

We are the Borg: the Web as agent of assimilation or cultural Renaissance? (Charles Ess)

(9551 total words in this text)

Das überhandnehmende Maschinenwesen quält und ängstigt mich, es wälzt sich heran wie ein Gewitter, langsam, langsam; aber es hat seine Richtung genommen, es wird kommen und treffen. Goethe, Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre (1821-1829)i

[The overwhelming nature of the Machine fills me with terror and anxiety. It dances towards us like a storm, slowly, slowly - but it has set its course: it will come and strike.]

0 Introduction: We are the Borg.

In the United States, we are immersed in a series of messages concerning technology in general and computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies (such as the Internet, its offspring the Web, etc.) in particular: these technologies are crucial, we are told, because they will lead us to an "electronic global village." Thanks to these and their even more powerful descendents (just around the corner of an ever brighter future), the electronic global village will enjoy seamless and transparent communication: such communication will inevitably bring in its wake greater freedom of expression, greater democratic governance and affiliated rights, and, last but certainly not least, greater economic prosperity. The surrounding atmosphere of pundits' articles and manufacturers' advertisements breathlessly promise a global happy family: Jamie Lee Curtis (whether as Wanda or Wendy?) can call from "anywhere" on her cell phone, and New York customers can discuss their custom-woven rug with their Tibetan village craftsman.

I have become increasingly convinced, however, that the icon of the electronic global village is not simply advertisers' exaggeration and hype, a crafty - and successful - appeal to deeply-seated US values and beliefs for the sake of selling hardware and software. I will argue, rather, that such fond beliefs are a kind of bad myth - what Bourdieu calls *meconnaissance*, a framework internalized in our minds - one that then produces reality as it shapes human acts and behavior, and thus our history and society. This myth is *philosophically* suspect because we can see rather quickly that it rests on two contradictory philosophical assumptions regarding technology - i.e., the presumption of technological instrumentalism (these technologies are culturally and morally neutral) and of technological determinism (once these technologies are made available, they will inevitably reshape the world - including diverse peoples and cultures - in alignment with the ostensibly universally valid values of democratic governance, free speech, etc.).

This philosophical incoherence, moreover, is accompanied by profound *political* consequences. Especially if the technological determinism presumed by proponents of CMC as leading to greater world democracy and prosperity is granted, and if we recognize that the values and communication preferences embedded in these technologies are not universally shared, but indeed conflict (sometimes deeply) with the values and communication preferences of diverse cultures - then CMC technologies emerge as an agent of a globalization process that threatens to flatten all distinctive cultural values and communication preferences into a single homogenous "McWorld." It is precisely against such homogenizing globalization, of course, that diverse cultures and peoples react, sometimes violently, in the effort to preserve their distinctive identities - what political scientist Benjamin Barber refers as "Jihad."

If we examine, however, what actually happens as CMC technologies are introduced into diverse cultural contexts - especially as we peek over the boundaries of the dominant U.S. users' communities (what Steve Jones [in press] refers to as a kind of "Gates-ed community") to contexts outside U.S. cultural borders - we find that first of all that neither the claims of technological instrumentalism nor technological determinism are borne out in *praxis*. Secondly, especially as a

strong technological determinism is replaced by a "soft determinism" (so Don Ihde) - the apparent political dilemma between Jihad and McWorld may not be so intractable. Indeed, there are examples to be drawn from *praxis* - first of all, from Thailand - that mark out a middle ground between Jihad and McWorld as CMC technologies are taken up in ways that both allow for a global connectivity (but in a "thin" culture) and the preservation and enhancement of local cultural values and communicative preferences (a "thick" culture).

These observations, however, force a final point. Soft determinism makes clear that concerns about the potential political and social impacts of CMC technologies require attention to the social context of use. Simply, the technologies can be appropriated so as to either enhance or block democratic values. To redeem the promise of these technologies thus requires that those who hope to use these technologies to facilitate greater democratic polity and more equally shared economic prosperity be educated in ways that help them avoid the inadvertent but powerful cultural imperialism that follows from ethnocentrically presuming that one's own cultural values and communicative preferences are universally shared. Rather, *cosmo-politans* who hope to see a genuinely pluralistic, culturally diverse global village emerge from the networks of CMC technologies will have to become "cultural polybrids" - persons familiar with, perhaps even fluent in, the cultural values and communication preferences of diverse cultures. On the analogy of becoming fluent in more than one language and cultural style, such users can then avoid cultural imperialism by knowing how to speak and maneuver in more than one culture without presuming and thus imposing a single homogenous set of cultural and communicative preferences upon their dialogical partners. By contrast, users who "surf the Web" from a culturally- and communicatively naïve standpoint - i.e., very likely the vast majority of the current US users who demographically and culturally dominate the Web - can only be "cultural tourists" who see "other" cultures as merely offering resources for consumption and homogenization. The paradox and profound danger is that such users, while happily assured by the icon of an electronic global village that their appropriation and use of CMC technologies will inevitably lead to greater democracy and prosperity, thereby become Borg - consumer-agents of a relentless cultural homogenization.

Lastly, I discuss signs of hope that we are collectively attending more and more to the sorts of educational and cultural approaches that would foster cultural polybrids instead of the Borg - including what may be an emerging, genuinely global Renaissance of cultural intermixing that encourages pluralism and "cultural flows" rather than imperialism and homogenization.

1. Definitions: Technological Determinism, Technological Instrumentalism, Utopias, Dystopias, "Jihad vs. McWorld"

A central justification for CMC technologies is the claim that these technologies facilitate a democratizing form of communication - i.e., communication that flattens traditional hierarchies, expands freedom of individual expression, and gives everyone a voice in a global society. iii Such claims obviously appeal to core values of North American culture. More broadly, the conception of an electronic global village appears to rest on two contradictory assumptions. On the one hand, McLuhan (1965) presumed that the technologies that would facilitate the emergence of the electronic global village were themselves morally neutral or value-free. That is, such technologies are presumed neither to embed nor foster any given set of ethical or cultural values: as morally neutral, the only question that can then be put regarding technologies are the ends or goals to which they serve as means. This view of technology is discussed by philosophers of technology as technological instrumentalism. vv On the other hand, especially popular views of CMC technologies seem to presuppose a technological determinism. Such a view sees technology and whatever effects follow in its wake as possessing their own autonomous power, one that cannot be resisted or turned by individual or collective decisions. Proponents presume that the introduction of CMC technologies will inevitably convey and reinforce cultural values - specific preferences, say, for free speech and individualism, particularly in the case of the Internet and the Web, as centralized

control of information conveyed through these technologies is very difficult. Interestingly, this same philosophical presumption underlies an apparently opposite vision: in the inverse dystopian image, captured powerfully in the images of the Borg in Star Trek(tm), technology is likewise an unstoppable force. Once infected by the Borg implants, all humanity (specifically such qualities as individuality and compassion) is lost as one becomes seamlessly integrated into the single-minded machinery of the Collective. Such science-fiction portrayals enjoy considerable currency in the US - both in the form of other fictional dystopias such as *The Matrix* and in the astonishingly popular essay by Bill Joy who, as a pioneer in computing technology, is now deeply troubled by a dark future in which our machines will, as Goethe foretold, strike and overturn humanity. Such fiction and essays, finally, match the real-world fears of those who see CMC technologies as central engines in a global but homogenous McWorld that will override and eliminate local choice and distinctive cultural values (Barber, 1992, 1995). The popular image of an electronic global village, as implicating both technological instrumentalism and technological determinism, thus rests on two fundamental but contradictory claims regarding technology. Beyond this underlying contradiction, both claims are themselves open to doubt - especially in light of what happens in praxis as CMC technologies are diffused in diverse cultural settings. We will see how this is so, beginning with a focus on the claim of technological instrumentalism.

2. Instrumentalism, Determinism and the *praxis* of CMC: Global Perspectives

2.1. US/Europe

The current US discussion of a "digital divide" tends to focus on economic and infrastructure issues. While recent data suggests that the gap between the information "haves" and the information "have-nots" may be closing in the U.S. - including the interesting statistic that women now constitute 50.4% of Internet and Web users - there remain questions of how far gender and culture shape rates of appropriation and patterns of use. Even within the North American and European contexts, evidence suggests that gender and cultural differences play a role in how people take up and use CMC technologies.

For example, in their study of student use of a listserv designed to foster more egalitarian/democratic modes of conversation in a class made up of Caucasian, African-American, and Asian students, Stewart, Shields, and Sen (1998) found that males adopted the technology first, most of them doing so in the first two weeks, while more than half of the females adopted only in the 2nd half of the term. The only two non-adopters, as well, were women. Moreover, all but one white American adopted in the first two weeks of the term; the majority adopted after week three. Additional data from their study also points to differences in communicative preferences and styles. Consistent with the extensive discourse analyses of Susan Herring (1996, forthcoming), white American males tended towards an "adversative" style marked by higher numbers of and more extensive posts, a somewhat ethnocentric perspective, and a tendency towards verbal aggressiveness. By contrast, women and "minority" students (African-American and Asian) tended towards a "positive politeness" style - one marked by self-deprecation for the sake of maintaining communicative equality, attention to and respect for the perspectives and experiences of others, etc.

Similarly, Lucienne Rey's study of differences in CMC use among the German- and Latin-speaking (i.e., French, Italian, Rhaeto-romansch) cantons of Switzerland also uncovers clear correlations between culture and technology diffusion. Briefly, despite their economic and cultural predominance, German-speaking cantons show less use of CMC technologies (as measured, for example, by the number of home pages per canton) than French and Rhaeto-romansch cantons.

Rey suggests that these differences may be rooted in the long-standing tradition of German Romanticism and its suspicion of technology,^v and the correlation between Latin cultures as more playful, on the one hand, and the claims of especially postmodern proponents that CMC and cyberspace constitute "playful" environments.

However this may be - these studies together demonstrate that people from distinct cultural backgrounds respond to and make use of CMC technologies in ways that correlate with cultural differences. This suggests *prima facie* that, contrary to the claims of technological instrumentalism, these technologies are not somehow culturally neutral. Rather, these and other responses suggest that CMC technologies embed and foster specific cultural values and communicative preferences.

2.2 Global Perspectives

2.2.1. A continuum of cultural responses.

Indeed, such correlations and contrasts between culture and technology use were first studied systematically by Hofstede (1980), who surveyed IBM employees around the world. Building on Hofstede and others' work, Maitland and Bauer (in press) have conducted the most extensive quantitative study known to me on the role of cultural factors in the rate of technology diffusion. They find that infrastructure and economic factors play a greater role in explaining distinctive rates of technology diffusion.ⁱⁱⁱ But culture also plays a role, especially the factors of

English language ability

Low uncertainty avoidance (i.e., the willingness to risk change)

Gender empowerment

Indeed, such contrasts and correlations can now be marked out on an extensive global continuum - ranging from

the relatively modest clashes between culture and technology apparent within the US and Europe ⁱⁱⁱⁱ, to especially striking conflicts with the cultural values and communicative preferences of Middle-Eastern, Asian, and indigenous cultures, to the conscious rejection of the Net in light of perceived cultural conflicts.

As an example of the last point on the continuum, consider the South Pacific micro-state of the Kiribati. As described by Sofield (2000), the Kiribati see direct conflicts with the values embedded in CMC technologies and those of their own culture, namely:

a commitment to economic equality that severely sanctions "shining" - i.e., standing apart from others in terms of material possessions, etc., vs. the threat that unequal access to CMC technologies will issue in distinctive advantages for a few; a tradition of secrecy with regard to especially governmental information vs. the openness of CMC; and traditions of paternalism and communalism in government vs. the ways in which CMC technologies may foster individualism and individual independence.

While this last example may stand as a literally marginal case - as philosophers know, such margins and limits are essential as they demarcate and define the boundaries of concepts, ideas, etc. In this instance, the Kiribati are a crucial example of the cultural demarcations of CMC technologies. In doing so, they further reinforce the central point: *contra* technological instrumentalism, CMC technologies are not culturally neutral. Rather, diverse cultural responses to these technologies - including their outright rejection - strongly argue that these technologies carry and favor specific cultural values and communicative preferences.

2.2.2. East/West conflicts vis-à-vis democratization and technological determinism

Conflicts between Western CMC technologies and non-Western cultures began to be reported in communication studies relatively early - with Singapore standing as the best-documented example of a society determined to resist the cultural pollution represented by the Web and the Net.^{xx} Such

conflicts reinforce my initial critique of technological instrumentalism: if technologies were value-neutral, we would expect no such culturally-based resistance. Moreover, in announcing their intention to "open the window [i.e., of Internet access] but swat the flies [i.e., of cultural pollutants such as free expression, pornography, etc.]" (Yeo, quoted in Low, 1996) Singapore and other Asian countries thus bring into play the claims of technological determinism. If (a) Western-designed CMC technologies in fact embed Western values and communicative preferences, and if (b) the claims of technological determinism are correct - then such cultural resistance should be futile.

That is, we should expect non-Western cultures to be simply reshaped along Western lines, so as to endorse democratic polity, free expression, and Western communicative preferences. The history of technology diffusion in Asian *praxis*, in short, provides us with several tests of how far technology may be resisted. In particular, at least one case study - that of Korea - will help us specifically test the democratization claim.

2.2.2.1 Japan/Heaton

One of the most striking examples of how Western-designed CMC technologies embody communicative preferences not shared by their intended users is documented by Lorna Heaton (1998). In her study of Computer-Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) systems, Heaton documents two projects in which Japanese engineers (re)designed CSCW systems in order to capture the elements of communication crucial within their own cultural domains - but which are thoroughly ignored in Western CSCW systems.

As she observes, much of communication in Japanese culture turns on non-linguistic components - body posture and distance, direction of gaze (including avoidance of eye contact), and hand gesture. In the terms of communication theory, these components contribute towards a "high context/low content" communication preference - one well documented for Japan and other non-Western cultures. In these terms, Western - especially North American white male - communication styles are by contrast "high content/low context."

Think of the standard (ASCII) e-mail: most of the communication bandwidth is taken up by the content of the message itself. There is very little (for some, ideally no) indication of the relative social status of sender and receiver (including their status relative to one another within a company), their gender, etc. Such communication preferences, while perfectly normal and comfortable for Westerners, especially Americans (who value direct communication, direct eye contact, etc.) proved to be very uncomfortable for Japanese engineers (who prefer the various indirect modes of communication made possible through non-verbal as well as verbal practices, for whom direct eye contact is usually insulting, etc.) Consequently, Japanese engineers, when confronted with CSCW systems built around the communicative preferences of their Western designers, set about building their own CSCW systems to capture those non-verbal modes of communication essential in Japanese culture - primarily by using high-bandwidth video systems to convey and capture the proper body posture, distance, gaze, and hand gesture.

This example makes clear not only that CMC technologies embed specific cultural values and communicative preferences (*contra* technological instrumentalism): it further makes clear that these technologies do not entirely reshape their users in accordance with their embedded values (*contra* technological instrumentalism). Rather, people - at least if they're engineers! - are capable of (re)designing systems more in keeping with their own cultural values and communicative preferences.

2.2.2.2 South Asia

We can see similar patterns of response to Western-designed CMC technologies in several South Asian countries. Out of these studies, in fact, will emerge not only evidence that contradicts both technological instrumentalism and technological determinism: as well, they help identify a cluster

of cultural values shared widely in South Asia that sharply contrast with the Western values apparently embedded in Western-designed CMC technologies and endorsed as ostensibly universal in an "electronic global village."

Abdat and Pervan (2000) analyze Group Support Systems - especially their capacity to allow users to provide anonymous feedback - in light of Indonesian cultural values. They characterize Indonesia (in terms familiar from Hofstede) as *low individualism/high collectivism* and *high power distance* - such that people arrive at major meetings, for example, with the details already negotiated and planned: the point is to avoid surprises - especially those that lead to "loss of face," where saving face is a central value from Confucian ethics (2000, 211). In this context, anonymity - touted in the West as one of the advantages of CMC technologies, as it encourages more open expression and may contribute to a "flattening" of organizational hierarchies - is janus-faced. On the one hand, in certain pre-meeting contexts (i.e., where details to be approved in the major meeting are negotiated), anonymity may contribute to group efficiency as it reduces status differential. On the other hand, in major meetings in which face is much more at stake, anonymity might encourage comments and questions that threaten face. For these and other reasons, Abdat and Pervan argue that GSS systems need to be re-designed in order to make anonymity a switchable feature (213f.).

Similarly, in her comparison study of Malaysian and Australian students using GSS systems, Nasrin Rahmati (2000) characterizes Malaysia as a culture marked by a distinctive religious commitment factor, as well as high fatalism, high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism, traditionalism, and the value of keeping face. In a kind of shorthand, such a society is thus denoted as a "tight" society, in contrast with a "loose" society, such as Australia, which is marked rather by low religious commitment, low fatalism, low uncertainty avoidance, individualism, etc. She finds that these cultural differences correlate with different responses to GSS technologies among Malaysian and Australian students. In particular, she finds that GSS technologies "...can change the social behavior of groups from different cultures and this change seems to be more pronounced for a sample from tight societies than for a sample from loose societies." (271)

Rahmati's findings make clear that CMC technologies embed specific cultural values and, consistent with those reported by Dahan (1999) and Wheeler (in press) (see below), can thus influence persons in a movement from their original cultural values and communicative preferences. At the same time, however, this movement is not final and complete: technology does not entirely remove us from our original cultural "skins" and, as if we were Cartesian minds thoroughly disconnected from a body immersed in distinctive histories, traditions, and communities, somehow place us into some entirely new body/identity.

More broadly, these studies point to a cluster of South Asian cultural values that conflict with Western CMC:

- face-saving (Confucian)
- high uncertainty avoidance (low risk tolerance)
- high collectivism/low individualism
- high power distance

These findings, moreover, correlate with Maitland and Bauer's demonstration that

- low uncertainty avoidance and
- gender empowerment

are significant cultural factors promoting diffusion of IT

2.2.2.3 - *The Democratization Claim vis-à-vis Korea/Yoon*

The democratization claim is now widely presumed and studied: in particular, it is the basis of any number of projects in the US and abroad to establish "electronic democracy" via CMC technologies. *Praxis* reveals, however, that there are grounds for both optimism and pessimism.x For example, Michael Dahan (1999) has argued that in conjunction with other social factors, CMC technologies have indeed helped Israel shift towards greater openness and democratic participation: by itself, however, CMC does not force the emergence of such openness and participation. Similarly, Deborah Wheeler (in press) documents that access to CMC technologies among women in Kuwait can open up communication, say, between men and women in ways that violate social traditions and expectations - but this effect is limited to younger women. Again, technology alone does not necessarily force social change.

Specifically, CMC does not automatically generate democracy. In particular, Sunny Yoon makes clear that contrary to hopes for establishing an especially Habermasian public sphere in cyberspace (as a necessary condition of democratic governance - see Becker and Wehner, in press), Korean journalism fosters instead commercialization and eCommerce, leading to unequal access and distribution of CMC technologies and resources. (The role of print media in fostering a specific style of use, as Yoon documents in the Korean case, seems quite similar to US media reporting on the Internet and the Web.)

Moreover, consistent with Maitland and Bauer's findings regarding the importance of English as a cultural factor supporting uptake of CMC technologies, Yoon observes the importance of English as a "cultural capital," one that involves a subtle but nonetheless intransigent sort of power. In terms drawn from Bourdieu, she writes:

In the virtual world system, language exercises symbolic power. It guides the new generation of Koreans regarding how they talk, write, behave and think. It is a symbolic violence that constrains Korean youngsters in their reading, writing and knowing information. As symbolic power, language constructs a Habitus that makes people accept what they believe to be the legitimate way of behaving and thinking in the virtual world system. It is violent in Bourdieu's sense, but it symbolically influences people without being noticed. In the cyberworld, English is cultural capital.

Finally, Yoon notes that facility with computers and CMC technologies (including, for example, the ability to construct web pages) gives Korean youth an unprecedented experience of power *over* their elders. In a traditional society such as Korea, this involves more than the sort of disquiet Americans feel when they joke that they depend on their children to program their VCR's and fix their computers: it threatens a profound reversal of traditional social hierarchies. More generally, Yoon finds that Korean youth are drawn to CMC technologies not for reasons of democratic values and the promise of free expression - but rather because possession and mastery of these technologies provides status and power over others. In Hofstede's terms, CMC thus coheres with a cultural value of "high power distance" - i.e., acceptance of a strong hierarchy marked by wide discrepancies between elites and the many with regard to status, wealth, power, and privilege.

These lessons from Korea make clear that while CMC technologies may indeed embed Western preferences for open communication, equality, etc. - they by no means inexorably impose these values on people shaped by different cultural values. In political terms, CMC technologies are *ambiguous*: as Yoon emphasizes, these technologies may lead **either** to greater **or** less democracy and equality, depending on social and individual choices (as reflected in *Habitus*).

To summarize: contrary to the claims of technological instrumentalism, CMC technologies are not value-neutral. Rather they embed and foster specific cultural values and communicative preferences. At the same time, however, these technologies are apparently not able to simply overrun "target" cultures in general: specifically, they are not by themselves sufficient conditions for an inexorable democratization process. Rather - and *contra* the claims of technological determinism - both democratization in particular and larger potential social impacts in general are

tempered, sometimes profoundly, by the values and communicative preferences of those who take up the new technologies.

Philosophically, these results point us in the direction of a middle ground between technological instrumentalism and technological determinism. Such a middle ground has been demarcated by philosopher of technology Don Ihde (1973)ⁱⁱ

Politically, a soft determinism further means that escape is possible from the otherwise intractable dilemma of Jihad vs. McWorld. That is, if strong technological determinism were true, then we would indeed be faced with the choice:

either a "McWorld," a global but homogenous culture, one resulting from the inexorable power of a Western, democratizing technology wiring the planet and reshaping all human cultures along a single set of cultural values and communicative preferences,

or

Jihad, as the sometimes violent effort to resist such colonization and imperialism by defending and reinforcing local cultural values and communicative preferences.

But as the examples documented by Heaton and Yoon make especially clear - resistance is not futile. Cultures can resist the values and preferences embedded in CMC technologies - indeed, members of diverse cultures are able to reshape these technologies precisely in order to preserve and enhance their own values and preferences, thereby making possible uses of CMC that preserve and enhance local cultural identities.

2.2.2.4. *Resistance is not futile! Thailand vs. the dilemma of Jihad vs. McWorld.*

This last point is made clear in the *praxis* of a Thai Usenet newsgroup, as documented by Thai philosopher Soraj Hongladarom (1998, 2000).^v Hongladarom documents how a specific newsgroup - for example, as members debated whether or not to make Thai the only official language of the newsgroup - established modes of communication that reinforced local cultural identity and community (in part through what Carey identifies as the "ritual function" of communication). Hongladarom appropriates Michael Walzer's terms to refer to this as a manifestation of "thick culture," i.e., a worldview both deep and broad enough to define basic beliefs, values, communication preferences, etc., that vary - sometimes markedly - from culture to culture. At the same time, however, their participation in the local newsgroup did not prevent Thais from also taking up the communication abilities (including English) of what Hongladarom calls an "umbrella cosmopolitan culture." In Walzer's terms, this "thin culture" is marked by a shared *lingua franca* - English and its pidgens - which makes functional but limited forms of communication possible (e.g., as when airline pilots globally use English to communicate). As a "thin culture," however, any global Internet culture is not necessarily able to override local "thick culture" and its attendant practices. Rather, in a way consistent with Yoon's observation that much depends on the choice of the participants, individuals seem able to maneuver within and between both a thick local culture and a thin global culture.

More recent reports from Thailand (Thanasankit & Corbitt 2000) Malaysia's Kelabit people (Harris et al 2000, Khoo et al 2000), and the Phillipines (Sy 2000) likewise suggest that such middle grounds - ones that preserve local identities while facilitating global connections - are possible. In this way, *praxis* is again consistent with the philosophical middle ground of soft determinism.

Most hopefully, soft determinism and conjunctions of "thick"/local cultures with a "thin"/global Internet culture thus escape the dilemma of McWorld vs. Jihad. A "thin" but global Internet culture will make communication across cultures possible - but in ways that do not necessarily threaten to steamroll (Jones, 1998) local cultural identities for the sake of a single, homogenous "McWorld."

On the contrary, participation in a thin/global culture can cohere with participating in a thick/local

culture as mediated by CMC technologies - perhaps as reshaped to better fit specific cultural values and communicative preferences.

Concluding Remarks: from the Borg to a new Renaissance?

The rosy images of a "wired world" as a cozy "electronic global village," however well-intended, can thus be seen as resting on the twin but contradictory assumptions of technological instrumentalism and technological determinism. The *praxis* of (re)designing and implementing CMC technologies, moreover, bears out neither of these assumptions. By now, I hope that the popular version of technological determinism - "If you build it, they will (be)come ..." more democratic, more egalitarian, more prosperous - as an unspoken (and thus uncriticized) presumption and *leitmotiv* of Western CMC discourse and advertising is now clearly unveiled as a *philosophical* assumption that *praxis* forces us to modify into a position of soft determinism. More fundamentally, such a presumption - as coupled with the unspoken (and thus uncriticized) presumption that Western values and communicative preferences can and ought to be imposed upon the rest of the world "for their own good" - is now discovered to be a *meconnaissance*, a "mis-consciousness" or bad myth that, instead of encouraging democracy in *praxis*, issues in the opposite, namely a technological imperialism and colonialism. Such computer-mediated colonization further appears to resolve into the intractable choice between a colonized and thus homogenous McWorld or the violence and fragmentation of Jihad that seeks to preserve local identity. The apparently optimistic and benign intentions of those who believe wiring the world will inevitably issue in greater democracy and prosperity tragically work as an ideology for a *praxis* that threatens to homogenize the globe's peoples and cultures in the image of Western CMC proponents: the reality underneath the smiley face of an electronic global village, in short, is the Borg.

But because technological determinism is false, we have also seen, both in theory and in *praxis*, that a middle ground between Jihad and McWorld is possible - a middle ground that conjoins both local cultural values and communicative preferences (in a thick culture) with a global communication facility (in a thin culture). *Philosophically*, the turn to soft determinism means that if we remain interested in an electronic global village - one that moves beyond a Borg-like McWorld to one that preserves distinctive cultural values and communication preferences - we must turn from the naïve (and imperialistic) focus on the technologies alone to their *social context of use*.

That is, as several studies here have shown - the technologies of CMC are ambiguous with regard to their cultural impacts. As Yoon makes clear, if we are interested in steering the development and use of these technologies in ways that are indeed benign - we must expand our attention, for example, to the motives of users, e.g., whether they are interested in taking up these technologies as they promise to benefit their communities, perhaps as they facilitate economic prosperity - and/or as these technologies promise their users individually enhanced power and prestige over others. More broadly, are these technologies (re)presented in a larger social context - including how print and electronic media "report" on their development, use, and impacts - in ways that steer users in more egalitarian and empowering uses, and/or uses (such as their commercial value) that may only reinforce and amplify existing social and economic inequalities?iii

In fact, the Thai example of a middle ground that conjoins both local/thick cultural identities with global/thin communication points to the importance of the social context of use: it is likely no accident that this example emerges from a country which has a long history of blending diverse cultures, resulting in a cosmopolitan mix - a tradition that allowed Thailand, for example, to avoid military colonization by Western powers (Hongladarom, 2000). In the same way, the emergence of "cyber-barangays" in the Philippines - "local" communities that both draw on very old Filipino traditions of cultural identity while connecting both locally and globally via CMC - may reiterate the point: when appropriated within a specific sort of social context - in these cases, in cultures already marked by a cosmopolitan ability to negotiate the ongoing (re)mixing of diverse cultural values and communication preferences - CMC technologies can indeed avoid the specter of Jihad

vs. McWorld.iiii

And in those countries and cultures not so distinctively multicultural and cosmopolitan? What might be done regarding the social context of use to encourage (re)design and implementation of CMC technologies that preserve local cultural values and preferences while facilitating global communication?

Part of my response is what one would expect from an undergraduate instructor of philosophy and religious studies, whose passion is for liberal arts education. My own view is that part of what will be needed for a wired but genuinely pluralistic global village are people (a term I prefer to "users") who have learned how to become "cultural polybrids." That is, in the ways fostered by liberal arts in general (and, I would argue, philosophy in particular - at least as taught with a view towards history and Continental thought), *cosmo-politans* are people who have moved beyond naïve (because unexamined) ethnocentrism precisely to the recognitions that (much of) their own cultural values, beliefs, and preferences are limited rather than universal, and that "other" cultural values, beliefs, and preferences may (also) make for vital and meaningful individual and community life. Especially if they have had the privilege of becoming immersed in an "other" language and culture, so as to become cultural hybrids or cultural polybrids, such *cosmo-politans* not only recognize the intrinsic value and importance of diverse cultural identities and practices: they can contribute to the preservation of diverse cultural identities and practices insofar as they are able to maneuver comfortably among multiple cultures - modifying their own language and behaviors to fit those of the "Other," rather than ethnocentrically presuming that the "Other" must conform to his or her own original language, beliefs, and behaviors.

If I am right that such cultural polybrids are a necessary condition for a culturally diverse global village - can the Net foster the development of such cultural polybrids? It is possible: the Net certainly makes available a staggering variety of information drawn from and about diverse cultures. But it is one thing, say, to peruse a web page on the Karen of northern Thailand. It is something else entirely, of course, to be there - to be removed from one's own cultural context entirely and to attempt to existentially engage in a different language, worldview, and cultural tapestry of behaviors, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, habits and expectations that define the everyday lifeworld. And the danger is that an array of prevailing Western assumptions and values work against such engagement, in part (as another instance of *mesconnaissance*) as they seduce us into believing that we have achieved such engagement when we have in fact done the opposite. The ease with which one can sit down and "surf the Web" - where "surfing" entails sliding over surfaces while making rapid (if not random) consumer choices among diverse offerings designed to catch one's eye and attention among the otherwise overwhelming clutter of the Web's information glut - caters to the power and presumptions of the user: what is challenging (say, a web page in an unfamiliar language, about a topic that, however crucial it might be for cultural identity, may appear "boring" to the consumer/user) is easily passed by in favor of more familiar, more entertaining, more easily digestible - and thus less challenging - bits. Such cruising closely resembles the "cultural tourist" - the customer at an "ethnic" restaurant, or the traveler whose exposure to "other" cultures and locales is entirely a matter of conveniently (and attractively) packaged morsels offered up for consumption. But as Hongladarom (2000) observes,

When an American consumer eats *Tom Yum Kung* ... he or she does not necessarily take part in the elaborate history and narratives that constitute the traditional Thai world system of which the *Tom Yum* has been an integral part. Furthermore, when a Thai, for example, travels to the United States and eats the dish at a Thai restaurant owned by a Korean American who employs a Vietnamese cook, what he is eating is less a part of his or her own cultural heritage, her cultural roots, than a consumer item catered to the global taste.

While they may genuinely enjoy their meals (both literal and metaphorical) such cultural tourists do not experience what cultural polybrids experience - namely, a kind of "ontological shock" or culture

shock in which they are forced to recognize both the irreducible *differences* between their original culture/language/worldview and those of the "other" culture, and the concomitant legitimacy and importance of the "other" culture as a world/view in its own right. Indeed, cultural polybrids - usually only after extensive training and education that prepares them for their immersion into another country/world - move beyond such ontological shock and come to enjoy and value their newfound facilities in another language and ways of being in the world. In ways that parallel the institutional cultural flows Hongladarom describes above, cultural polybrids themselves become, in the jargon of intercultural studies and cross-cultural communication, multicultural (Adler 1977), intercultural (Gudykunst and Kim 1992), or "third culture persons" (Finn-Jordan 1998). As multilingual polybrids, they are able to travel, speak, and live in more than one cultural domain (if in varying degrees of comfort and facility). By contrast, the cultural tourist eats the *Tom Yum Kung*, pays the bill, and goes home: the Web surfer moves on to another site that piques an easily bored and distracted interest, and eventually logs off altogether - again, s/he is back home. Such consumption and surfing do not confront the "user" with the deep and intractable realities of a complete lifeworld that differs from his or her own at the most fundamental levels - hence there is no movement beyond what one already knows, believes, values, practices. There issues no deep understanding of the complex of beliefs, values, languages, behaviors, senses and sensibilities that make up a lifeworld different from one's own. "The Other," rather, is represented as simply another consumable resource, to be assimilated without resistance whenever one's mood, whim, and pocketbook allow.

In sum, cultural polybrids - the sorts of persons, after all, that the liberal arts in at least some places in Western traditions have held up as examples of human beings who, along Socratic, Aristotelian, and Stoic lines, fulfill their human potential in part by learning precisely how to be such *cosmo-politans* - would have the cultural awareness and linguistic sensibility to participate in a genuinely diverse electronic global village in which global communication may take place alongside multiple forms of local communication, communication that preserves and enhances distinctive cultural values and communicative preferences. By contrast, the cultural consumer, to say it most sharply and provocatively, merely conspires with the computer-mediated cultural and communicative homogenization of the planet. By not questioning the underlying assumptions of the electronic global village, by accepting the prevailing models of use as shaped by commercialization and consumption, the "user" may well be quite unaware of how his or her ethnocentric use of the Net and the Web only consolidate McWorld. But it is precisely this *meconnaissance*, of course, that makes the users' participation in technological imperialism so complete and powerful. To update a phrase, this *meconnaissance* - complete with the cheerful veneer of an ostensibly happy global family in the electronic global village - gives us in reality the Borg with a smiling face.

Over against such dark visions, however, I see small signs of hope for a global village modeled more along the lines of the Thai coffeehouse. To begin with, if cultural polybrids are indeed necessary conditions for a pluralistic global society - we must of course ask, Where will they come from? Beyond the perhaps utopian hope that especially U.S. colleges and universities will come to recognize the importance of attending as much to the social context of use of CMC technologies as we currently do to teaching their instrumental uses (again, because we presume they are "just a tool," thus requiring no moral reflection or comment) - more than one commentator has suggested of late that, rather than presuming a postmodern framework as the best descriptor of our time and circumstance, the Renaissance may offer important historical analogies to and lessons for our time. For example, Rapolyi (2000) argues that just as the citizens of the 15th and 16th centuries found themselves faced with a crisis of religious belief (as one's primary way of knowing and making sense of the world), postmodernism has opened up for us a similar crisis with regard to the natural sciences (which in (post) Enlightenment cultures likewise serves as the primary way of knowing the world). I would further observe that Medieval and Renaissance times were also times of considerable "cultural flows" - where such cultural interacting and intermixing proved to be both

horrifically violent and enormously fruitful. As but two examples. What we now recognize as the modern natural sciences depend in considerable measure upon foundations (epistemological, conceptual, methodological) and knowledge that developed in the Medieval period as Jewish and Christian scholars were able to take up once again the inheritance of Greek and Roman philosophy and science - as both preserved and enhanced by Muslim scholars. By the same token, the Renaissance likewise emerges out of a profound cultural mixing, beginning with a Renaissance humanism that sought to recover and expand on the ancient, more cosmopolitan sense of what it means to be human - one that goes beyond the boundaries of nation, language, and even religion, to an ideal Renaissance human being defined in part by his (and occasionally her) familiarity with multiple cultures and literatures, as well as by multiple practical and artistic skills and sensibilities. Like the men and women of the Renaissance, we are less sure of a single, especially religious conception of the universe and its promises of an afterlife. Like they, we are (for better and for worse) more forthrightly interested in power and the enjoyment of "worldly" goods that it brings. Like they, we align our pursuits in the light of especially aesthetic (and, in some quarters perhaps, still rational) values. Like they, we have seen countries, cultures, and peoples destroyed by warfare and disease: like they, we pendle between optimism and pessimism regarding human nature and our future. Perhaps we find ourselves in the midst of something like a Renaissance. As more and more people can - and must - travel (either physically and/or virtually) among the diverse cultures of the world, perhaps we (at least some of us) will awake to the necessity of moving beyond our view of the Other as a customer and/or exploitable resource, to a recognition that we can be enriched in personal, humane, and communally important ways if we learn to move beyond our own cultural skins and inhabit the lifeworld of a genuinely different culture and people. iii And if these analogies to the Renaissance hold, this time around, any emerging conceptions of humanism may indeed lay claim to a more global currency, as they reflect dialogue across multiple world cultures - a dialogue apparent, for example, on the scholarly level in the rise of cross-cultural approaches to philosophy and ethics.iiii

Secondly, the prevailing views of scholarly and popular discourse concerning CMC technologies appear to me to be rapidly shifting from a posture and set of beliefs that seemed dominant from the late 80's through at least the mid-90's, to a (re)new(ed) understanding that would support the importance of our becoming cultural polybrids. Briefly (and thus unfairly), especially postmodernists celebrated hypertext and computer-mediated communication as marking out a cultural shift as revolutionary as the printing press, if not the invention of fire (e.g., Lyotard 1984; Bolter 1986, 1991; Landow, 1992, 1994). While not without their critics,iiii these views, marked by an emphasis on the *difference* between past and future, were further accompanied by a kind of "cyber-gnosticism," an equally dualistic presumption that the mind/persona in cyberspace enjoyed a complete divorce from the body sitting back at the keyboard. Thus the mind/persona, radically divorced from the larger communities, histories, traditions, etc., of the body could enjoy an unprecedented freedom in cyberspace of either a feminist sort (ala the early Donna Haraway 1990) and/or libertarian sort (Barlow 1996). Insofar as women (along with body, sexuality, etc.) are demonized in culture - the flight to cyberspace in the name of equality makes especial sense. But for philosophers, such dualism echoes Descartes' famous mind-body split (and associated problems): for historians of religion, such dualism looks very much like Gnostic beliefs in the soul as a spiritual "spark" of the Divine, fallen from heaven and trapped in an earthly but temporary body - a soul thus hopeful for liberation from the body at death (at least, if properly initiated and possessed of the appropriate secret knowledge). Whatever its conscious and unconscious origins, such cyber-gnosticism seems required by the radical view that CMC technologies will utterly transform us. Only if our minds are thoroughly disconnected from a body that ties it to habit, memory, community, and culture, can we believe that they can be utterly liberated from the chains of modernity and the constraints of what Barlow so contemptuously called "meatspace."

By contrast, if we come to recognize that CMC technologies are not value-neutral, and that culture makes a difference in how these technologies are designed and implemented, we seem

further required to recognize that the mind/persona in cyberspace remains very much shaped by and attached to a particular body, with its attendant history, membership in diverse communities, traditions, cultures, etc. In fact, beginning in the mid-90's, there has been increased recognition of the importance of *embodiment* in CMC research. Indeed, my impression is that current CMC scholarship is increasingly shaped by a recognition of and interest in further understanding precisely the role of embodiment - and thus of culture.xxx This turn to the body - and thus the importance of culture - may disabuse us of the earlier presumption that minds/personae enter cyberspace radically divorced from gender and cultural histories. In doing so, it may renew our sense of the importance of life off-line for life on-line - and thereby, renew our sense of the importance of distinctive cultural values and communication preferences. This scholarly shift, in sum, may help reorient us towards an understanding of culture and communication that will stress the importance of recognizing and learning to preserve the often profound differences between distinctive cultures.

This scholarly shift may thus contribute to our recognition of the importance of becoming cultural polybrids instead of Borg.

As a political counterpoint to this scholarly turn: the past few days (October 6-8, 2000) have demonstrated the absolute importance of body - especially for those who hope that CMC technologies will contribute to greater social justice and/or democratization. While Belgrade was being bombed during the NATO offensive, citizens used CMC technologies - specifically, chat channels - to keep track of where bombs had hit, the extent of damage, possible casualties, etc. (Antonijevic 2000). As helpful and necessary as such communication may have been - neither CMC nor NATO bombs brought democracy to the citizens of Yugoslavia. Nor, as we have just seen, did democratic elections. Their bodies - placed in harm's way, in a very real world of tear gas and the threat of gunfire from police and military - did.

This would seem to suggest that any electronic global village, if it is to preserve distinctive cultural identities and especially if it is to move in more just and/or democratic directions, will have to be a place where both our minds and bodies are at home.

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[Note: the *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication* (Fay Sudweeks and Charles Ess, eds.), containing several of the articles referred to below, is available (at cost) on-line:
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