The Prospects for Identity and Community in Cyberspace

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INTRODUCTION

Before you read on make sure you have a photo…I will not answer to anyone I cannot imagine physically. Thanks. (Message posted to an online discussion forum)

Individuals are increasingly employing Internet and communication technologies (ICTs) to mediate their communications with individuals and groups, both locally and internationally. Elsewhere, I have discussed current perspectives on the origins and impact of cyberculture(s) (Macfadyen, 2006a), theoretical arguments regarding the challenges of intercultural communication in online environments (Macfadyen, 2006b), and recent approaches to studying the language of cyberspace (Macfadyen, 2006c)—the very medium of interpersonal and intragroup communication in what is, as yet, the largely text-based environment of cyberspace. Virtual environments might in some sense be viewed as a communicative "bottleneck"—a milieu in which visual and oral cues or well-developed relationships may be lacking, and in which culturally diverse individuals may hold widely different expectations of how to establish credibility, exchange information, motivate others, give and receive feedback, or critique or evaluate information (Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche, & Chase, 2004).

Anecdotal evidence, and a growing body of research data, indicate that the greatest challenge that online communicators (and especially novice online communicators) experience is that of constructing what they consider to be a satisfactory or "authentic" identity in cyberspace, and in interpreting those online identities created by others. Rutter and Smith (1998) note, for example, that in their study of a regionally-based social newsgroup in the UK, communicators showed a real desire to paint "physical pictures" of themselves in the process of identity construction, and frequently included details of physical attributes, age, and marital status. Moreover, authentic identity construction and presentation also appears to contribute to communicator's perceptions of the possibility for construction of authentic "community" online.

BACKGROUND

As with the literature on many other aspects of ICTs (Macfadyen, Roche, & Doff, 2004), current literature on the possibilities for "authentic" identity and community in cyberspace tends to offer either simple pessimistic condemnation (e.g., Blanco, 1999; Miah, 2000) or optimistic enthusiasm (e.g., Lévy, 2001, 2001a; Michaelson, 1996; Rheingold, 2000; Sy, 2000). Perhaps it is not surprising that feelings run so high, however, when we consider that human questions of identity are central to the phenomenon of cyberspace. Lévy reminds us that cyberspace is not merely the "material infrastructure of digital communications," but also encompasses "the human beings who navigate and nourish that infrastructure" (2001, p. XVI). Who are these humans? How can we be sure? And how is the capacity for global communications impacting interpersonal and group culture, communications and relationships? This article surveys recent theoretical and empirical approaches to thinking about identity and community in cyberspace, and the implications for future work in the field of human-computer interaction.

VIRTUAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY: CRITICAL THEMES

Virtual Identity, Virtual Ethnicity, and Disembodiment

Does the reality of "disembodied being" in cyberspace present a challenge to construction of identity? Key

theoretical arguments regarding identity in cyberspace revolve around questions of human *agency*: the degree to which individuals shape, or are shaped by the structures and constraints of the virtual world. Holmes (1998) argues, "human agency has radically changed in spatial, temporal and technological existence" (p. 7); the emergence of cybercultures and virtual environments means, he suggests, that previous perspectives on individuality as constituted by cognitive and social psychology may be less meaningful, especially as they do not consider aspects of space and time in the consideration of community and behaviour. Building on Holmes rethinking of social relations, other contributors to his edited collection *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace* suggest that alterations in the nature of identity and agency, the relation of self to other, and the structure of community and political representation by new technologies have resulted in a loss of *political* identity and agency for the individual. Jones (1997) similarly questions whether public unity and rational discourse can occur in a space (cyberspace) that is populated by multiple identities and random juxtapositions of distant communicators. Fernanda Zambrano (1998) characterizes individuals in virtual society as "technological terminals" for whom state and nation are irrelevant but actually sees disembodiment and deterritorialization of the individual as a strength, offering the possibility for "productive insertion in the world" beyond traditional geographically-bound notions of citizenship. Offering decidedly more postmodern perspectives, Turkle (1995) suggests that a model of fragmented (decentred) selves may be more useful for understanding virtual identity, using theoretical perspectives on identity from psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, aesthetics, artificial intelligence, and virtuality, and Poster (2001) proposed a new vision of fluid online identity that functions simply as a temporary and ever-changing link to the evolving cultures and communities of cyberspace. Others (see, for example, Miah, 2000; Orvell, 1998) are, however, less willing to accept virtual identity as a postmodern break with traditional notions of identity, and instead argue that virtual reality is simply a further "sophistication of virtualness that has always reflected the human, embodied experience" (Miah, 2000, p. 211).

This latter author, and others, point out that regardless of theoretical standpoint, virtuality poses a real and practical challenge to identity construction, and a number of recent studies have attempted to examine tools and strategies that individuals employ as they select or construct identity or *personae* online (Burbules, 2000; Jones, 1997; Smith & Kollock, 1998). Rutter and Smith (1998) offer a case study of identity creation in an online setting, examining elements such as addressivity (who talks to whom) and self-disclosure, and how these elements contribute to sociability and community. Jordan (1999) examines elements of progressive identity construction: online names, online bios and self-descriptions.

Interestingly, a number of authors focus explicitly on the notion of "virtual ethnicity:" how individuals represent cultural identity or membership in cyberspace. Foremost among these is Poster (1998, 2001) who theorizes about "the fate of ethnicity in an age of virtual presence" (p. 151). He asks whether ethnicity requires bodies—inscribed as they are with rituals, customs, traditions, and hierarchies—for true representation. Wong (2000) meanwhile reports on ways that disembodied individuals use language in the process of cultural identity formation on the Internet, and similarly, Reeder et al. (2004) attempt to analyze and record cultural differences in self-presentation in an online setting. In a related discussion, contributors to the collection edited by Smith and Kollock (1998) offer counter-arguments to the suggestion that as a site of disembodied identity, cyberspace may eliminate consideration of racial identity; instead, they suggest that cyberindividuals may simply develop new nonvisual criteria for people to judge (or misjudge) the races of others.

Online identities may therefore be multiple, fluid, manipulated and/or may have little to do with the "real selves" of the persons behind them (Fernanda Zambrano, 1998; Jones, 1997; Jordan, 1999; Rheingold, 2000; Wong, 2000). Is "identity deception" a special problem on the Internet? Some theorists believe so. Jones (1997) examines in detail the way that assumed identities can lead to "virtual crime", while Jordan suggests that identity fluidity can lead to harassment and deception in cyberspace. Lévy (2001), on the other hand, argues that deception is no more likely in cyberspace than via any other medium, and even suggests that the cultures of

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