together by new information and communication technologies manifested by the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Transnational communities are communities that span national borders and are a by-product of “improved communications, better transportation, and free trade

laws" (Portes 1996). The communities' stock-in-trade consists chiefly of shared information, trust and contacts. As the members of these communities travel back and forth, they carry cultural and political currents in both directions. Community members are comfortable in different cultures, are bilingual or multilingual, and often maintain homes in both their countries of origin (typically a developing country) and adoption (typically a developed country).

Transnational communities could be regarded as an example of a "globalisation of the local" process, whereas their virtual counterparts — cybercommunities — are increasingly undergoing a "localisation of the global" process. Within the electronic global village, boundaries are being drawn around virtual neighbourhoods, bound together not by geography but by common interests. The Internet, historically the almost exclusive and privileged playground of academic elites, has been invaded by commerce and the "man in the street." Net dwellers and urban dwellers alike withdraw more and more into closed private spaces as a panacea for overcrowded environments.

These tensions between the global and the local are further at work in the larger visions of the Internet and the Web as globalising media. In particular, an emerging pattern of scholarship and research suggests that the optimistic vision of the electronic global village rests on a number of assumptions which may be culture bound. For example, rather than necessarily inaugurating an egalitarian and democratic global village, new communications media threaten to expand, rather than resolve, cultural conflicts. Communication can facilitate the free flow of information and promote solidarity; communication can also fuel conflicts and deepen ethnic conclaves. Computer mediated communication empowers the already powerful — those with access to the medium (Habermas 1983). Even today, we must apply caution in using terms such as global communication when the entire African continent has fewer telephone lines than Tokyo (Tehrani 1999).

To examine more systematically and coherently the interplay between culture, communication and technology, we organised the first international conference on *Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communication* (CATaC98). The conference brought together in an interdisciplinary dialogue — for the first time, to our knowledge — scholars and researchers representing philosophy, communication theory, and cultural sciences from eighteen different countries. The conference presentations, along with informal dialogue and exchanges, shed greater light on just how culture impacts the use and appropriation of new communications technologies. In this special issue on computer-mediated culture, we share with you six key articles from the conference.

In the first article of this issue, Cameron Richards challenges us to reflect on the degree of social reality or social liberation embodied in the virtual worlds made possible by computer-mediated communication. He poses the question to the reader: "should a distinction be made between the use of virtual utopias ... as merely escapist, self-indulgent fantasies ... or as useful, transformative media for reinventing the human condition." The popularist visions of utopian virtual communities (e.g. Rheingold 1994) are contrasted with the more pessimistic perceptions of a dysfunctional and alienated society controlled by technology (e.g., Stoll 1995; Dery 1995). This dystopian view of virtual communities has been fuelled by the recent transition from text-based to graphics-based avatar communities populating designed virtual spaces.

The designed spaces — exotic "New World paradises" to those entrenched in a suburbia quagmire — spawn communities that have a unique identity quite apart

from their structured environment. Perhaps their identity is influenced by the visual metaphors embodied in creative interfaces. Richards suggests that interfaces to the virtual spaces could function as mirrors of human communication.

But is communication itself a virtual or real experience when machine mediated? In responding to this question, Richards admirably pulls together the works of diverse scholars such as Levinson (1990), Poster (1995), Ong (1992) and Ricoeur (1991) in defending the personal, social and cultural reality of computer mediated communication against critics such as Stoll (1995) and, to a lesser extent, Baudrillard (1983) and Turkle (1997). Indeed, despite the supposed paucity (Daft and Lengel 1986) of text-based CMC<sup>1</sup> programs, relationships and coteries form swiftly and easily. Richards argues eloquently that utopian rhetoric is a transformative and interactive media that augments our “real,” increasingly restricted, suburban communities with virtual communities<sup>2</sup> (Jones 1998) and cultural worlds.

Daniel Pargman introduces us to a range of issues that emerge in other articles in this issue through a case study of SvenskMud (a Swedish Multi-User Domain system). He discusses, in turn, four questions.

First, how have American cultural attitudes (historically) shaped the development and use of CMC technologies? Here, Pargman identifies instances of bias in computer systems. Bias occurs in the design of systems such as the Internet, which historically has supported English characters only even though the Swedish language has three non-English characters (å, ä, ö). Bias also occurs in the widespread adoption of English as the Electronic Language and the *lingua franca* of the Internet. This issue is also discussed by Alexander Voiskounsky.

Second, how do diverse cultural attitudes (today) shape the implementation and use of CMC technologies? The Swedes’ response to technical and linguistic biases is to exclude the three non-English characters in email addresses and URLs. Jerome Heath explores a related issue — cultural variations in the acceptance of technology.

Third, how do diverse cultural attitudes manifest themselves in the implementation and use of MUDs? Pargman sees MUDs as sociotechnical system with a dialectical and coevolutionary relationship between the social and technical systems.

Fourth, how do diverse cultural attitudes manifest themselves in the implementation and use of SvenskMud? Pargman identifies five different cultures embodied in the Swedish MUD: Swedish, youth, hacker, fantasy and CMC cultures. What makes SvenskMud uniquely Swedish, though, are the processes of vernacularisation (adapting the MUD to the Swedish language) and localisation (adapting the content of the MUD to the Swedish culture). The centrality of language and culture in creating non-English virtual communities is also the focus in the next article.

Filipp Sapienza, like Cameron Richards, explores the reality and cultural validity of virtual communities that are rhetorically constructed from a dialectic of anonymity and mobility. Sapienza explores the formation of community identity on a web site, *Little Russia in San Antonio, Texas*. Through shared activities and bulletin board dialogues on the web, an ethos (or ethnoscape<sup>3</sup>) emerges which, in turn, creates a cultural and communal consciousness.

Little Russia’s Web board is considered a more rich and robust form of communication than the text environments described by Richards, as sound, graphics and animation can be included. Sapienza, like Richards, discusses the creative and personal aspects of the medium, as well as the apparent paradox of participants’ desire for both anonymity and disclosure.

An analysis of bulletin board posts reveals two conversational genres that are instrumental in creating and maintaining community identity in a deterritorialised virtual space: émigré Russians connecting with each other, and Russians building cultural solidarity against the threat of America's global "McDonaldisation."<sup>4</sup>

Is the Internet a springboard for a move towards tribalism or globalism? or towards cultural diversity or unification? Certainly virtual communities like Little Russia limn the shift from geographically delineated to rhetorically constructed cultural identities.

Alexander Voiskounsky addresses the issue, too, of how rhetoric on the Internet impinges on cultural diversity and unification, but from linguistic and psychological perspectives.

Throughout history, communication media have created a privileged elite sector of societies (Tehrani 1999), from the ancient prophets and soothsayers of the oral communication age to the modern power brokers of the mass media age. Information and communication technologies have similarly created a new communication elite — the "technologues," who speak the vernacular of the Internet.<sup>5</sup> English as the *lingua franca* of the Internet, according to Voiskounsky, contributes to global homogeneity (or perhaps a Coca-Colonisation of the Internet!). Of necessity, this *lingua franca* (or "network English") is a basic form of English to accommodate non-native English speakers. Voiskounsky leads us a step further and presents a compelling argument for network English as a unique form of written pidgin. Traditionally, pidgins are formed from oral communication, but the blurred distinction between orality and literacy (à la Ong 1982) in network communication certainly adds weight to Voiskounsky's intriguing argument.

From a psychological perspective, Voiskounsky identifies various factors that impinge on communication practices and cultural identity on the Internet. He observes a corollary between social and cultural value systems and web navigation practices. The cognitive complexity of the nonlinear structure of hypermedia, for example, allows a user to either wander a labyrinthian route or adopt a reduced selection technique. Voiskounsky suggests that democratic cultures tend to choose the former whereas authoritarian cultures tend to choose the latter.

The social and cultural value systems of the Middle East, the Far East and the West are explored in the last two articles. Michael Dahan explains in considerable detail the history of Israel's social and cultural value system — one that, until recently at least, has of necessity preferred the cluster of values associated with national security ("the militaristic values of authoritarian, hierarchical organisations trained in the use of violence") than democratic civic values (including equality, freedom of speech and press, and critical debate). In particular, two factors in Israel's historical origins have shaped a culture emphasising respect for the military, national security, and the importance of censorship in protecting the state. The first is Israel's origin as a "garrison state" (i.e. faced with vulnerable borders and the demographic advantage of Arab states) and the second is David Ben Gurion's (Israel's first prime minister) policy of statism, which stressed the role of the Israeli Army (IDF) in "serving as a crucible in shaping the national identity of Israel's Jewish citizens." These value preferences have been confirmed by polls as recently as 1993.

As is well-known, CMC technologies are promoted by enthusiasts as facilitating open communication. In this sense, these technologies are seen as promoting the democratic values of free speech and exchange of information, as well as flattening tradi-

tional hierarchies of power. The introduction and rapid growth of the Internet and Web into Israel thus represents a significant test case of the promoters' claims. Dahan claims that these technologies inevitably force democratic and democratising values. While Dahan sensibly observes that it is much too early to assess just how far the Internet and the Web have contributed to a transformation of Israeli culture in the direction of democratic civic virtues, it seems clear that these technologies have indeed been a factor in just such a turn in Israel.

Dahan documents several incidents that exemplify how CMC technologies have forced open what was previously closed and secret. For example, IRC channels and Usenet groups on the Internet provided, for anyone who cared to check in, accurate and uncensored reports on missile strikes during the Gulf War. More recently, the name and address of the then new head of Israel's General Security Services — ordinarily, a closely guarded state secret — was posted to a number of Usenet newsgroups (March, 1995). As a last example, a number of classified documents have been posted on the Internet, leading to what may be a test case regarding the Internet and national security. Dahan is clear that many factors — including individualisation, economic liberalisation, the Oslo Accords and the peace process — contribute to a greater openness in contemporary Israeli society and an open civilian critique of the military. But he is willing to claim that the Internet and the Web have played a significant role in this maturing of Israel as a democratic society. The proponents' claims regarding CMC technologies as democratising technologies — at least as they are accompanied by other significant social factors — would hence seem confirmed in this case.

The social and cultural belief systems of West and East, in the context of technology acceptance, are investigated by Jerome Heath. Heath argues that the popular theory of Herbig and Palumbo (1994) does not adequately explain the variable growth and use of technology in different cultures and suggests that epistemology plays an important role. Maruyama's (1994) four-way classification of epistemological types is an appropriate analytical tool for this study as it accounts for both Eastern contextual epistemology and Western hierarchical epistemology.

Heath surveyed groups of university students from Asian and United States origin about their attitude towards new technologies and then compared their responses to previously administered instruments which measured their belief systems and factors such as their interest in media, acceptance of newness, and public issues. The results indicated that demographic issues (gender, age, father's education, cultural origin), rather than the other measures, were more robust predictors of acceptance of technology. Heath concludes that the use and growth of technology is related to need rather than to the economic criteria listed by Herbig and Palumbo.

The concept of global culture emerging from the articles in this special issue is one connected in unparalleled ways by a technology that simultaneously globalises and localises. More importantly, each of the articles offers an alternative to fatalistic acceptance of an autonomous technology.

## Notes:

1. Synchronous environments such as IRC (Internet Relay Chat), MUDs (Multi-User Domains) and MOOs (MUD [Multi-User Dungeon] Object Oriented).
2. *Compunities* is a term coined by Jones (1998), denoting the "merger of computers and communities."

3. An *ethnoscape* is described as a community formed from groups of migrants who “regroup in new locations, reconstruct histories and reconfigure their ethnic projects.” In that sense, they are not unlike the transnational communities described by Portes (1996). Transnational communities, though formed primarily for economic reasons, also act as a conduit for the flow of cultural influences between home and adoptive countries.
4. See Barber’s (1992) treatise on Jihad vs. McWorld, and Ess’s (1998) discussion on the debate.
5. The rise of virtual reality will no doubt usher in another privileged sector — the “visulogues” (Tehrani 1999).

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