A Research Paper on Cyberculture and Virtual Politics

Aelan Biruar Arumpac / University of Philippines, Philippine

Introduction

You wake up to the buzz of your mobile phone. The alarm was triggered by a calendared reminder. The note is from your boss telling you to email your report that is badly needed for the monthly corporate meeting. You're in New York and Manila is thousands of miles away. But then you do not fret because the hotel you are staying in is has WiFi connectivity. And despite the distance, you will see your boss smile at what a good job you have done.

This picture is probably one of the best examples at assessing how 'wired' the world has become, redefining even the simplest means of how we communicate with each other. The advent of technologies that enhance the management of information and communication systems has created a big impact in people's lives. The mechanisms employed through the use of these technologies have become a lifestyle. A way of doing things simply and conveniently.

With the introduction of basic email, what we call the 'snail mail' has suddenly become prehistoric. We can immediately send letters at the mere touch of keys. Thus, mail servers such as Yahoo Mail, Hotmail, and Google Mail have become household names. With this immediacy, transactions of all kinds have also been drastically changed.

Dynamic interactions have also increasingly grown online. Individuals from different time zones can talk as a group on a particular 'thread' or topic. Even electronic dating and online gaming is made possible. These are called Multi-Dimension Domains or MUDs, where interactions are made on real time. The advent of blogs or online journals has paved way for individuals to create and re-create online identities. These portals also allow for people of common interests and disciplines to come together and pave way for the creation online groups where information is shared and distributed.

These are just some of the 'by-products' of cyberculture. A culture that has emerged with the advent of technologies made possible through the use of Internet.

It is the aim of this paper is to elucidate on what cyberculture is and to try to describe its dimensions through some related terms and also by taking a look at its 'by-products'. As one of the authors made reference to by this paper would like to posit, the nature of cyberculture can be understood only by looking at its dimensions. Briefly, this paper will also give a glimpse of how 'cyberculture' was coined and how it continues to evolve through time.

Hopefully, this paper would be able to elicit appreciation of what is being termed as 'future culture' in the hope we could use the emerging technologies to enhance our society and eliminate the possible perils it may impose.

Introducing Cyberculture

The study of cyberculture flourished throughout the last half of the 1990s (Silver 2000). The study was transformed in a lot of ways and new topics and theories were constantly added. Before delving into the broadness of cyberculture, let us first discuss the context in which cyberculture studies originated. Thus it is important to look into concepts such as cyberspace and the Internet.

The Internet

The term Internet came into view during the 60s where it was constructed as a global, computer-based 'network of networks' by the Department of Defense of the United States of America.

In America the evolution of the Internet is shown in the introduction of Web, or more popularly known as the World Wide Web (www) which introduces a simple and user-friendly interface with file transfer protocols that are much too common nowadays. Everybody has surely encountered the likes of dot.com, and dot.org. This technological breakthrough has made simple the navigation around the Net. Popular breakthroughs also included the birth of Internet service providers such as America Online (AOL) and CompuServe.

Whittle (1997) discussing the future of the Internet, said: "The pioneers, settlers, and squatters of the virgin territories of cyberspace have divided some of that land into plots of social order and plowed it into furrows of discipline -- for the simple reason that is natural resources can only be found in the mind and have great value if shared (420)".

Cyberspace

One cannot mention Internet without the word cyberspace flashing through one's mind. Though the former's inception came early with the introduction of the concept of cyberspace, nowadays, one can hardly tell the difference between both when speaking about network, connection and information. For in fact, these facets are present in both two.

The word cyberspace was first coined in William Gibson's 1984 ground-breaking novel *Neuromancer*. In the novel, cyberspace was referred to as "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators… A graphic representation of data

abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity"(51). Cyberspace is being viewed as a new frontier where importance is placed more in digital information than geographic space. Indeed, time-spatial mobility is not hard to imagine. People from different time zones can now interact with one another in real time.

Later on, cyberspace is referred to interchangeably as *information superhighway,* where information is accessed and distributed at an unimaginable speed and communication is more defined.

> No less than United States Vice President Al Gore (1995) aptly put:
>
>> These highways – or, more accurately, networks of distributed intelligence – will allow us to share information, to connect, and to communicate as a global community. From these connections we will derive robust and sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, better solutions to global and local environmental challenges, improved health care, and – ultimately – and a greater sense of stewardship of our small planet.

Because of the increased interactionism, writers, scholars and advocates, popularly known as *technofuturists* declared cyberspace as a new frontier fostering democratic participation and one which could end economic and social inequities (Silver 2000). *Wired* magazine's publisher Louis Rosetto likened cyberspace as "a new economy, new counter culture, and beyond politics."

Cybertheorist Allucquere Rosanne Stone (1991) defines cyberspace as "incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face' (85)." In other words, despite lack of physical geography it offers opportunities for the creation of collective communities and individual identities (Silver 2000).

With the constant transformation, reinvention, and innovation within and around the Internet, it is with no doubt that indeed, as what publisher Rosetto posits, 'a new culture has risen', and it is seen with high interest, more so that theorists have called it a 'future culture'.

Cyberculture

Before going any further, the paper reiterates that it does not aim to define cyberculture because of its nature. According to David Silver, cyberculture is hard to define and that it must be understood as *"broad, deep, and in constant state of flux"* (1996-1997). He also added in his article that "it is much easier to put forth a number of dimensions of cyberculture than a single definition of it."

It is 'broad', for as the author puts it, it does not thrive only within the context of the Internet, a 'network of networks', but rather it is also created by online identities which makes possible the

interactions of individuals online. The many types of social interactions that occur includes basic email, newsgroups, and as what was mentioned in the introduction, multi-user domains or MUDs and electronic chat rooms, even the vast websites that can be found in the World Wide Web also allow for online interactions to take place.

Cyberculture is also 'deep' in the sense that "it is often a product of complex and collaborative communicative practices which takes place in varying segments of time and space." The different social interactions that occur within the Web offer opportunities for collaboration that in turn fosters the creation of online communities. The concept of online or virtual communities is part of the study of cyberculture.

Cyberculture is also 'in constant state of flux'. Just as culture, evolves through time, so does cyberculture. In fact, the evolution takes place at a much rapid pace considering the fast innovation of technologies that takes place in our generation. Like culture, what descriptions, perceptions, and theories we may have now, may change or may be replaced tomorrow.

There is no putting boundaries to our perception of what cyberculture because just like culture, it is broad, deep and in constant state of flux'.

Cyberculture also takes its roots from the idea of information culture (Hawks 1993), where the prefix 'cyber' means information. In his essay, Hawks posits that information is an important commodity in cyberculture, and was seen in the prominence of CNN and MTV in our society.

Moreover, his essay also probes on the science-fiction movement called 'cyberpunk' wherein the concept of cyberculture grew out. Cyberpunks, or more popularly known now as hackers, from tow words "cyber" and "punk", roughly translates to "people using technology and information in ways that deviate from the expected norms and laws of society". Taking note of the previous reference of cyberculture as 'information culture', the cyberpunk movement pronounces the slogan: 'information wants to be free'. This movement thus creates a 'space' in which information can be readily accessed and shared in 'varying segments of time'.

In his essay, Hawks (1993) posits:

> Cyberculture is probably most closely associated with the idea of futureculture, yet cyberculture is often mis- and over-used. If you look at the meaning of the word "cyber", basically "information" in an oversimplified context, it has little to do with frequently-used notions of cyberculture, specifically a Gibson-esque cyberpunk world as it exists today or in the near-future.

In discussing cyberculture, it cannot be helped that Postmodern philosophy will arise. It refers to how that world has changed and evolved using the World War II as a reference point. In the postmodern world, technology is prominent, and information is important (Hawks 1993). Moreover, "postmodernism accepts the reality of a post-industrial world moving towards an information-based world.

But just as the study of cyberculture revolves around the concept of Internet and things that are constantly happening in cyberspace, (insert author) proposes a working definition for it.

Thus, is a collection of cultures and cultural products that exist on and/or made possible by the Internet, along with the stories told about these cultures and cultural products (Silver 1996-1997).

Cyberculture: FutureCulture

The ideas that I have related to you so far are dimension in which cyberculture can be described, thus, you been reintroduced to the Internet the cyberspace, as well as the concepts of virtual communities and online identities. Also, through these facets, the premise that culture is broad, deep and in constant state of flux is all the more emphasized.

In his article, *Maniphest Destin-E: What is Future Culture? A Manifesto on the Here-and-Now Technological Revolution*, Andy Hawks uses and discusses lengthily the metaphor of the bubble-morph to depict the evolution of subcultures.

Here is a brief illustration of Hawks and how it relates to cyberculture. When we were kids, we were fond of blowing bubbles. At the course of their life span, these bubbles, which are diverse in size and shape, spin, rotate and float in the air. At some point they pop leaving whatever residues on the earth. They shape-shift and some of them join to form a new bubble.

Hawks presents this simple imagery of the character of bubbles to describe what he meant of the evolution of subcultures. He states:

> "…thus, you can see, subcultures combine into cultures or bigger subcultures (it's all relative), subcultures may self-destruct, they may evolve or morph, they may diverge in a seperate direction. But watever the case, there's still bubbles because we, as a global village, are like the five year old -- entrenched in the world of bubbles, looking on with wide-eyes."

The salient ideas the Hawks wants to drive at is that, cyberculture described and illustrated in the context of the evolution of subcultures, is (1) in a continuous process 'with an infinite amount of ebb and flow between and among subcultures'; and (2) it does not lose its identity but rather morphs and combines with other technologies and by-products having a 'synergetic effect'.

Hawks proceeds his discussion by associating cyberculture to the whole idea of 'technoculture' which actually forms part of what he refers to as 'future culture', the 'here-and-now' reality, what is happening in real time. Our previous discussion on cyberculture introduced its dimensions and facets, which includes the technological revolution of the Internet.

By analyzing further, we see a culture fueled by technology, TV, computers, and thus the term

'technoculture'. Cyberculture in turns forms part of the whole gamut of the 'future culture', the here-and-now reality that is happening in real time and is in constant state of flux. We see the cycle of cyberculture as we begin to see changes take place right in front of our eyes,

To conclude; Hawks (1993) says:

> "FutureCulture represents an internal and external effort, both passive and interactive, observational and participatory, to: discover these trends/ideas/objects or at least bring acknowledgement of their existence to a larger segment of the global populous, provide an interactive forum for the global populous to discuss such matters and to reflect and refract varying cultures and subcultures, to then apply this discussion to existing cultures and subculture to plant the seeds spawning further trends/ideas/objects."

Virtual communities and online identities

Previously, we have discussed in brief the Internet and its origins. The subject of the Internet is what composes the *popular cybercultre*. We have also discussed the technologies such the World Wide Web which is a part of popular cyberculture.

According to professor David Silver (2000) *popular cyberculture* is the first stage of cyberculture and it proceeds to the second stage, *cyberculture studies*, the second generation, which mainly rests on what he refers to as 'two pillars': the virtual communities and online identities.

We have learned so far that people meet online and the individuals compose of these online groups are identities that are also created online. Later on, we can dissect this relationship and see how the relationship can be inverted.

Rheingold (1993) defines virtual communities as a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words or ideas through mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. His essay is considered one of the pillars in the cyberculture. He added: "we temporarily have access to a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalize the public sphere. The same tool improperly controlled and wielded, could become an instrument of tyranny."

In other words, while bringing into focus the positive aspects, Rheingold does not dismiss what critics call as 'negative utopia' wherein the Internet can be used as a tool to perpetrate adverse effects of power such as in the recent case, terrorism. Terrorists and extremists have created their own 'haven of terrorism' through websites, even encouraging terrorist acts through these avenues.

Cybertheorist Stone in defining cyberspace talked about individuals who 'meet', but the word

'meet' here takes on a definition as it is placed in the context of cyberspace. The level of interaction among individuals create collective communities, virtual communities, which in the level of offline reality, can be a called a neighborhood without the actual geographic space. Groups as diverse as Dog Lovers Club or Book Lovers Club can meet online and even pave way for 'offline' meeting.

Additional theories have referred to virtual communities as mechanisms of 'social networks' (Wellman, 1997; Wellman et al 1996). The subject of virtual communities has also been linked in the theories of interactionism and collective action dilemma theory (Kollock and Smith 1996; Smith and Kollock 1999).

While Rheingold introduced the concept of virtual communities, Sherry Turkle (1995) expanded the discussion of the individuals in theses virtual communities -- the online identities. In her essay, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Turkle explained that online identities are explored through virtual environments, including the previously discussed MUDs. She finds that some users use cyberspace to repress their true or offline identity or private lives, and create online identities which can entirely be a different person with a different set of characteristics, values and beliefs.

Also in her essay, there some case studies that prove some users use the Internet it to navigate their offline lives. In other words, online identities can become extension of 'offline' lives. Turkle uses the example of Ava, a college student who lost her leg to a car accident. Ava created a one-legged character online and served for other persons with disabilities to get together share experiences, and eventually even find romance. In this scenario, Turkle drives home the optimism that Rheingold has that the Internet as a tool for empowerment.

Cyberpower and virtual politics

We have understood the nature of cyberspace and Internet in earlier discussions. This paper has also impressed the power of the Internet as a tool for interaction and personal development while offering a glimpse at some of its negative aspects.

With information deemed as an important commodity -- in fact the most vital commodity -- it is not hard to imagine the power that is wielded in cyberspace.

We have learned that in cyberspace the individual and the collective are intertwining aspects. Cyberpower can be understood in these two aspects: the individual and social space. Cyberspace can be used by the individual as a 'playground' as what Professor Tim Jordan of the University of East London states in his essay Cyberpower: The culture and politics of cyberspace (1999).

Second, cyberspace can also be used by the collective as a 'social space', where communities

exist, thus a 'greater freedom of action' is assumed by those who have the control information and technology. But the Internet and cyberspace as society or as Jordan puts it, a 'digital nation', can also be an aspect or form of cyberpower.

To understand cyberpower, let us look at one of its root word -- power. Power has been thoroughly discussed in socio-political theories developed by some of the philosophers Webber, Barnes and Foucault. The moral and ethical dimension of power revolves around the notions that power creates social order and power as a form of domination.

Much as power is hard to define, the power in cyberspace assumes the same difficulty but the dimensions of power in creating social order and domination can be used to describe the power in cyberspace. Here we are entering again into the realm of individuals and collectives in the cyberspace. This discussion however, does not put cyberpower in the context of power per se but the power that resides in cyberspace.

The discussion on cyberpower starts the basic unit called the online identity. In his essay, Tim Jordan describes the entry of individuals into cyberspace (1999a):

> We usually begin our journeys into cyberspace as individuals. In front of a computer screen, reading the glowing words, we confront our singularity before building a sense of others in the electronic world. There is a double sense of individuality here. First, people must simply connect to cyberspace by logging in, which almost certainly involves individuals entering their online names and secret, personal passwords and then being rewarded with their little homes in cyberspace (usually consisting of such elements as their e-mail or their list of favorite websites).

Nearly everyone has entered into cyberspace through basic email which usually requires user account names and passwords creating a sense of identity in an individualized space. However, the email accounts can be linked with other email accounts creating what we call email groups where everyone reads the message sent to everybody in that particular group. The email group now consists of several online identities that may have different characteristics.

Online identities are characterized by identifiers. Identifiers refer to the addresses, names, self-descriptions and other data that designate contributions to cyberspace. The email address is the most common identifier. Jordan illustrates the creation and the eventual distinction of online identities. He uses the examples of two email addresses: dark.knight@hacktic.nl and the other one, billg@microsoft.com.

Look at the domains of both email addresses. As Jordan would like to argue, supposing you receive emails from both, preconceptions would be formed even before opening the mails. Hacktic is a group of Dutch Hackers from Netherlands (identified by its domain name .nl). The other one you would presume would come from a highly revered company, not to mention the being identified by the top-level domain .com. This illustrates that even the simplest identifier

such as email addresses puts a stamp or signature to an identity.

Enter the avatars, more popularly used by Yahoo Messenger, an electronic chat room. Online identities can choose to 'style' their avatars, or caricatures of male and female entities. Style is one identifier. You can choose various styles for your avatars ranging from clothes, accessories even sets and backgrounds. Avatars not only identify the online individual through styles but also even the mood is detected. Let us say, during a hot summer day, Jane's avatar poses a two-piece bikini suit, shades and a straw hat all capped with a background of a tempting beach. His chatmate John could probably assume Jane wants to take a dip in the waters.

Thus identities are created and recreated online through the use of identifiers and style. Identity fluidity is the process through which online identities are constructed (Jordan 1999a).

The subject of online identities leads us next to the discussion of renovated hierarchies. Jordan defines renovated hierarchies as "the processes through which offline hierarchies are reinvented online, with many online resources undermining offline hierarchies while also defining new hierarchies".

Online identities become part of these renovated hierarchies as there access to information is unrestricted and communication becomes more open and multi-level. Since offline identities are discarded, the sharing of information and discourse eliminates certain criteria that may be limiting such as designation and socio-economic profile, even gender and race.

Jordan's essay puts further:

> "…communication from many people to many people is close to the norm in cyberspace. This opens participation in decision making, creating the potential for conclusions to be reached in more egalitarian ways than are available offline."

Sproull and Keisler's work however poses the idea:

> "…electronically mediated discussions are distinct from one-to-one or one-to-many discussions in that they are more inclusive, are more equal, require more time to reach decisions, and are more prone to abuse. (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986, 1993)."

Despite the breakthrough in participatory decision making, some electronically managed and dependent interactions can become exhausting. Since many people are able to participate in online discussions, there is a fear of taking time to reach decisions especially in critical issues. However, electronic mediated discussions remain to be a substantial and valid avenue for participatory democracy.

What Sproull and Keisler mean can be illustrated in the example that has happened to UK's medical profession. The ability of patients to seek and access information for the prevention or cure of their illnesses sparked a debate as this scenario poses a threat to the authority of physicians. This shows that while the Internet holds massive information, the hording of these can lead to undermining certain authorities which can be considered a disruption of social order.

In his article Virtual Politics: How the Internet is transforming democracy, Garance Franke-Ruta (2003) said that the Internet boom 'created a new base of wealth free from long standing allegiances or deep involvement in traditional political circles'. These individuals, according to her, has gained valuable technical skills and 'the raw power to make what they envision to do so'. In America, the most popular political-technical hybrid organizations Silicon Valley in California and the Silicon Alley in New York.

Franke-Ruta points out that Internet has characteristics present in both television and newspaper. Because it is interactive, it drives people to 'meet up' and gather online, whereas in TV 'viewing is strongly and negatively related to social trust and group membership.'

Franke-Ruta writes:

> "Though spending time in the Internet isolates people in physical space, the fundamental quality of the Internet is that it is ultimately interactive. The most common Internet applications -- email and instant messaging software -- drive people into epistolary relations."

> Further, theorist Stirling Newberry from ClarkSphere.com says:

> "Technologies are social organizations primarily …in the modern age, the technology that is driving people to communicate at the front end of the campaign is the Internet."

The Internet as a technology, is a social structure and 'people organize themselves to use it'. Deemed as a powerful tool, the Internet has also been used as a platform for advocacy. In several political circles in America, the Internet is an avenue for political campaigns. Politicians who have increased public relations through the Internet are considered to be front-runners. Franke-Ruta cites Vermont Governor Howard Dean to be leading the Democrats in the race.

One of the recent campaigns that have used the Internet as a platform is One.org. In its cause to eliminate worldwide poverty, with focus on African countries, the campaign is perhaps more popularly known because of its appealing TV commercial which features Hollywood actors and actresses, politicians and other famous American figures. But what makes the campaign also successful is the massive campaign in the Internet. By logging and signing on to its interactive website, you will immediately be included in their mailing list. Not only is the mailing group an effective advocacy strategy but a marketing strategy as well. As One.org advocate, you will be offered wristbands and shirts of which proceeds will go to the furtherance of the advocacy.

Franke-Ruta's article also explores the metaphor of the previously upstart free and open source systems (FOSS). In FOSS technologies, the characteristics of virtual communities gives a clearer picture. These technology works in which a program can be written by a community of coders in an open source system where 'anyone can propose new code'. The interactions that occur in the process of integrating and re-creating programs is the very essence of a virtual

community.

Inversion of Relationship: Individuals and collectives

The external and internal efforts mentioned by Hawks in his article can be assumed to represent the subjects in which the discussion of cyberculture studies revolved: the individuals (online identities) and the collective (virtual communities).

We have also learned in the previous discussion how the individual upon entering into cyberspace constructs an on online identity and assumes an 'individual space'. Later, this individual meet other online identities. They share thoughts and later discover other online identities and they begin to constitute a sort of 'neighborhood' minus the geographic space, thus virtual communities are created.

From this point of view, it seems that individuals become the fundamental cause of virtual communities. However, Jordan (1999a) argues that the emergence of virtual communities proves 'that the individual is no longer the final cause of online life'. While individuals consist these virtual communities, what appears is that these online communities set the standards and conditions in which the 'individuality' of these online identities can be defined. Thus, the collective now is the fundamental cause.

This scenario is therefore referred to as the inversion of relationship where online identities and virtual communities transforms and interchanges roles. This phenomenon holds true the fact that the study of cyberculture is broad, and the constant flux constitutes a power that is found in the realms of cyberspace.

Conclusion

Understanding cyberculture is understanding the 'here-and-now' reality.

There could be a plethora of topics that could be discussed under the study of cyberculture yet one cannot fathom the immensity of the subject for after all its very nature can only be understood in the previous topics we have discussed.

We live in society where technology rules and information is deemed to be a vital commodity. Our culture is defined by the by-products of these technologies and the mechanisms that are employed in the management of information and communication systems.

We have learned of the Internet as a tool, not only in accessing information but in changing the face of decision making, changing the way we look at participatory democracy. We took a closer look at we how we engage ourselves in cyberspace and the many social interactions that we have become part of. We are part cyberculture. We enter into cyberspace as individuals and

assume online identities, converse with other online identities and eventually create a virtual community.

As we become enmeshed in cyberculture, it also continues to transform itself making our understanding of it broad, deep and that it is in constant state of flux, just like the evolution subcultures metaphorically describe in the bubble story.

Part of this transformation is also made possible of the power within cyberspace. The inversion of roles and relationships online and electronically mediated interactions that make way for participatory decision making are concrete examples of how cyberspace and the Internet has transformed the way we live.