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Culture and Communication: The Impact of the Internet on the Emerging Global Culture

by Michael Hauben

Any document that attempts to cover an emerging culture is doomed to be incomplete. Even more so if the culture has no overt identity (at least none outside virtual space). But the other side of that coin presents us with the opportunity to document the ebb and flow, the moments of growth and defeat, the development of this young culture. (John Frost, *Cyberpoet's Guide to Virtual Culture*, 1993)

ABSTRACT

As we approached the new millennium, social relationships were changing radically. Even in 1969, the anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote of an "approaching worldwide culture." While she wrote of a global culture made possible by the electronic and transportation advances of her day, her words actually foresaw fundamental changes that have been substantially enhanced by the computer communication networks that were just beginning. A new culture is being formed out of a universal desire for communication. This culture is partly formed and formulated by new technology and by social desires. People are dissatisfied with their conditions, whether traditional or modern. Much of the new communication technology facilitates new global connections. This article will explore the emerging culture and the influence of the net on this new participatory global culture.

I. – The Emerging Globalization of Everyday Life

The concept of a global culture arises from the extensive development of transportation and communication technologies in the twentieth century. These developments have linked the world together in ways which make it relatively simple to travel or communicate with peoples and cultures around the world. The daily exposure of the world's peoples to various cultures makes it impossible for almost any individual to envision the world consisting of only his or her culture (Mead, 1978, p. 69). We really are moving into a new global age which affects most aspects of human life. For example, world trade has become extensive, more and more words are shared across languages, people are aware of political situations around the world and how these situations affect their own, and sports and entertainment are viewed simultaneously by global audiences. The exposure to media and forms of communication helps spread many of these cultural elements. While television and radio connect people with the rest of the world in a rather removed and often passive fashion, computer networks are increasingly bringing people of various cultures together in a much more intimate and grassroots manner. A global culture is developing, and the Internet is strongly contributing to its development.

Culture is a difficult concept to define. Tim North has gathered six different definitions in

his unpublished Masters thesis:

1. Culture: The shared behavior learned by members of a society, the way of life of a group of people (Barnouw, 1987, p. 423).
2. A culture is the way of life of a group of people, the complex of shared concepts and patterns of learned behavior that are handed down from one generation to the next through the means of language and imitation (Barnouw, 1987, p. 4).
3. Culture: The set of learned behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and ideals that are characteristic of a particular society or population (Ember and Ember, 1990, p. 357).
4. Culture ... taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society (Tyler, 1871; cited in Harris 1988, p. 122).
5. Culture: The customary manner in which human groups learn to organize their behavior in relation to their environment (Howard, 1989, p. 452).
6. Culture (general): The learned and shared kinds of behavior that make up the major instrument of human adaption. Culture (particular): The way of life characteristic of a particular human society (Nanda, 1991, p. G-3). (North, 1994, chapter 4.2.1)

One common category in some of these definitions is the passing of previously learned behavior from one generation to the next. Another common category in North's definitions of culture is the importance of experience and patterns of behavior being shared among a group of people.

Historically, during most periods, culture has changed slowly and has been passed on from generation to generation. In the last half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, for most peoples the normal rate of cultural evolution has been accelerating. Mead (1978, p. 64) writes that while in the past, culture was transmitted from the older generation to the younger with slow change from generation to generation, today the younger generation learn from both their elders and their peers. The learning from peers is then shared with their elders. Human culture gets set by how people live their lives (Graham, 1995). Culture is created and re-enforced through how that person lives in context of society and social movements. One is taught the culture of his or her society while growing up, but those perceptions change as he or she matures, develops and lives an adult life. Culture is not statically defined. Rather a person grows up into a culture and then can contribute to its change as time progresses. (Mead, 1956)

People are increasingly living a more global lifestyle, whether mediated through television, radio and newspapers, travel or actual experience. This global experience is facilitated by the ability of the individual to interact with people from other cultures and countries on a personal level. Images and thoughts available via mass media show that other cultures exist. But when people actually get a chance to talk and interact, then the differences become less of an oddity and more of an opportunity (Uncapher, 1992). Professor Dennis Sumara observes the formation of self-identity is influenced by relations with others. He writes:

The sense of self-identity ... emerges ... from our symbiotic relations with others. In coming to know others we learn about ourselves. It is important to note, however, that it is not a static or unified self that we come to know, for in the coming-to-know – we are changed. We evolve through our relations with others ... (Sumara, 1996, p. 56) That implies that people and cultures change from the interaction with other people's cultures. This new interaction and subsequent change is part of the formation of a global culture.

There are critics (Appadurai, 1990: etc.) who claim this global culture, or mass culture is

snuffing out individual differences for a pre-packaged commercial culture. These critics call for the isolation of communities from each other so that uniqueness can be preserved. This criticism misses that human culture is a dynamic element of society, and freezing it would produce a museum of human society. Uncapher (1992) correctly points out that what these critics do not recognize is that more and more people of various cultures are understanding the power of the new communication technologies. More and more people are reacting against the mass media and corporate dominance and calling for a chance to express their views and contribute their culture into the global culture. As an example, Margaret Mead tells a story (1978, pp 5-6) of returning to a village in New Guinea which she had visited three decades earlier. She wrote:

In the 1930s, when one arrived in a New Guinea village, the first requests were for medicine ... and for trade goods. The European was expected to bring material objects from the outside world ... but in 1967 the first conversation went:

“Have you got a tape recorder?”

“Yes, why?”

“We have heard other people’s singing on the radio and we want other people to hear ours.” (Mead, 1978, p. 5)

The presence of radios made the villagers aware of the music of others, and they wanted a part of their culture broadcast around the world.

Mead understood the importance of diversity to the survival and strength of a species, whether human or animal. However, she also understood that part of the global commonality was through the spread of scientific understandings and technological developments. The desire for technology is strong among those who have only heard about their advantages. She wrote, “People who have only seen airplanes in the sky and heard the wonderful ways of radio, satellites, telescopes, microscopes, engines, and script are eager to experience these things for themselves.” (Mead, 1978, p. 121)

The Internet is one of the new technological advances of today, and can be seen to fit with the above examples but for more advanced societies. It is important to understand that coupled with the desire for the technological advances is the understanding of the need to control the introduction of such technology and participate to have its use benefit the particular peoples in their particular needs. The peoples of the world understand that with the implementation of technology comes a responsibility for the management and careful handling of that technology. Mead writes about this:

... the very burgeoning of science that has resulted in world-wide diffusion of a monotonous modern culture has also stimulated people throughout the world to demand participation. And through this demand for participation in the benefits of a monotonous, homogeneous technology, we have actually generated new ways to preserve diversity. (Mead, 1978, pp. 153-154)

Even in the primitive communities that Mead studied in the Pacific Islands, she recorded that these people adopted democracy and the use of technology with their own variations and new aspects that served their own needs. The new advances in communication technologies facilitate new democratic processes. People are discovering new ways to participate and add their cultural contributions to a larger world. Efforts to communicate require the acceptance of technological standards and the building of a common technical framework. The growth of communications networks and standards at the same time allows diverse cultures to share and spread their varying cultures with others.

II. – Global Contact over Computer Networks

The new media of forums, newsgroups, email, chat rooms, blogs, webpages and social media on the internet facilitate the growth of global interactive communities. These electronic communication forms are made available through community networks, universities, the workplace, portals and internet access providers (Hauben & Hauben, 1997, p. 8). Human culture is ever evolving and developing, and the new public commons that these technologies make possible is of a global nature. A growing number of people are coming together online and living more time of their daily lives with people from around the world. Through the sharing of these moments by people, their cultures are coming to encompass more of the world not before immediately available. Mead (1978, p. 88) understood that a global community and awareness would require the development of a new kind of communication that depended on the participation of those who previously had no access to such power or such a voice.

Newsgroups and forums are a relatively young medium of human discourse and communication. The Usenet technology, one of the first broad newsgroup networks, was developed by graduate students in the late 1970s as a way to promote the sharing of information and to spread communication between university campuses. Their design highlighted the importance of the contribution by individuals to the community. The content of Usenet was produced by members of the community for the whole of the community. Active participation was required for Usenet to have anything available on it. It was the opposite of a for-pay service that provides content and information. On Usenet, the users produced the content, i.e., talk, debate, discussion, flames, reportage, nonsense, and scientific breakthroughs filled the space. Usenet was a public communications technology framework which was open. The users participated in determining what newsgroups were created, and then filled those newsgroups with messages that were the content of Usenet. In forming this public space, or commons, people were encouraged to share their views, thoughts, and questions with others (Hauben & Hauben, 1997, p. 4). The chance to contribute and interact with other people spread Usenet to become a truly global community of people hooking their computers together to communicate. People both desire to talk and to communicate with other people (Graham, 1995; Woodbury, 1994). Usenet was created to make that communication happen. In time it also gave a public voice to those who would not have had the opportunity otherwise to have their voice heard. By promoting a democratic medium, these graduate students who created Usenet were helping to create the kind of medium Mead believed was an important condition toward the development of a global culture.

In a study about the global online culture, Tim North (1994, chapter 5.2) asked the question “is there an online culture and society on Usenet?” His conclusion was that there was a definite Usenet culture. He listed four of the important defining aspects of this unique online culture:

1. The conventions of the culture are freely discussed.
2. The culture is not closed to outsiders and welcomes new members.
3. There is a strong sense of community within the Net culture.
4. It's what you say, not who you are.

North described the Usenet culture as open and welcoming of newcomers even if there was an occasional unfriendliness to “newbies.” He focused on how the online culture was documented and available so newcomers could figure out how the community functioned and more easily join it. But also not only was the documentation available online to learn from, it was open for discussion.

Another researcher in the 1990s, Bruce Jones described the fullness of net culture: ... the Usenet network of computers and users constitutes a community and a culture, bounded by its own set of norms and conventions, marked by its own linguistic jargon and sense of humor and accumulating its own folklore. (p. 2)

Jones elaborates on what he saw to be an egalitarian tendency or tendency to contribute to the community's benefit. Jones wrote:

... the people of the net owe something to each other. While not bound by formal, written agreements, people nevertheless are required by convention to observe certain amenities because they serve the greater common interest of the net. These aspects of voluntary association are the elements of culture and community that bind the people of Usenet together. (p. 4)

While North proposed that Usenet was a distinct culture, he argued that it could not be considered a separate society. Rather Usenet was "a superstructural society that spans many mainstream societies and is dependent upon them for its continued existence" (North, 1994, chap. 4.2.2).

North argued that the Net does not need to provide the physical needs made possible by a society. He wrote:

In this superstructural view, the Net is freed of the responsibilities of providing certain of the features provided by other societies (e.g., reproduction, food and shelter) by virtue of the fact that its members are also members of traditional mainstream societies that do supply them. (North, 1994, chap. 4.2.2)

Rather, those who use the Net live in their daily offline society, and come to the Net for reasons other than physical needs. Others (Avis, 1995; Graham, 1995; Jones, 1991) also studied this new online culture and its connection to the growing global culture. They saw there are a distinct online culture and a distinct offline global culture. While the online culture strongly contributes to the developing global culture offline, it is not the sole contributing factor. The contribution of the online culture to the global culture through such technologies as forums and electronic mailing lists is important as the online media requires participation of the users to exist. Since as media forums, newsgroups and social websites encourage participation, they support the contributions of many diverse people and cultures to the broader global culture.

Both the technological design of opening one's computer up to accept contributions of others and the desire to communicate led to the creation of an egalitarian culture (Jones, 1991; North, 1994; Woodbury, 1994). People have both a chance to introduce and share their own culture and a chance to broaden themselves through exposures to various other cultures. As such, the online culture is an example of a global culture which is not a reflection of purely one culture. Instead, it both incorporates cultural elements from many nations and builds a new culture (North, 1994). Self-identity evolves through relations with others. (Sumara, 1996, p.56) The new connections between people of different cultures allows each culture to broaden itself based on the new understandings available from other places; culture changes through the exchange with new ways of understanding and life. And this change and shared changes gets shared around the world.

III. – Community Networks Making Online Access Available

Being a relatively young medium, the Net is available to a subset of the world. However, this is rapidly changing. Projects are extending the connections to undeveloped countries and the basic technology needed to gain access is as simple as a computer and modem connected to the local

telephone or amateur radio network or use of Internet connectivity available from an Internet service provider. More and more people around the world are getting online via mobile devices. Another hurdle to overcome is technical training. However, the democratic ethos of the Net spreads through the help that users offer each other online. A large number of people who are on the Net want more people to be able to use computer technology. Many are helpful and take the time and effort to spread their knowledge to others who desire to learn. Similarly everyone online at one point was new and learning. This experience of “newbie”ness provides a common heritage to unite people. The problems encountered in implementing and using new technology encourages people to connect to others using the technology. This is an incentive to hook into the Internet where such people can be contacted. The commonality of people participating in the same technology creates a basis to develop commonality toward other interests.

Community networks in the 1990s provided a way for citizens of a locality to hook into these global communities for little or no cost (Graham, 1995). Community networks also provided a way for communities to truly represent themselves to others connected online (Graham, 1995; Weston, 1994). Without access made available through community networks, through publicly available computer terminals or local dial-in phone numbers, only those who could have afforded the cost of a computer and the monthly charges of commercial Internet service providers (ISPs) or online services or who had access through work or school would represent themselves (Avis, 1995). Particular portraits of various cultures would thus be only partially represented. Also, when access is available and open to all, a greater wealth of contributions can be made. For example, there was a strong push in Canada and Canadian communities to get online. A lot of grassroots community network building took place. A Canadian national organization, Telecommunities Canada, stressed the importance of contributing Canada’s various cultures to the online community and in this way made a contribution to the whole community (Graham, 1995; Weston, 1994). In a similar way, Izumi Aizu (1995, p. 6) says that Japan had “an opportunity to bring its own cultural value to the open world.” He continues, “It also opens the possibility of changing Japan into a less rigid, more decentralized society, following the network paradigm exercised by the distributed nature of the Internet itself” (Aizu, 1995, p. 6).

There is something to be said about the attraction of representing one’s self to the greater community. The many-to-many form of communication where an individual can broadcast to the community and get responses back from other individuals is an empowering experience. No longer do you have to be rich and powerful to communicate broadly to others and to represent yourself and your own views. This power is making it possible for individuals to communicate with others of similar and differing interests around the world. Grass-roots organization is boosted and even the formation of local community groups is all accelerated. Development of the commons to the exclusion of the big media representations makes this an electronic grassroots medium, or a new enlarged public commons (Felsenstein, 1993).

The online culture is primarily a written one, but there are an increasing number of videos and podcasts, although much of the text is written generally in an informal, almost off-the-cuff fashion. While people will post papers and well thought-out ideas, much of the conversation is generated in an immediate response to others’ messages. This text can feel like a conversation, or a written version of oral culture. Stories akin to the great stories of the pre-history come about. Legends and urban myths circulate and are disseminated (Jones, 1991). Pictures and other non-text items can be posted or sent in messages. These nontext items are primarily transferred and not modified, thought upon or communally worked on as are the textual ideas, but the comments often

resemble a conversation. Graphics and graphical communication and collaboration occur more on websites, although they are still a less effective communication medium. The common shared online language was in the beginning English (Aizu). That has changed. Other languages exist in country hierarchies and newsgroups and in mailing lists, along with chat rooms, search engines and web pages. Moreover, all these developments, textual or graphic or video, make possible a global conversation of diverse views. Mead recognizes that "True communication is a dialogue." (Mead, 1978, p.77) She points out that real communication occurs "... in a world in which conflicting points of view, rather than orthodoxies, are prevalent and accessible." (Mead, 1978, p. 80)

IV. – Conclusion

The new global culture is forming in several ways, none of which is a generic corporate rubber stamp. People are taking charge. They are bringing their own cultures into the global culture and spreading this new culture around the world. This is taking on a general form and an online form. The online form provides a strong means by which people can spread their ideas and culture which in turn affects the broader global culture. This broader global culture also has an effect on newsgroups or online media. The ability to express oneself to the rest of the world is addictive and the rapid increase of new people joining the online global community makes that manifest. "The voice-less and the oppressed in every part of the world have begun to demand more power The secure belief that those who knew had authority over those who did not has been shaken" (Mead, 1978, p.5). Mead states later, "There are new technological conditions within which a new initiative for the human race is possible. But it will not be found without a vision." To the former call for brotherhood and sisterhood or of loyalty to kin and one's ancestors, Mead proposes, "we can now add a vision of a planetary community." She explains that "Within such a vision, the contributions of each culture ... can become complementary." However, Mead emphasizes, "but within the new vision there must be no outsiders." (pp. 147-148)

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