

## Chapter 14

# Visuality and the Difficult Differences in Networked Knowledge Communities

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter argues that as Networked Knowledge Communities (NKC) become increasingly the way knowledge is constructed, represented, and circulated, visuality in information-based societies is also being shaped, and shaped by, the interactive and collective ideologies of digital technology environments. Like the written text, which constructs and imposes hegemonic ideals of identity through discursive practices, visual representations of identities also serve as powerful discursive reservoirs of subordinating representations. By focusing on NKC as an epistemic space that reflects, recirculates, and reacts to bodies of knowledge produced by the institutions of power in the larger social culture, this chapter examines the vulnerability of subjugated identities to normative processes of identity formation in digital networked communities. This inquiry positions visuality not as a subordinate and incomprehensible form of discourse to the written text, but as a symmetrical and understandable discursive practice and democratizing pedagogy imbued with all the possibilities and inadequacies that come with interpreting identity and the difficult differences. Without question, globalization is a key factor in this debate despite the lack of transparency in its meaning and use. However, despite its resistance to a comprehensive definition, globalization will provide an important ideological framing from which to begin this argument given its loosening of sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and technological borders.*

### INTRODUCTION

*It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences. – Audre Lorde*

The view that NKC are unaffected by the same institutional hierarchies of identity formation because culture jammers disrupt dominant ideologies is damaging both to the ethos and ethics of NKC. Further, it is equally dangerous to presume that

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4757-2.ch014

digital natives (Palfrey & Grasser, 2008) whose identities are the most socially constructed in the digital visual culture (Bentkowska-Kafel, Cashen, & Gardiner, 2009) do not reimagine the old tyrannies of individualism in class-based learning environments into new tyrannies of NKC, which aims to democratize learning by collaboration pedagogies. Therefore, it is important to take a critical and explicit inquiry into the development of new bodies of knowledge in NKC with particular consideration to the social construction of the visual (Duncum, 2001; Tavin, 2003), which anchors subjugated identities into dominant discourses of identity construction for definition and representation. With this view, visuality, which embodies and inscribes the experience of seeing in historical and canonical discourses, unites in NKC two meaningful and engaging conversations. The first one considers the difficult differences (race, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, culture, sexual identification, and disability) in relation to the shaping and articulation of identities within NKC. The second one examines NKC as sites of social justice where democratizing pedagogies can dismantle artificially imposed notions of self, to a technological space where the agent can exercise authorial control over the shaping of an authentically ascribed notion of self.

This chapter is divided into five sections with the overarching goal of examining the visuality of subjugated identities in the sphere of NKC, and characterizing the interconnectedness of NKC, self-fashioning, and the power of democratizing pedagogies of resistance. First, I identify the difficult differences that are challenges to the subjugated agent's authorship and agency in NKC to include digital natives. Second, I describe rhetorical and political strategies agents can invoke to resist and dismantle a canonical experience of seeing. Third, I bring into focus the ideology of NKC as disruptive epistemic spaces to hegemonic modes of knowledge construction. Fourth, I describe NKC as a scopic regime and the new rhetoric as an argument strategy that en-

ables countervisualizing the difficult differences. Finally, I conclude the chapter by identifying a democratizing pedagogy of resistance for visualizing the difficult differences within NKC.

## **AUTHORSHIP, AGENCY, AND THE DIFFICULT DIFFERENCES IN NKC**

In the modern visual age language and images intersect and interact in digital networked communities while opening new forms of knowledge through the prism of the visualizer's eye. Yet, to presume that the interplay between the two discursive formations does not create overt or subtle tension is to ignore the shifting relations of the written text to the visual image in networked knowledge communities. Like voice, facilitated primarily through the written text, and which has the discursive power to claim or encapsulate the author's identity, the author's visual representation can also shape authorial presence. Although questions of ideology, aesthetics, and sociopolitical constructions of identity will inescapably arrive and converge along with the antagonisms of the difficult differences, it is clear that visuality like the written text structures, channels, and redistributes power relations. Therefore, visual self-fashioning also holds and unfolds ontological significance when encountered in the spatial matrix of NKC. What are NKC? For clarity in this chapter, I define network knowledge communities as virtual sites where assumptions of identity and belief systems taken as visually natural and immutable are critical discourses for redefining, reconstruction, and reinterpretation. Thus, one can argue that NKC are subversive virtual sites since they destabilize concepts, practices, and perspectives that underlie sociopolitical structures entrenched in relations of power. As noted earlier, as slippery as the term globalization is it has both problematized and produced new systems of thought for the twenty-first century and most particularly for digital natives. While in another section of this

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