

Cybersociety and Virtual Ideology

As this chapter is intended as a context and agenda setting discussion, my intent is to raise a number of points relating to cybersociety as whole. In attempting to comment on virtual ideology it is first necessary to define at least some of the terminology that will be repeated throughout this chapter. “Cyberspace” is the commonly accepted term for the realm of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and discourse. It is the conceptual space one is said to be ‘in’ whilst using the Internet. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is a software driven communications program that provides a real time chat facility, similar to a visual telephone conversation where each party sees the others words on screen. By virtual I mean that there is no physical or real world presence of the subject in question, or that what is being experienced is mediated through cyberspace. Thus the terms “virtual” and “cyber” are to some extent interchangeable though each has specific connotations and would be peculiar to a specific exposition. The term “community” is somewhat problematic to define as it has different connotations dependant on the context it is used in: ideological, descriptive, normative etc...

“A community is a bounded territory of sorts (whether physical or ideological), but it can also refer to a sense of common character, identity, or interests as with the ‘gay community’ or the ‘virtual community’” (Jones, 1997, 39).

The above description hints at the culturally binding nature of collective consumption, goal formation and symbolic constructions that encompass social, economic and political

spheres of life. Perhaps the reason community is so hard to define is that it is dynamic by nature, evolving with society: a metaphorical organism that conducts Computer Mediated Communication through its skeletal body.

The first line of inquiry we should adopt within the context of this chapter is the apparent juxtaposition between individuality and collectivity in cyberspace. Jan Fernback (Jones 1997, 36-54) posits that cyber-existence in post-industrial societies is partially characterised by emergent tensions between the individual and the collective. This is perhaps most prevalent in the case of discussion groups and listserved discussion, where messages may either be posted to an individual or the collective 'list' where all may view the post. This gives rise to a notion of the group as a new type of collective meta-consciousness, reasoning with itself internally as though engaged in a meta form of intra-personal communication. It is within a relationship to this group identity that individual identity is formed. Jones (1997) notes that identity is derived from both our understanding of group identity and identification within a collective.

“...those who frequent Usenet newsgroups provide evidence that they feel the group and its messages “belong” to them (McLaughlin, Osborne, & Smith, 1995, 102), creating an inversion of traditional community power and possession. No longer do *we* as members of the group, belong to the community, rather the community belongs to us” (16).

This has interesting implications in the discussion of tensions between individual and collective identity, as the collective is inflected to include a new conception of

individuality that is also part of the collective. That is to say, our own formations of identity come from both identification with a group of potential peers, and our understanding of the collective identity of a specific group within cyberspace. Thus possession of the community becomes an integral element of individual membership. This is where the public and private become blurred, as the public collective is enveloped in individual privacy.

The actual 'space' in which the community can be said to exist therefore, can be seen as an arena of power which facilitates social, cultural, economic and political interaction. Benedikt (1991) sees cyberspace as having many of the same features as physical space.

“Cyberspace has a geography, a physics, a nature and a rule of human law. In cyberspace, the common man and the information worker-cowboy or infocrat- can search, manipulate, create or control information directly; he can be entertained or trained, seek solitude or company, win or lose power... indeed, can “live” or “die” as he will” (123: cited in Jones, 1997, 37).

Cyberspace also has many characteristics of physical space. These are: density, experienced in the traffic to and from a commercial web site, as opposed to a private homepage offering nothing more than a collection of hyperlinks; and dimensionality, experienced in the difference between virtual world simulation and browsing web pages or using email. With this in mind we are compelled to treat it as more than a mere new

communication technology and more as an arena of competing interests which reconceive the public sphere. Fernback describes cyberspace as:

“...sacred and profane, it is workspace and leisure space, it is a battleground and a nirvana, it is real and it is virtual, it is ontological and phenomenological” (Jones, 1997, 37).

The keywords central to our discussion here are ontological and phenomenological. The very nature of being is something which cyberspace is greatly concerned with, as it inflects modern ontology to include a form of cyber-science. That is to say, the virtual has become equally prominent in the metaphysical commentary of today as whatever reality was before cyberspace was realised. Encompassing both the nature of being and phenomena as instances of consciousness, cyberspace has become an arena for participation in public life, offering the principle seduction that public space is available within the private sphere. I believe the attraction of cyberspace is the actual proximity of a global network within one's own home.

“We might be alone at our computers as we type, but we are participating in some form of public life” (Ibid., 38).

Fernback attributes this phenomenon in part to an intense desire for privacy, and calls for a re-examination of our atomized lives. Mistrust of one's actual neighbour or the isolation experienced in the later stages of capitalism are among possible reasons attributed to the

fact that we now seek community within our homes; within private space. Our lives have become increasingly atomised to the extent that now we can even shop on-line, making sources of community such as the village high street (which is itself threatened by the ‘out of town’ hypermarket that is an increasing signpost to the later stages of capitalism) defunct. This being the case we are further atomised as the need to venture out of our homes declines; we find the ease with which we can engage in virtual community increases. One need only note that television and radio stations now include e-mail addresses as contact points to illustrate how technology is becoming naturalised; absorbed into our everyday lives so that future generations grow up alongside technology culture. The culture of technology is spread throughout the public sphere, which as Habermas contends, reflects the interests of the dominant social group.

“When Habermas (1962/ 1989) conceived of the public sphere as a realm in which rational public debate helps to shape participatory democracy, he noted that the nature and limits of public space were partially determined by the concomitant social configurations of the day...” (Ibid.).

Fernback attempts to draw a comparison between cyberspace and the public sphere here, which is highly relevant to my project. Cyberspace serves as a public sphere in the form of IRC chat rooms and Usenet groups, which offer institutionalised forums for public debate. To this end Habermas’ ideas on the public sphere are relatively useful as a tool for examining CMC technology as an alternative social space. However in response to Habermas’ argument that a public sphere of competing ideas forms the ideological space

for public opinion to be rationally formed, Fraser (1990) posits that rather than welcoming true public debate his concept of public sphere functioned as a space for “propertied, bourgeois men to practice their own skills of self governance” (Ibid.).

This seems to be the general flaw in most social theory of late: i.e. that what claims to address a whole society in actual fact pertains to only a small elitist faction. The lower classes and women were denied access to the public space Habermas speaks of in Fraser’s account. Thus we must adopt a skeptical position here in relation to Habermas’ intentions. However, this doesn’t necessarily undermine his theoretical position if we take this into account when considering his notion of a public sphere to be an elite space which the majority of the population had no access to, not unlike cybersociety. Although the virtual collective within cyberspace would no doubt like us to believe it is entirely utopian, it is actually a space very similar to Habermas’ public sphere of ideological space where ideas compete to form a rational public opinion. I think we must again be skeptical as to the exact nature of this public opinion here, which ultimately belongs to the dominant ideology. Thus we must consider Fraser’s initial argument that the rational formation of public opinion is a product of the elite social order. It is important to consider the implications of this, as due to the very nature of this medium we are addressing a global world order; an elite space capable of overcoming cultural, geographical and language boundaries.

Encompassing both material and symbolic dimensions in the merging of public and private spheres, cyberspace fosters a unique type of community. This community is presently undergoing exponential growth, inversely proportional to physical community, which is in decline. Howard Rheingold has noted the decline of community in postindustrial America:

“I suspect that one of the explanations for this phenomenon is the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives”

(<http://www.well.com/user/hlr/vcbook/vcbook1.html>, 4).

Conceptions of community as involving the collective formation of goals and policy, shared experience and culturally binding symbolic constructions, place community as dynamic and socially evolving. As one of the earliest cyberspace critics, Rheingold's enthusiastic polemic asserts that as a disembodied community, the virtual community allows connectivity between like-minded people across geographical boundaries. He describes cyberspace in terms of a global petri dish:

“Although spatial imagery and a sense of place help convey the experience of dwelling in a virtual community, biological imagery is often more appropriate to describe the way cyberculture changes. In terms of the way the whole system is propagating and evolving, think of cyberspace as a social petri dish, the Net is the agar medium, and virtual communities, in all their diversity, as the colonies of micro-organisms that grow in the

petri dishes. Each of the small colonies of microorganisms—the communities on the Net—is a social experiment that nobody planned but that is happening nevertheless” (Ibid.).

This is a particularly vivid metaphorical device that enables us to understand the way cybercolonies interact with one another and behave socially. Its relevance to my own project is dramatic as the metaphor connotes a vague form of socialism, with the community itself controlling the means of its own production and sustenance.

Interviewed in San Francisco, 1995, Rheingold explains what he considers to be so revolutionary about this medium:

“Many-to-many media, I think, are a revolution in the way the printing press was a revolution. Before the printing press, there were a few tens of thousands of hand-picked people who could read and write. After the printing press, there was a literate population in Europe of millions... When you collect computers and telecommunications together, you created a global many-to-many medium that unlocks the access to other people’s minds...” (<http://www.ucet.ufl.edu/~fischer/rants/rheingold.html>, 1)

Rheingold’s polemic is full of such positive expositions of the potential of cyberspace, and he clearly finds a vision of participatory democracy to be the most favourable future for the Internet. However he is also aware of the impending threat from big business and the commercial sector:

“If they put these new cable boxes into our homes and we can get 10 million bits per second into our homes so that we can get video on demand, but we can only put a hundred bits per second back out onto the network, in other words, just a channel clicker that will enable us to choose between packages that are sold to us, then we will lose that capability of the medium that makes every person a publisher” (Ibid., 2).

The point here is that a two-way architecture is for the individual user vastly preferable to one in which the streaming of content into our homes is favoured, as this encourages passive consumption. The large media companies however would welcome such a one way architecture, and Rheingold points out that we must guard against them trying to force this situation. If we arrive at a position where a company that owns a lot of cables also owns a lot of content providing media, then unless laws are passed to prevent it they will obviously favour their own content. This is how the freedom of the Internet could potentially be withdrawn; leaving us with a global network that is no longer decentralised.

Later theorists like Jones (1997) discuss Rheingold (1993) with an almost nostalgic rhetoric, (1997, 40), as he places the desire to build communities in cyberspace purely down to the human need for social contact, presenting notions of fellowship and folk traditions. In attempting to assess the real interest driving a virtual community, Jones questions whether a group of like-minded individuals constitutes a true collectivity (Ibid.). He postulates that maybe it is symbolic value that constitutes true worth in relationship to virtual communities, using Rheingold’s rhetoric about atomisation and

fear of our physical neighbours. This privileging of the symbolic dimension seems to fit in with the Baudrillardian view, and I will return to it in the chapter devoted to Baudrillard.

I have established so far that cyberspace encounters notions of individual and collective consciousness, in the constitution of both identity and community. This is relevant to the larger project of simulation and power in cybersociety, as it ultimately affects the perception of subjects and way in which they behave. The combined discussion of naturalised technology and image of a global petri dish, indicate that technology is indeed becoming a new life supporting medium or 'agar jelly'. This is important as it contextualises virtual culture as being far more than that of a single community, preparing the ground for a discussion of virtual ideology as introduced through a comparison with American democracy. While the link between culture and ideology is often at the subconscious level, it is important here as ideology constitutes class in the Marxian sense, and this is useful to aid in conceptualising cybersociety. Virtual communities have developed a culture all of their own that is specific to the dominant ideology in cyberspace.

Another point made by Jones (Ibid.) is that we may use these virtual social groups, which Rheingold's polemic is so endearing towards (especially his documentation of The WELL, <http://www.well.com/user/hlr/vcbook/vcbook1.html>), as models for physical community building in the future.

“Ideologically, community within cyberspace appears to emphasize a shared belief in the principles of free speech, individualism, equality, and open access- the same symbolic interests that define the character of American democracy” (1997, 40).

The character of American democracy provides us with a useful locus from which to investigate virtual ideology, as many of the central tenets are exactly the same. In fact, as America is the Internet’s birthplace it may be no coincidence that this link is in place, for it can be demonstrated through analysis of virtual worlds that cyberspace merely replicates the values of its users, which contribute to ideological formation.

Rather than attempt to describe the process without first understanding our motives for involving ourselves in this polemic, it is perhaps best to illustrate how ideologies are formed through presenting a case study of the commonly accepted virtual ideology. What has come to be known as the Californian Ideology (<http://www.wmin.ac.uk/media/HRC/ci/calif5.html>), is actually composed of ideals for democracy that mirror the politics of Thomas Jefferson: a unique blend of free market economics, cybernetics and counter-culture libertarianism. It is interesting to note here that the same Jefferson who inscribed democratic process into the American declaration of independence was also one of the largest slave owners in the country. This mirrors the double nature of liberal individualism that contradicts the very nature of the American dream: for specific individuals to prosper others must either suffer or loose out in some other way as wealth in any given society is limited. However the post-human philosophy of the American West Coast Extropian cult combined with the Californian free enterprise

model of economics looks set to become the dominant ideology for cyberspace, as there are no obvious competitors to the Californian Ideology.

“ On superficial reading, the writings of the Californian ideologists are an amusing cocktail of Bay Area cultural wackiness and in-depth analysis of the latest developments in the hi-tech arts, entertainment and media industries. Their politics appear to be impeccably libertarian – they want information technologies to be used to create a new ‘Jeffersonian democracy’ in cyberspace where every individual would be able to express themselves freely. Implacable in its certainties, the Californian Ideology offers a fatalistic vision of the natural and inevitable triumph of the high tech free market – a vision which is blind to racism, poverty and environmental degradation and which has no time to debate alternatives” (Ibid.).

This ideology is already commonly adopted in future-watch publications such as the popular journal “Wired.” As one of the leading proponents of the Californian Ideology, it brings academic and business communities together with enthusiastic rhetorical flourishes in the common interest of technology. This magazine is itself documentary evidence of ideology at work, not having time to debate alternatives as it is too wrapped up in Jeffersonian free market futurism. However it is also egocentric and the criticism of social blindness to inequality is fairly attributed, as the projected vision is seen through rose tinted spectacles that fail to recognise imperfection in the global race to become digital.

As the patron saint of this ideology, Marshall McLuhan initiated further interest in this area in the 60s with a discourse preaching that the empowering effects of new technology on individuals would overthrow the centralised power of government institutions. The most profoundly influenced sub-cultural movement were the middle class Hippies, who believing their own libertarian non-conformist goals could be realised through technology saw the confluence of telecommunications and media industries with computing to be inevitably promoting an electronic democracy.

“During the ‘70s and ‘80s, many of the fundamental advances in personal computing and networking were made by people influenced by the technological optimism of the new left and the counter-culture. By the ‘90s, some of these ex-hippies had even become owners and managers of high-tech corporations in their own right and the pioneering work of the community media activists has been largely recuperated by the hi-tech and media industries” (Ibid.).

This historic situation provides us with both an explanation for the present situation, and a clear illustration of how the Californian Ideology was formed over a period of four decades. With an ideology behind them skilled workers in the virtual domain can now be said to constitute a class; each member of the virtual class being promised the opportunity to become successful through the use of information technologies. However it must be acknowledged here that despite claims of universality, the Californian ideology is a specific instance of an indigenous people following their own path of socio-economic and technological development. Thus this is not the inevitable future of the whole planet as

Californian Ideologues would have us believe. As technological determinists they promote a dream of digital nirvana which their ideology fully endorses, yet it rejects notions of social progress and community in favour of economic and technological fatalism.

Jones contends however that a community of pure interests, which is often emphasised in cyberspace such as a discussion group, can be an ideologically isolated space closed off from the rest of virtual culture (1997, 40). That is to say, individual communities may lack a social role in the larger collectivity of cyberspace if they never extend beyond the boundaries of their closed group, which has a predefined agenda relative to the common interest. Whether or not the whole of cyber–meta– space may be conceived of as a ‘larger collective’ is another matter that I do not care to engage with here. Although the one thing we can be certain of is that members all have access to cyberspace, which places them in a generic category relative to economic position.

Jones argues that these isolated communities lack the sense of individuality that can only be realised within the context of a larger collective as members often experience a deficiency in belonging to anything other than the community itself. I think the point he is driving at here is that individual identity (as defined earlier) depends on an understanding of one’s own position within a collective. Presumably the point he is trying to make is that by fixing your identity in relation to an isolated cyber community one also isolates oneself from the larger collective. Fixing one’s identity in relation to the larger collective of Internet users would embrace the collective consciousness though this may

constitute leaving the isolated community. However this assumes it is a conscious process; the process of identification with a group may well be a subconscious decision in most cases, depending on how rigidly an individual fixes their identity on an exclusive group. In the case of gay men for instance, using the #gaysex IRC channel can be a vital confirmation of identity and tool in the coming out process:

“For some IRC is mere entertainment. For others it has been an integral part of their coming out process and the formulation of a gay identity... Thus, for the gay men participating in CMC, the virtual experiences of IRC and real-life experience share a symbiotic relationship; that is, relationships formed within the exterior gay community lead the users to the interior CMC gay community, where they, in turn, develop new relationships which are nurtured and developed outside the bounds of CMC” (Ibid., 143).

Shaw’s study of twelve gay men between the ages of 20-32, who frequently use gay IRC channels, noted that while some of the men worked with computers others could only use IRC and word-processing software. These men are perhaps most at risk from being atomised by rigidly fixing their identity with an exclusive community as they may not belong to the larger collective of cyberspace. However this is slightly problematic for two reasons: firstly, it can be demonstrated that sexuality is more than simply a category of interest. This presents the notion that homosexuals may see sexual categories as mutually exclusive. Thus they may not want to belong to anything other than the gay community. Secondly the larger collective of cyberspace calls for further definition in this context, yet to some extent it resists definition by addressing a meta-space. To say it is a ‘larger’

collective means that, while actual size is comparatively irrelevant, we are addressing a meta-collective consisting of every single cybercommunity. However it is questionable as to whether an individual gains a greater awareness of their-own identity through feeling any affinity with this meta-collective. This is as far as my project allows this discussion to go, so to qualify the point for thematic continuity, IRC affords the opportunity for all to try on different personalities. In the case of gay men it provides a chance to try out their real identity before coming out to the rest of society.

Another problematic of the above discussion is that the foundations of entirely virtual community seem relatively shallow as only a small amount of time and effort may constitute belonging to the group. Perhaps this is a symptom of the way community is evolving to embrace a global architecture. As community has become a dynamic construct in the space of CMC, Rheingold's previously detailed metaphor of a global petri dish illustrates that as cyberspace grows regardless of geographical boundaries, the nature of cyber-community dynamically adjusts itself to suit the new 'agar' (life supporting electronics). Placing collectivist rhetoric as a proactive discourse, the ideology of cyber-democracy mentioned earlier is founded on a collectivist belief that humanity can be achieved through online interaction in the global petri dish. Kapor (1993) supports this notion of collectivist virtual ideology, stating:

"Life in cyberspace is often conducted in primitive, frontier conditions, but it is a life which, at best, is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentralized than hierarchical. It serves individuals and communities, not mass audiences... In fact, cyberspace seems to

be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community” (53: cited in Jones, 1997, 47).

This statement seems to uphold a Rheingoldian ideal of a cyberspace that may only remain in existence with governmental backing to keep the information infrastructure free from monopolistic tendencies and capable of fostering small communities. The commitment to pluralism, diversity and community is engrained into the very core of virtual ideology. It is interesting to note that cybersociety writ large is often compared to America in terms of colonisation. Phrases like ‘frontier conditions’ connote surviving in a primitive settlement, which is exactly where we will view our present position in the retrospect of as little as a decade.

However the technological skepticism displayed by Winner (1984) sees Kapur’s utopianism, which fits in with American Vice-President Gore’s vision for the National Information Infrastructure, as naïve:

“Where... is any motion toward increased democratized and social equality or the dawn of a cultural renaissance? Current developments in the information age suggest an increase in power by those who already have a great deal of power... Far from demonstrating a revolution in patterns of social and political influence, empirical studies of computers and social change... usually show powerful groups adapting computerized methods to retain control” (92 : cited in Jones, 1997, 47).

Winner's principle point here is that decentralised control and social equality can never be realised until 'our' society (meaning America in the context of his polemic but modified to mean globally here) invests informed efforts at CMC policy making.

I have established the notion of a virtual ideology so far in order to gain a clearer understanding of culture in cybersociety. This is important here, as one of the purposes of this chapter is to broadly characterise cyberspace. For instance, consider that with McLuhan as patron saint, the Californian Ideology is exemplified through journals such as "Wired". This is interesting as the spatial layout of his original texts emphasises the role of the eye in perception. Aside from theoretical rhetoric, his books often pose questions through symbolism, rather than deliver concrete facts. I believe this is as close to the nature of cyberspace that a printed book can be, as it emphasises non-linear perception. The next chapter is entirely devoted to the theories of Marshall McLuhan.

Jones' contentions about individual and collective consciousness lead into a discussion of identity fixing. Through looking at gay men and their use of IRC, the notion of fixing one's identity according to an exclusive community is exemplified. This ties in with the collectivist virtual ideology that humanity can be achieved online. However online humanity necessitates some form of regulative agency. Thus the discussion now progresses to notions of spatial legality within cyberspace.

The territory of cyberspace problematises certain geographically based laws that are needed for society to function smoothly, such as copyright, libel and censorship. That is to say, as a global medium the Internet renders national laws inadequate. For instance, a BBC news bulletin published on the web on February 26, 1998 (http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk/newsid_60000/60355.stm), identifies child pornography as a growing problem, and launches an attack on Demon Internet for refusing to moderate its discussion groups. In the article Cliff Stanford of Demon responds:

“It doesn’t work. It is not news groups that are causing the problem. It is news articles... By deleting the newsgroups where people expect to find it, this material disappears into all sorts of other news groups.”

The conclusion of the article is a paragraph stating that the Obscene Publications act was applicable to magazines and books. The police now need to know how they can prosecute Internet Service Providers for providing access to child pornography under the 40-year old act. This example perfectly illustrates the problematic status of trying to govern cyberspace with laws that were made before it was even realised. Another aspect of this problematic is location. What is considered legal but not pornographic in Holland may well be completely illegal under current UK legislation; whereas in Singapore posting material critical of the government renders one liable of defamation (Edupage, 1996 cited in Jones, 1997, 49). The correspondence between “law space” and physical boundaries is highly problematic. Although commercial websites invoke the law of the country they are

geographically based in, trademark law encounters the problematic of defining a global marketplace, when the physical location of companies competing for the same trademark may be on the other side of the world to each other. That is to say, geographically based laws fall short of being equally applicable to cyberspace.

“Cyberspace radically undermines the relationship between legally significant phenomena and physical location. The rise of the global computer network is destroying the link between geographic location and (1) the power of local governments to assert control over behaviour; (2) the effects of behaviour on individuals or things; (3) the legitimacy of the efforts of a local sovereign to enforce rules applicable to global phenomena; and (4) the ability of physical location to give notice of which sets of rules apply” (Kahin & Nesson (ed.), 1997, 6).

The Internet therefore radically subverts elements of the old geographically based legal system. As it enables transactions between people who do not necessarily know the physical location of the other party, a new form of law to govern this global cyberterritory is imperative. Perhaps the easiest means of addressing this problematic would be to define a legal institute specifically for cyberspace.

“Many of the jurisdictional and substantive quandaries raised by border-crossing electronic communications could be resolved by one simple principle: conceiving of cyberspace as a distinct ‘place’ for purposes of legal analysis and recognising a legally significant border between cyberspace and the ‘real world’” (Ibid., 13).

The authors note here that this distinction should fit into place easily because access to the cyberworld occurs through the boundary of a monitor. Distinct codes of conduct will undoubtedly evolve in these new spaces, according to the rule that any law must take into account the nature of the place it governs, the persons and objects found there. However it is not within the focus of this thesis to either analyse the existing legal system or propose an entirely new one.

The intention of this chapter has been to introduce relevant areas and concepts that provide a general introduction to cyberspace as an object of theory, and set a context for the later chapters of the thesis. I have attempted to move the discussion relatively swiftly between aspects that I believe define the character of cyberspace. This has been the short-term agenda in order to introduce the nature of a space without physical presence. This is important to contextualise the world simulation programs I intend to discuss in Section Two. To briefly surmise then I have discussed, notions of individual and collective consciousness in an electronic environment where social relations occur, virtual ideology as emphasising a belief that humanity can be achieved online, and the problematics of law space. Law speculations help introduce and frame simulation and power within the context of this thesis. We can now explore the theoretical issues governing the constitution of simulation and power. I will continue with a generalised notion of cyberspace throughout the next section, only moving the focus from cyberspace to virtual world as media-text in the second part of this work.