

Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village

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Charles Ess, Ed, Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001. ISBN 0-7914-5016-3.

Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village is a collection of essays providing an interdisciplinary examination of both Internet use and the ways that culture affects the appropriation and use of communication technologies. The goal of this book, according to Charles Ess, the book's editor, is to contribute to the readers' "own discovery of new and cultural and communicative views and beliefs and thereby contribute to their own boundary crossings (academic and beyond) and resulting constructions of more complete, multicultural worldviews" (25).

The papers collected for this volume were the result of an international conference on Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communication (CATaC'98). Part I, titled "Theoretical Approaches: Postmodernism, Habermas, Luhmann, Hofstede," introduces the reader to the major theoretical frameworks that shape contemporary analysis and discourse. Part II, "Theory/Praxis," consists of case studies and research projects from diverse cultural perspectives and focuses on how these cultural differences interact with computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Ess 3). The essays in Part III, "Cultural Collisions and Creative Interferences on the (Silk) Road to the Global Village: India and Thailand," show us how CMC technologies may be used to catalyze global communication while preserving and enhancing local culture. The selections in this book allow us to look more closely at the role culture plays in the adoption of CMC and in the creation of a global electronic village.

In “Understanding Micropolis and Compunity,” Steve Jones introduces us to the online version of a metropolis – the mecropolis. These online communities reflect many of the gated communities found in society in that they require passwords for entry, connectivity and access. What is unique about online micropolii is the way they are connected. The Internet and the World Wide Web allow users to enter online communities (micropolii) and connect to people and groups with similar interests.

Barbara Becker and Josef Wehner reflect on “Electronic Networks and Civil Society” in their essay on structural changes in the public sphere. Becker and Wehner maintain that the “public space based on electronic networks is something qualitatively different from an all-inclusive public based on the mass media” (68). According to Becker and Wehner, the power of mass media lies in its ability to motivate politicians to become interested in specific issues and the direction of political decision making whereas the Internet opposes the “consensus-building system of mass media” (78). While mass media disseminates the same information to different people, the Internet provides a space for many people to provide opinions and information on any number of topics. Becker and Wehner come to the conclusion that “the Internet lacks the ability to dramatize problems in a way that makes political systems take notice of them” (79) While this may have been true in 1998 at the time this conference took place, the Internet has evolved significantly in just a few short years. Manuel Castells and many others have written about the impact electronic networks have had on politics and ways different groups use electronic media effectively to fight social and political injustice.

Concetta Stewart, Stella Shields and Nandini Sen studied cultural and gender differences on electronic listservs. Their essay highlight concerns regarding how different

groups cope with new technologies and what role factors such as gender and culture play in participation and creation of new systems. The focus of their research concentrates on how groups who are typically absent from online communities, women and minorities, can participate more equally. The authors studied a listserv set up for both graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in a global telecommunications course at a major urban university in the United States. There were obvious differences in communication patterns by gender and by culture which “could be said to simply be replicating patterns of interaction that are seen in traditional face-to-face situations” (180). However, the online environment provides some anonymity and may encourage those less likely to speak in a classroom to post their opinions in writing. The authors maintain (citing Rakow 1988) that one of the key tasks of utilizing new communication technologies is to “gain an understanding of how power is exercised through the technology” (181). Stewart et al raise a significant concern regarding access to the Internet and the implications for those populations already underrepresented in the electronic world. This issue, often referred to as the digital divide is one that has been expressed by many others in recent years. How will we, as a society, address the fact that “only some individuals will have access to this greater speed and broadband capacity?” (181) There is no doubt that a gap exists and that there is inequity in the ability to access the Internet especially for women, minorities, and the poor. These authors conclude that the longer we wait to address these inequities the longer it will take for the “emergence of an inclusive global information economy” 182.

Looking at the process of reproducing power by means of *habitus* (Bourdieu) and micro-politics (Foucault) in “Internet Discourse and the *Habitus* of Korea’s New Generation,” Sunny Yoon argues that “the Internet exercises symbolic or positive power on the new

generation by guiding educational rules and linguistic manners” (244). By examining the way Korean youngsters use the Internet and its cultural meaning for them, Yoon maintains that the Internet is a medium of resistance and a tool for upward mobility. The younger generations are more comfortable with technology and, therefore, have more control over their destiny in cyberspace.

Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village provides the reader with wonderful insight into the impact computer mediated communication has had on society. While the book provides a number of interesting case studies, it would be interesting to see what the outcomes of the same studies would produce today. The book was the result of the first conference on Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication which was held in 1998. Technology, and its integration into society, have advanced so rapidly that it would be interesting to see what the outcome of similar research would produce today.