



Early Cyber Communities and the Postcolonial Participant: The Insider-Outsider

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The traditional ideas and norms regarding community formation and community interaction have undergone tremendous changes with the advent of online community building made possible through internet. Network interaction media like e- mails, chats, newsgroups, blogs and other online facilities for community formation were the first to be used widely throughout the world for forming virtual communities. However, the exact nature, scope and position of such social spaces have to be interrogated thoroughly. The optimistic proponents of online facilities often assert the value of internet by laying stress on the prominent role that it plays in providing opportunities for social and political participation, in generating opportunities for employment, providing scope for new modes of socializing and also in the matter of providing entertainment. Contrastively there is also the view that internet provides the technological, cultural, social and economic backdrop to the onslaught of neo- colonial aspirations. From this view emerges the scenario of an individual who is trapped or ensnared in a globally cast "net" that predominantly offers new opportunities for surveillance and social control by the state and also by the other agencies that represent the interests of global finance capital. It is argued that while the network provided by the new media empowers the individual to a certain extent it cancels out the positive effects of such empowerment by doubly empowering the existing hegemonic structures of power and authority that oppress the individual.

E-mail happens to be the first tool that forged together cyber connections in the world. E-mail discussion groups had the advantage/disadvantage of participating in an asynchronous form of communication. Interaction is structured into turns but a reply may occur minutes or months after the prior turn. Thus, it is more like an ordinary regular mail and more unlike that of a telephone call. E-mail has had a great impact on the amount of information sent worldwide. It has become an important method of transmitting information previously relayed via regular mail, telephone, courier, fax, television, or radio. However, E-mail has the advantage of being forwarded to many addresses at the click of a mouse and this led to the origin and development of mailing groups which were originally cyber communities formed around topics, themes, incidents and even personalities.

Text chats which emerged later on supported a synchronous mode of communication among the participants. Chat systems usually had both pre-arranged and user-created chat rooms. Chat rooms were sometimes dedicated to a particular group of people, such as teens, or to discussions limited to a single subject area, such as music or sports. Some chat rooms covered complex technical topics and others focus on aspects of popular culture. In some of these special chat rooms, participants were organized into virtual "rows," as if they were in an auditorium. Users could chat freely with others in the same row, but not with people in other rows. Everyone in all rows could hear the presentation given by the featured speakers on the "stage." Chat also developed its own lingo which kept on accumulating over time. People who chat commonly used a large number of abbreviations to represent a lot of commonly used phrases and expressions. MUD or Multi-User Dungeon which was an elaborate type of role-playing computer game played on the Internet were also popular in the 1990s.

The World Wide Web became a popular resource centre after 1993 when the first widely distributed web browser provided a convenient way to access a variety of information on the Internet. The Web uses multimedia, which meant that information could be displayed in a wide variety of formats. Users could read text, view pictures, watch animation, listen to sounds, and even explore interactive virtual environments on the Web. Subsequent to the evolution of Graphical User Interface it became possible to integrate images and sounds and thereby navigating through web pages became easier. The web offers a place where companies, universities and other institutions, and individuals can display information about their products, services, facilities, or research, or even their private lives. Only a small percentage of information on the Web is restricted to subscribers or authorized users. The majority of web pages are available to anyone who can access a computer that connects to the internet. The Web has become a marketplace for many companies selling products or services, and a forum for people to exchange opinions and information. Museums, libraries, government agencies, and schools post information on the Web to make it available to others. The World Wide Web sites also foster cyber communities in their own way.

Blogs or web logs became popular as a sort of manual or personal diaries published on the Internet. It is actually a kind of "rearviewmirrorism" in the way in which Marshall McLuhan has used the term (Hartley 198). In the late 20th century, a type of self-published periodical or pamphlet called the zine (pronounced ZEENS) became increasingly popular. Zines are published at irregular intervals and generally address topics that are of great interest to a limited number of readers. The word zine is a



shortened form of the word magazine, which is a wordplay on their limited scope. In the 1970s and 1980s zines were most often published on copier machines, which allowed people without access to printing presses to distribute their writings. In the mid-1990s, as the popularity of the Internet increased manifold, many people began publishing their zines online as e-zines, or electronic zines. The ease of online publication led to the creation of hundreds of e-zines, but the difficulty in making them profitable led to the demise of many within just a few years. By the late 1990s an entirely new online publishing genre called Weblogging or blogging had become popular. Blogs, often published by one person or a small group of persons with a shared interest, feature brief, informal commentaries on various themes and they are often studded with hyperlinks to related material on the Web.

Identity is the basic building block of online social interactions. In order to participate in an online discourse like e-mail or chat an individual is expected to adopt an identity and while doing so s/he is under no compulsion to do justice to his/her real identity. In fact, most of the uses of the Internet abet the construction and use of synthetic identities. Labelling these constructed identities as "real" or "fake" would be rather pointless. What is relevant here is the fact that these identities are "constructed" and as such they are as valuable as any other cultural construct. The view that these identities may not reveal much about the individual behind the identity is insignificant when compared to the fact that they reveal a lot about the cultural context that has given rise to them. It is true that online interactions are devoid of many of those cues or signifiers that we usually use in our material day to day interactions. It is this very absence of familiar cues that makes online transactions a significant site for deeper cultural interrogation. But the fact is that the cultural markers related to the body are always brought into cyberspace in a subtle and complex manner. As Judith S. Donath rightly observes in her essay "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community"

In the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity. The norm is: one body, one identity. Though the self may be complex and mutable over time and circumstance, the body provides a stabilizing anchor . . . The virtual world is different. It is composed of information rather than matter. Information spreads and diffuses; there is no law of the conservation of information. The inhabitants of this impalpable space are also diffuse, free from the body's unifying anchor. One can have, some claim, as many electronic personae as one has time and energy to create. (Smith, 29)

This absence of familiar signals is filled in with an opulence of assumed signals and thus online interactions provide a wealth of material for cultural analysis. It is not the case, as one may innocently assume, that the absence of signals of identity will take away the hegemonic structures which are usually associated with such tangible cues regarding identities. What happens most of the time is a subtle duplication of identities and a cultural appropriation of traditional status hierarchies and inequalities. The question involved here is not the moral one of "honesty and deception" but the political one of "what you are when you are online?" While online interactions strip away the physical markers that play a significant role in real cultural transactions it may be seen that it very often reinforces the very value system that make these physical markers culturally and politically significant. Even when the most optimistic proponents of the Internet have argued that gender, race, class and age become unimportant in online interaction it is seen that issues like gender and race play a very important role in organizing online relations and communities. Gender, like race, and to certain extent like class, is constantly produced and reproduced in online interactions. It is so because all manifestations of community, from ordinary organisations to the cyber communities on the internet are formed through the abstraction and extension of social relations. Hence it could also be said that all communities are abstract communities to a great extent.

It would be interesting to note how the various ingredients in the constructs of identity are recognized and appropriated into a medium that is characterized by the lack of physical markers and other such cues. Byron Burkhalter in his essay "Reading Race Online: Discovering Racial Identity in Usenet Discussions" examines as to how race is assumed and constructed in an online atmosphere. The study focuses particularly on the formation of racial identities and racial frames in UseNet groups. Fixing the racial identity of the other is a prerequisite towards knowing and reacting towards the other. Burkhalter says that, "Once established, racial identity is a reliable social resource that organizes the behaviours that one anticipates, allows, and accepts from another. Knowing another's racial identity provides ways of understanding and acting towards the other." (Smith 61). In his study he concludes on the basis of numerous examples that he gathers from the interactions in Usenet newsgroups that racial identification in online interactions relies on the participants' perspectives as revealed in their posts. Instead of eliminating race online interactions deduce race from the limited resources available in a textual medium and the race thus deduced often does full justice to the stereotypical notions regarding race that are prevalent in the contemporary society. He continues:

Race is no less relevant in online interaction than it is in face to face interaction. Instead racial stereotypes may be more influential and resilient on the Usenet. At the same time, individuals participating in Usenet newsgroups can experience a variety of people, ideas, and cultures that could supplant stereotypes. Although the technology may be revolutionary and expectations utopian, newsgroups are made up of people neither revolutionary nor perfect, armed with ordinary way of understanding each other.

The medium that technologically constrains participants' interactions is also constrained by participants' method of organizing interaction. (Smith 74)



Gender being a social institution the characteristics that belong to this institution are often adopted as a primary scale with which people usually sort and define others. Feminist initiatives in cultural studies have already shown that such gender-based sorting is by no means "natural" or "benign." Jodi O'Brien in her essay "Writing in the Body: Gender (re)production in Online Interaction" observes that the field of online interactions can be taken as an excellent area for how persons categorize self/other and structure interactions even in the absence of embodied characteristics. In online transactions which are devoid of corporeal sex markers gender often manifests in the form of "performance". She says that the proclivity for carrying gender into online transactions is not a matter of individual whim or fancy but a matter concerned with the presence of gender as a dominant, shared social construction that constitutes a primary symbolic form around which we organize interaction. She writes:

Gender as a primary category for sorting self/other is not likely to be erased in the near future of cyberspace. Nor is there reason to assume that the constructed representations of a single physical body as the site of one true self is going to change anytime soon. (Smith 88)

The myth that online societies would be free of many of the prejudices and discriminations that characterize the real society is deconstructed in these studies.

The issue of power and hierarchy in Internet is also a much discussed one. The ideal of complete freedom in cyberspace has often been disregarded by states and institutions which see the Internet as a convenient medium for implementing effective surveillance strategies. In her essay "Hierarchy and Power: Social Control in Cyberspace" Elizabeth Reid examines the mechanisms for social control which have been imposed on Multi User Dungeons. In her study she points out that though the cyber communities may be regarded by some as a product of technology does not wholly determine the nature of the society, except certain broad parameters within which that society may develop. Technology cannot liberate anyone from the evils of the very society which has given birth to it. She writes:

The internet- the realm of electronic impulses and high-speed data highways where MUDs exist- may be a technological artifact, but the virtual reality of a MUD world is a construct within the mind of a human being... The illusion of reality lies not in the machinery itself, but in the users' willingness to treat the manifestation of their imaginings as if they were real. (Smith 109)

It is also observed that what actually characterizes the online transactions is not the absence of inhibitions but a redefinition of inhibitions. Similarly, power structures and the resultant hierarchical structures are also redefined and the new social spaces formed by the Internet are created within these newly assumed hierarchical structures. So even while these communication etiquettes and the societies in which they are practiced may seem highly anarchic and uncontrollable at first glance they in fact follow a rigid and structured social pattern. Individual freedom is always brought under a make-believe system that is empowered by the ideology that it adopts from the real world. It is true that the anonymity and lack of physical proximity promote plenty of personal as well as social experimentations related to the explorations of identity, self and community formations. However, these experiments and explorations are contained by the ideological structures that are a product of the contemporary socio- political context.

The next issue that has to be discussed in detail with regard to the internet is the issue of access. There is a general feeling that communication in cyberspace holds great opportunities for accommodating a lot of individuals as well as groups whose voices were unheard before. Though television has a vast reach it doesn't support interaction the way internet does. However, the arrival of the digital media as a whole has also brought in the question of digital divide which is nothing but the manifestation of class and subalternity with all the attributes that postcolonial studies have invested in these terms. Technology in a divided society cannot help but be an instrument acting on behalf of the very division that has wrought it.

The question that is central to us is as to how the postcolonial citizen fits into these cyber communities. Post colonialism is usually used to refer to a specific range of cultural events that took place in the aftermath of the Second World War. To this extent the term included both historical contexts and theoretical pursuits in a specific direction. Issues like class, race, gender and national identity, which were previously defined from a Eurocentric point of view, acquired a novel and problematic perspective when they were subjected to postcolonial interrogations. Questions regarding the constitution of subjectivity under imperial conditions and the relationship between language and power were also raised as a part of post-colonial rereading.

The issue of a causal link between the dominant forms of communication and the organization of the society was explored in the works of Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis. They had distinguished between time-based media like clay and stone which were not easily transportable and which thus promoted stable societies and the reproduction of traditions over long periods of time from space-based media like paper which supported the expansion of administrative and political authority over large territories. All this was challenged by the advent of the electronic media which annihilated space and time. Modern media confronts us all the time and the act of consuming it is not restricted either to the seekers or to any particular period of time. Information from diverse locations and even periods of time are juxtaposed in a single item. This is how McLuhan arrived at the concept of the "Global Village."



It may be noted that media studies after McLuhan focus on the material conditions that determine the production of culture. Of particular relevance in this context is the work of Jurgen Habermas whose theories centred on the concept of public sphere. Habermas sees the emergence of the "bourgeois public sphere" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from critical self-reflexivity fostered by the public sphere that sprouted in the coffee houses, salons, pamphlets, journals and newspapers. However, the coming of the electronic media contributes to the breaking up of this sphere precisely because electronic media operates within the logical structures of the "global village". It also contributes to the acute privatization of cultural consumption. Jean Baudrillard understands contemporary capitalism in terms of symbolic (as opposed to strictly economic) exchange. In his view the contemporary world is dominated by signs, images and representations to such a degree that the distinction between the sign and its referent, the real-world collapses.

When a citizen of the third world, whose subjectivity has essentially been constructed by the colonial experience, enters the cyber world s/he is attempting to become a citizen of the "global village". We have already seen that the cultural essence of this "global village" is constituted by all that is hegemonic and discriminatory in the real world. Hence the attempt to construct an identity by the postcolonial subject becomes at once an attempt to decolonize himself/herself and thus to qualify for entry into the global village and also an attempt to resist the hegemonic systems prevalent in the cyber world. To do this s/he is constrained to mimic the hegemonic standards of behaviour which in turn destabilizes the very identity that s/he has constructed for herself/himself for gaining entry into this world. So, at each juncture, the postcolonial tryst with the cyber world becomes an agonizing clash with the identity with which s/he has gained entry into that world. It is this perpetual conflict that constitutes the essence of the presence of a postcolonial in the cyber world. S/he is destined to retain the consciousness of a person in disguise, the awareness of a person who inhabits a space that s/he is not qualified or expected to inhabit and s/he is more or less like the serf who participates in a medieval knight's masquerade where s/he has gained entry merely on the credentials of disguise. All internet related activities like browsing, chatting, e- mailing etc. gives the postcolonial this strange sense of self-consciousness and a characteristic fear of being discovered.

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