

# Chapter 16

## Networking Identities: Geographies of Interaction and Computer Mediated Communication<sup>1</sup>

**Lhoussain Simour**

*Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Morocco*

### ABSTRACT

*Electronic connections allow the individual to be at various global sites while sitting in front of his or her computer. By being electronically connected, one's participation in virtual worlds raises important questions about the nature of our communities and problematizes our identities. This paper examines how experiences in virtual interactions affect people's real lives and what impact computer mediated communication has on the formation of a virtual community and its relation to individuals' identities. Virtual communities stimulate experiences that redefine the basic concepts and contexts that have characterized the essence of human societies. They offer new contexts for rethinking the concept of identity and provide a new space for exploring the extent to which participation in computer mediated interaction modifies the subject in terms of identity, leading to a reconstruction and a reconstitution of self.*

### INTRODUCTION

Globalization refers to the ways in which previously isolated parts of the world have become connected in a historically unprecedented manner, in such a way that developments in one part of the world are now able to rapidly produce effects on geographically distant localities. This has in fact made it possible to think of the world as a single global space, or 'global village', thanks to the drastic growth of the New Communication

Technologies. In the present environment, one cannot consider identity without reference to the technological innovations that have changed the background against which identity is constructed; they have reshaped and redefined the "generalized elsewhere" (Meyrowitz 1989) from which the self takes its different configurations. So as the human society enters the twenty first century, a new era of change continues to unfold; there is an apparent openness of change among countries and cultures and a free flow of information, goods and ideas. Information and technology, or what Arjun

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Appadurai calls “media scapes” (1996) are at the centre of this shift and have led to the emergence of a largely mysterious world of virtual reality.

Increasingly, people’s interactions with the world around them are mediated by computer technology and the contact with machines is becoming more frequent to the extent that everyday activities have almost become machinated. Those who use the Internet, mailing lists, IRC (Internet Relay Chat), MUDs (Multi User domains), e-mail services, know quite well what it means to live the experience of participating in a virtual community. The interconnection of these existing virtual networks which use computer mediated technology to link people all over the world is informally known as “the net”.

The central argument of this article is that the net is a leading force which creates and simulates experiences that redefine the basic concepts that have characterized the essence of human societies. Social space, interaction norms and identity are being altered in computer mediated communication. I explore the notion of community and its relation to identity in the context of computer mediated communication. I argue that virtual communities are offering a new context for rethinking the concept of identity and are providing a new space for exploring the extent to which participation in computer mediated interaction modifies the subject’s identity leading to a reconstruction and a reconstitution of the self. In fact, the new technologized ways of communicating “have freed interaction from the requirements of physical co-presence; these technologies have expanded the array of generalized others contributing to the construction of the self” (Cerulo 1997, p. 386).

Electronic connections allow the individual to be at various global sites while sitting in front of the computer; and by being electronically connected, one’s participation in virtual worlds raises important questions about the status in quo of communities and problematizes paradigmatic structures of identities. So my major concern is to investigate how experiences in virtual interac-

tions affect people’s real lives and what impact computer mediated communication has on the formation of a virtual community and its relation to individuals’ identities.

Joshua Meyrowitz was one of the pioneers to explore the relationships between the New Communication Technologies and identity construction. His works on *No Sense of Place* (1985), *The generalized Elsewhere* (1989) and *Shifting worlds of strangers: medium theory and changes in “them” versus “us”* (1997) reconsider the ways in which electronic interactions reconfigure social interaction terrains. They remodify the self to locate it in new arenas of hybridized subjectivities. He gives the example of television as a new invention that has sanctioned the “disabled and the disenfranchised” by allowing them to have access to social information despite being physically dislocated or disabled. The notion of place within NCTs paradigm has reconfigured the borders and has allowed the complexity of identity to emerge.

In his *An Ecology of Communication: Cultural Formats of Control* (1995), David Altheide has also attempted to theorize different positions on NCTs and the configurations of the self. He argues that NCTs give new possibilities of being and becoming through communication interactions. They are important mediums that allow for the emergence of new modes of selecting, organizing, and presenting information. These new possibilities redefine social interaction and remodify current practices to give new ways of being.

Beniger (1987) has also talked extensively on the impact of New Communication Technologies on community construction and on collective identity. He suggests very specific directions in which communities constructed through media interactions provide new configurations of “pseudo” selves.

It is clear, then, that computer mediated communication largely affects people’s experiences of virtual community and identity. My main focus is to explore the relationship between a virtual community and identity and how participants in

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