CULTURE, INSTITUTIONS, AND ORGANIZATIONS ON THE INTERNET

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Summary

The recent growth of the Internet suggests a significant development in how humans may employ mediated communication to interact with one another and the rest of the world. In many respects, the Internet and cyberspace are unique compared to previous forms of mediated expression. Unlike other electronic forms of communication, common citizens may utilize the Internet to both disseminate their own voices and retrieve a wide array of information. The Internet also provides a greater remedy for distance-sensitive social encounters and financial transactions, enabling humans to communicate instantaneously with one another across great distances of space. Such features are just some of the reasons why the Internet may be considered to represent a new cultural marketplace of ideas. In addition, viewing the Internet as a postmodern medium unmasks some of the inherent difficulties of transferring existing real-world order to cyberspace. In many respects, the Internet modifies the role of the individual, organizations, and institutions. In particular, individuals have a greater ability to participate actively in the creation of their mediated communication environments. To ensure what many believe to be the liberating potential of the Internet, it is necessary to uncover its unique cultural and technological characteristics, and understand the

subsequent new practices of social interaction.

1. Introduction

While admittedly still in its infancy, thus far the cultural and technological characteristics of the Internet have coincided with a rise in the proliferation of information disseminated by institutions and organizations, as well as new forms of social interaction and behavior. Whereas once the cost of printing and distributing leaflets and pamphlets made publishing too prohibitive, the relatively inexpensive manner of cyber-mediation compared to traditional forms of media allows even novice town criers to create their own multi-modal printing presses. Besides creating a virtual presence, users are also attracted to cyberspace for the qualities of two-way interactivity, as well as the human-to-computer interface. Greater interactivity is complemented by the sharing of ideas and interests, often resulting in community-like behavior and greater social, economic, and political participation.

This article will discuss how the Internet manifests postmodern tendencies. In particular, cyberspace may offer a new marketplace of ideas that has the potential of recognizing those who were previously not represented in mainstream media, as evident from the proliferation and abundance of diverse information. Devoid of many of the control and gatekeeping mechanisms that are in place within traditional institutions, empowerment often lies with individual and collective users. Moreover, geographically bound barriers are replaced by virtual, electronic borders and self-created boundaries. Such changes represent a substantial shift from the structures and aspects associated with previous forms of mediated communication like broadcasting and print.

Because of this transformation, many organizations with social causes and concerns have unprecedented opportunities to spread their messages of hope and education. Those who want to campaign politically have found the Internet to be a great tool for discussion, and have used it as a means to reach voters and mobilize citizens to take action on social issues and concerns. Likewise, those holding unpopular messages have a newfound vehicle for expressing their own viewpoints that may compete in a new marketplace of ideas. Countercultures may facilitate forms of communities, based on particular shared interests, that are not easily attainable within the usual purviews of societal norms, values, and communication practices as reflected in mainstream media.

If nothing else, the Internet represents a large library whereby, with a little acumen and skill, specific and detailed information may be found at one's fingertips.

2. The Internet, Mass Communication, and Culture

Many believe humankind is in the midst of dramatic economic, social, and cultural changes, exemplified by the emphasis placed on information, global networks, the digital economy, and the Internet. With the adoption of the Internet, the potential for buyers and sellers to conduct worldwide electronic commerce (e-commerce) has been heralded. The Internet has also been singled out for its ability as a new frontier of expression, allowing individuals to attain information and knowledge, and even pursue forms of social interaction that emulate community-like behavior. Because of inherent

features like user-interactivity, decentralized network structure, digitization, and the displacement of physical, geographically-based borders, the Internet and cyberspace also present myriad challenges for the transference of existing social practices and the creation of new ones, including how we view the spread of information. For instance, thus far, at least in the arena of speech, one may contend that cyberspace has experienced limited state intervention in the formation and application of laws that have traditionally governed expression. Instead, citizens, institutions, and industry have fostered their own forms of standards, software, and norms of behavior collectively under the guise of self-regulation and user-empowerment (see chapter *Government and Governance in the Network Age: Can Cyberspace Really be Regulated?*).

To better understand the arrival of the Internet as a new forum for mass communication, it is helpful to turn to culture. The study of culture often attempts to derive how people interact and communicate with one another and society at large. Cultural and social practices often reveal preferred modes of expression and existing power dynamics that lie between individuals and institutions. Included within the umbrella of culture are societal norms, values, artistic works, and other forms of expression. With respect to mass communication, cultural theorists attempt to provide clues on how media may influence our own perceptions and behavior and how persons behave because of our mediated communication environments. Media that provide the mass communication of information are an important means by which many of us experience and relate to the rest of the world.

The way symbols and languages are used, habits are formed, and meanings are derived from messages and information transmitted via the mass media is pertinent to many researchers and theorists who focus on the intersection of communication and culture. In investigating mass communication and culture, scholars attempt to examine how everyday people utilize the media to make sense of themselves and the world that they inhabit. Simply stated, the ideas and symbols humans communicate and share with one another and the manner in which they do so is a vital element in the creation, reception, and dissemination of culture. Televisions, telephones, newspapers, magazines, and computers each present technological and cultural aspects of communication environments that may affect individual and collective behavior, cognition, perception, and social practices (see *Mass Communication and Society*). Likewise, the Internet adds an additional layer of complexity to grasping how humans communicate and come to understand culture and society.

Today social theorists contend that individuals, institutions, and organizations are living in the midst of an information society, in which the flow, communication, and acquisition of information is a core component of the economy and social spheres (see chapter *Information Economy and the Internet*). New technologies like the Internet are part of the ebb and flow of a new cultural transformation that is arguably rooted in a shift of communication practices. Such changes in communication environments have occurred throughout history, affecting patterns of perception and cognition in myriad ways. For instance, the invention of writing made abstraction possible, something that had been unattainable for cultures of the oral tradition. The advent of the printing press made possible greater standardization and fixity, along with tendencies toward rationalizing, codifying, and cataloguing data.

If networked computers are in fact the new printing presses of the twenty-first century, it is helpful to unmask what may be transpiring on the Internet in comparison to other tools of mass communication.

At first-glance, the Internet may appear to be a logical continuation and developmental progression of mass communication technologies. Taking over where the printing press left off, since the late nineteenth century, electronic communication technologies have made the physical limitations of space and time irrelevant factors in sharing and distributing information. The telegraph and telephone allowed users to communicate quickly over great distances without the need of a person or book being physically transported to relay information. With electronic media like television and radio, those with the means and access have the ability to control the flow of information to the public over great distances and spaces without direct, immediate forms of feedback from audiences (see chapter *Evolution of Journalism and Mass Communications*). The Internet, however, possesses a convergence of prior forms of mass communication, as well as characteristics not present in previous media. While, the shift in communication practices is a progression, it is markedly different, creating manifold potential effects on human perception and cognition and on the role of institutions.

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Biographical Sketch

Justin Brown is an assistant professor in the Department of Telecommunication at the University of Florida specializing in telecommunications law and policy. His research interests include freedom of speech and jurisprudential issues involving the Internet, as well as policy questions concerning privacy, universal service, and cultural implications of new media. Justin teaches courses in both communication law and telecommunication regulation.

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Justin's dissertation addresses the free expression implications of broadband, open access policies for the Internet.