
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cyberculture/Cyberspace as a Mode of Transmission of Cultures, Identities and Power Relations: A Theoretical Perspective

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| ABSTRACT

The sweeping rise of new technologies has allowed for the normalization of digital tools and devices as powerful modes of communication and transmission of cultures, lifestyles, languages, texts, and power relations. Communication has definitely and irreversibly taken on a new turn/trajectory in cyberspace, where people have transferred their offline activities, experiences, interactions, and socialization. Cyberspace is a vast, open, and malleable space that gives momentum to human communication and velocity to the multi-layered process of transmission. Cyberspace, as an electronic and digital landscape, is widely used to create, share, and transmit information. It also contributes to storing information to enhance and extend human memory. The power dynamics of cyberspace manifest in its ability to extend human memory, empower communication, and globalize transmission. The fluid and constantly streaming aspect of cyberspace allows the free flow of ideas, texts, artefacts, knowledge, narratives, arts, cultural heritage, and identities, to cite but a few. By subsuming all these social, cultural, and epistemological actions, cyberspace has fostered a new culture, cyberculture. The French scholar Pierre Lévy defines cyberculture "as a set of material and intellectual techniques: practices, attitudes, modes of thinking and values that have developed alongside the growth of cyberspace. Understood as a synonym for 'network,' cyberculture offers a new medium of communication..." (Qtd. in Teixeira et al, 2017). Cyberspace provides multiple virtual platforms where various forms of culture are being stored and transmitted. Both cyberspace and cyberculture have become new digital paradigms that could be conceptualized as semiotic signifiers of the new society, hosting collective intelligence and providing electronic venues/spaces to empower/sustain local cultures and identities. The fact that cyberspace combines audio-visual, textual, and graphic materials can amply facilitate the transmission and the development of local and national cultures, oral or written. This paper is, then, a theoretical attempt at showcasing the potential of cyberspace and cyberculture to communicate, transmit, and empower local and national cultures and identities through the multiple platforms that digital technologies offer to the new society, which, at the same time, could reflect power relations.

| KEYWORDS

Transmission, Cyberspace, Cyberculture, Power Relations, Digital Technologies.

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1. Introduction

Transmission has always been a human experience throughout history. People consistently seek to transmit cultures, ideas, languages, information, knowledge, and values, to cite but few, through the use of multiple modes and channels of transmission. The dissemination and normalization of cultures, for example, is conducted via the process of transmission through orality, books, visual materials, and especially the media. Transmission is a necessary action to maintain cultures and sustain links between generations and the ensuing social changes (Schonpflug, 2009). Much of the culminated knowledge about past and present civilizations and nations is communicated/channelled through the process of transmission. Humans are by nature social beings born with the impelling urge/need for communication, hence transmission. That transmission is a form of communication is a self-

evident fact; the more we communicate, the more we are systematically engaged in the process of transmission. Understanding social changes and evolution goes through scrutinizing the act of transmission, which has an influence on social and cultural dynamics. In this context, Mesoudi and Whiten argue that “cultural transmission is a fundamental component of cultural evolution. Without transmission, there can be no evolution, and the form that this transmission takes can significantly influence the evolutionary dynamics of culture” (Mesoudi and Whiten, 2008).

2. The role of cyberspace in transmitting cultures and identities

The concept of cyberspace has become ubiquitously normalized in academic research focused on the impact of digital technology on contemporary societies. Words such as immersion, cyber communities, online identities, and cyberculture are to be conceived as manifest ramifications of cyberspace, which have been constructed as both a surrogate and extension of offline practices. People are now continuously immersed in cyberspace without even being aware of its metaphorical and virtual dimensions. Cyberspace is a normative practice, no more a novel or queer activity, a semiotic index of new technologies, a cultural paradigm of the new society or electronic community, an interface between broadcast and post-broadcast era, an extension of the human mind, psyche, and memory, a symbolic marker of the end of geography and the rise of the “electronic frontier.” It is the actual reification of Marshal Mc Luhan’s prophetic theory of “the global village,” where borders dissolve, leading to a symbolically experienced deterritoriality and allowing the free flow of ideas, identities, ideologies, and cultures, all conducted in cyberspace.

As a matter of fact, cyberspace originates from William Gibson’s science fiction novel *Neuromancer* in which the term is defined as “consensual hallucination,” attracting “billions of legitimate operators” (Qtd. in Myers, 2001). Cyberspace promptly gained momentum beyond the limited spectrum of science fiction to be employed as a metaphor for networked space and a constituent of social construction and digital transformation. Cyberspace is by no means commensurate with Cartesian space or logic; it is an expression of human consciousness mediated by digital technology. In fact, the digitalized space is as malleable, transformative, mutable, and fluid as human imagination; it suggests a different way of understanding space as a mental conceptualization that breeds digitalized practices. Cyberspace emanates from human interaction with digital devices, which have become virtual platforms for mental projections. Contrary to old/traditional media outlets, which are one way, from sender to receiver, digital platforms constructed in cyberspace, are dialogical and interactive, shaping and being shaped by the human mind. In this sense, cyberspace is inherently connected to human cognition, which interacts with digital devices to breed mental, disembodied, and metaphorical venues that host human actions and practices.

Having outlined the basic and defining components of cyberspace, it is clearly evident that cyberspace is not to be considered synonymous with the internet. The following quotation confirms this idea: “While the internet is easy to define and identify, cyberspace is broader and more virtual. To some, cyberspace represents a dematerialized, borderless, and anonymous virtual ‘world’ of freedom, exchange, and communication” (Desforges, 2014). This is the spectrum from which cyberspace can be understood: a dematerialized and borderless environment that is not only representative of human actions and practices but also an extension of human memory and a mode/channel of storing and transmitting cultures and identities.

3. Cyberculture and the normalization of the network society

All human actions and practices experienced in cyberspace have prompted scholars and researchers to evoke a new form of culture born on digital devices: cyberculture. In plain terms, cyberculture consists of a set of technologies, practices, modes of thought, cultures, and habits that individuals/users experience in cyberspace. Indeed, cyberculture refers to the ways digital technologies shape people’s lives and construct new patterns and habits that embody a new concept of both society and socialization. The core meaning of cyberculture emanates from its extraordinary potential to draw individual users to a networked/digitalized ecosystem, a computer-mediated environment, a symbolic stage, and a simulacrum of real-time activities. To adequately comprehend the crux of cyberculture, it is recommended to view the concept not as discrete or separate from offline reality but as a ramification or virtual representation/extension of reality. It is a technologically mediated and disembodied world that has transformed the ways we socialize, interact, “how we live together,” how we manipulate information, and how we store and transmit cultural artefacts.

The French scholar Pierre Lévy’s seminal/pioneering work contributed to the dissemination and normalization of cyberculture as a concept and a new vision of digital technologies in his book *Cyberculture*. He provided a conceptual framework for cyberculture, which consists of new forms of knowledge and new forms of its distribution; he believes that new technologies have transformed not only the ways we distribute information but the society itself. He also defines cyberculture as “a set of techniques (material and intellectual) practical habits, attitudes, ways of thinking and values that develop mutually with cyberspace” (Qtd. in Teixeira et al., 2017). It is crystal clear that digital technology has radically altered our views and attitudes *vis-à-vis* society, communication, ways of thinking, and transmitting knowledge.

The American writer David Bell attempted to unravel the complexities of cyberculture, which emerged from “computational devices.” In his book *Cyberculture Theorists*, he sets out to describe the profound influence of cyberspace on the rise of cyberculture

and the new society. He defines cyberculture "as a way of thinking about how people and digital technologies interact, how we live together... Cyberculture, therefore, refers here to ways of life in cyberspace or ways of life shaped by cyberspace, where cyberculture is a matrix of embedded practices and representations (Bell, 2006). Cyberculture is the electronic mold that embodies human actions and social life, a "network of embedded practices and representations" consisting of "texts, images, talk, codes of behaviour, and the narrative structure..." (Bell, 2006). In other words, cyberculture can be viewed as a set of techniques, texts, and narrative structures to be utilized as a mode of transmission of cultures, identities, values, and cultural heritage. The normalization of cyberspace as a virtual platform for the transmission of cultures, values, identities, and power relations clearly denotes that digital tools are not only technological devices but also cultural artefacts that have fostered digital spaces for the practice of cyberculture.

4. Cyberspace and the extension/offloading of human memory

What enhances the practical function of cyberspace as a potential mode of transmission is its unlimited capacity to extend and empower human memory. It is starkly evident that the human biological brain cannot store, retain, or retrieve a largely extended amount of facts and information, which renders the human capacity for memorization a tedious action. People cannot rely on their memories to document and store data because of the fallibility of the human brain and the elusive nature of human memory. Print materials such as books and newspapers, audio-visual outlets such as images, postcards, and television still perform their roles as modes of transmission in terms of cultures, languages, and identities. They indeed provide viable spaces for transmitting and documenting human memories and narratives. Traditional media outlets have always been valuable platforms for human memory and history since the rise of print journalism in the 15th century with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press. Television, along with the cinema industry as early as the 20th century, also contributed to the transmission and extension of human memory. They exerted a paramount impact on the dissemination and globalization of national cultures and identities in both the modern and postmodern ages. They represent sites for the potential retrieval of people's histories and heritage through texts, images, and motion.

Despite the instrumentally historical and cultural function of traditional media outlets, their temporal and spatial scope is practically limited *vis-à-vis* new technologies. In this context, cyberspace is the new locus of human memory and human cognition. In my view, cyberspace succinctly incarnates Marshal McLuhan's prophetic statement that the media is the extension of man. Digital technology is indeed metaphorically prosthetic of man's biological memory, in the sense that individuals use their digital tools as external devices to construct spaces to offload their internal memories and cognition. People no more depend on their biological brains for encoding and transmitting information; we are experiencing "a knowledge transformation processes which internalize and externalize knowledge as symbolic behaviour and speech take place in wikis and blogs as reading and writing" (Jackson and Klobas, 2010). Viewed from this lens, cyberspace can be interpreted as a symbolic stage for the enhancement of human memory and, thus, an electronic venue for encoding and transmitting human culture, that is, cyberculture *per se*.

Cyberspace transcends the limits of individual memory and cognition. Through transactive memory, people experience collective/group and shared memory given the open and borderless space of cyberspace. Through computer mediated communication processes, individual memory is connected to group or members' memories, which become accessible for retrieval in cyberspace (Yan et al., 2021). In this respect, digital devices empower collective memory and intelligence despite the presumption that they would rather disseminate and normalize the culture of individualism. I believe that our personal computers and mobile phones amply allow for a disembodied collective experience we all practice on social media. We exchange knowledge. We transmit values, traditions, documents, stories, and narratives; we build up virtual communities and cultural identities through which we engage in processes of socialisation and cultural exchange. Social media provides narrative spaces where members of the networked community dissolve within collective memory, which could be considered a powerful hub for the consolidation of national identity and cultural heritage. Memory Studies scholars stress the central role of media in shaping collective memories. They argue that "Culture and individual memory are constantly produced through, and mediated by, the technologies of memory. The question of mediation is thus central to the way in which memory is conceived in the fields of study of visual culture, cultural studies, and media studies" (Ruth et al., 2017).

Through collective memories, human cultures and digital technologies interact to trespass the confines and constraints of time and space and to allow for interactive and collectively shared experiences that constantly flow in cyberspace. It is morally imperative to cease looking at new technologies as mere digital tools of communication, consisting of hard-wares, digits, algorithms, and codes. This is a sheer parochial/reductionist stance that depletes digital devices from their cultural, humanistic, and hermeneutic load. These devices are cultural paradigms of a new society that lives and thrives on electronic spaces bred by digital devices. The world has reached a position where most human actions have shifted online, which is eventually indicative of an evident paradigm shift in terms of time, space, culture, identity, memory, and modes of transmission. The binary line between the real and the virtual is blurred, giving way to "the electronic frontier" to which people have massively immigrated to build up their virtual spaces and share collective memories, remembrance, and narratives, which, I believe, represent a second human consciousness. Digital social

networks are, in this context, “sites of memory” as long as “they complement or replace functions that were once restricted to public and academic institutions, museums and archives... they constitute important virtual spaces of memory” (Moreno, 2022). De facto, computers have become the most viable tools for digital archiving as they provide unlimited spaces for both public and private institutions to store information. It is, therefore, plainly understood that cyberspace is a milestone or a staple platform for storing, transmitting, archiving, and remembering both individual and collective memories in the digital age, the age of the networked society.

5. Virtual Communities and the transmission of shared emotional support

Virtual communities are social networks on which people share common interests, goals, and practices to engage in social interaction and trespass the mainstream notions of time, space, and geography. These computer-mediated aggregations have profoundly transformed the ways we view and conceive communities as tangible social groups that share physical locations, having a clearly defined sense of place, spatial and geographical contours, and lineations. Communities are now experiencing the process of deterritorialization, transnationalism, and universality far beyond geographical borders. These networked communities need to be understood within their new electronic environments, which have generated new behaviours, practices, and shared interactions that develop a sense of space or ‘place’ in cyberspace (Blanchard, 2004). The most pronounced strength of these online social groups is their members’ sense of community, as in the following quotation: « A feature... of community is the members’ sense of community. A psychological sense of community is defined as the members’ feeling of shared emotional attachment, belonging, influence, and the integration and fulfilment of needs that make the community different from simply a group of individuals » (Blanchard, 2004).

Shared emotional attachment is the most distinctive attribute and behaviour of virtual communities, which are stable networked social groups that fulfil the specific needs of their members in terms of social interaction/integration. Most scholars veer on highlighting the psychological impact of virtual communities on their members. Howard Rheingold’s seminal work is a notable and scholarly contribution to the normalization of virtual communities as a defining hallmark of the new society. His immersive involvement in and direct interaction with social network groups drove him to theorize on the multiple facets that are intrinsic to the very core value of virtual communities, especially in terms of social contact that can empower virtual community members through the experience of empathy and compassion that can be felt on these digital platforms, reducing, therefore, the constraints of time, distance, geography and place that characterize real/offline communities. In fact, the concept of place loses its essential meaning when viewed through the lens of cyberspace. Virtual communities have no fixed boundaries that could generate physical and synchronous settings; they are rather conceptual and mental spaces that are reflexive of the users’ minds and psyche. Their persistence and viability are conditioned by the members’ sense of emotional attachment and their affiliation to the shared social experiences. In virtual communities, members have the opportunity to regain and experience a sense of community and gear up connections with their electronic environments.

Building up communities is indeed an essential endeavour for humans and individual lives, especially in the new digital ecosystem. A community is vital for human survival as it provides its members with a symbolic psychological revival through the experience of compassion and togetherness that users can sustain in cyberspace. In the same line, Rheingold (1993) righteously reminds us that we need to transform ourselves from mere social creatures to community creatures.

Indeed, digital platforms have abundantly contributed to the proliferation of virtual communities where community members are « community creatures » who internalize community spirit with its healing power beyond spatial and temporal limits. Despite their virtual and « bloodless » characteristic, virtual communities assume a reality in the community members’ minds; in Rheingold’s words, they are « social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace » (Rheingold, 1993). It is that human feeling that digital members could regain while living together in virtual communities; they share common feelings and interests, making these communities « a cosy little world », as confirmed by Rheingold: « I’m not alone in this emotional attachment to an apparently bloodless technological ritual. Millions of people on every continent also participate in the computer-mediated social groups known as virtual communities... The WELL felt like an authentic community to me from the start because it was grounded in my everyday physical world » (Rheingold, 1993). Once immersed in virtual communities, community members are not alone! They are engaged in a conceptualized collective experience that could affect their real life practices and mitigate the social and psychological grievances experienced offline. As stated above, communities have a healing effect, and, at the same time, they could enable community members to sustain an emotional attachment to their online social groups. I consider Rheingold’s immersive and theoretical reflections on virtual communities constructively viable for a potentially substantial theory on social media to surf far beyond the classical and pre-digital age theories of community construction.

6. Cyberculture and the transmission of power relations

Digital platforms are practical environments where users can store, share, exchange, and distribute information that can trespass the constraints of time and space and gain global proportions. Through the practice of cyberculture, people experience what Lévy calls “deterritorialization,” that is, a world without borders, a “symbolic stage” that embodies a “new universality” where the binary line between local and global melts away to give birth to a hybrid space, a contact zone of cultures, ways of life, but also power relations. That is to say, powerful nations and cultures dominate cyberspace to disseminate their ideologies, lifestyles, languages, identities, and narratives that are supposed to serve as universal models and paradigms. Following this argument, cyberspace is also a space for the transmission of cultural hegemony and power relations that have always defined the intrinsic relationships between races, cultures, and ethnicities. In this context, Pierre Lévy’s claim of cyberculture as a “new universality” veers rather toward Western-centrism, which systematically denies cultural diversity and polysemy and promotes Western values as irreversible universal icons. Cyberspace is a power-based stage whereby cultural artefacts, stereotypes, gendered narratives, ideologized texts, and discourses about post-colonial or Third World nations, in particular, are transmitted and perpetuated. Cyberspace is the new electronic arena where the colonial binary opposition between the White and the Non-White Other takes on more visibility and propulsion, given the widespread and global interconnectedness of the internet. I believe the “electronic frontier” metaphor must not be taken at its face value since it does not unfold the embedded political and ideological layers inherent to the geopolitical world map. The claim of universality attributed to cyberspace and cyberculture is sheer reductionism, perpetuating long and hectic lexical rhetoric churned out by colonial repertoire and the reactionary doctrine of Western supremacy. As Scott Bills (2001) rightly observes, cyberspace offers a new trajectory for Western colonization and its concomitant cultural impact on the current colonization of cyberspace, which he defines as “an imagined place, an artificially created zone of constant traffic of communication and exchange...”

Seen from this lens, cyberspace is the new trajectory for “media imperialism” or “cybercolonialism” that propagates “Western cultural semiotics” and depletes local and indigenous cultures from the epithet/taxonomy of universality. Cyberspace is the new electronic venue for the practice, dissemination, and transmission of Western global hegemonic products and values that have gained universality and legitimacy through the looming ubiquity of digital tools on which people construct their imagined, virtual, and artificial spectrum of cyberspace and cyberculture. New technologies are deftly manipulated to maintain the cultural and digital gap between developed and developing nations, which is manifestly a form of neo-colonialism. Social media platforms are more than electronic spaces for communication and networked society; they are also emblematic of Western technological hegemony that seeks to perpetuate the West’s “positional superiority” and the digitalized epistemological divide among the world’s nations. Neo-colonialism, therefore, takes the form of “cyber-colonialism” targeting indigenous cultures, as in the following quotation: “Cyber-Colonialism denotes the aspect of imperialism on indigenous cultures, languages, lifestyle, politics, folk media, and other native identities through cyber space. Corporates and colonial capitalist forces retain the social, cultural, and political cleavages in order to capture and control the global market for trade and tax” (Sekar and Siwach, 2021).

A potentially holistic approach to cyberculture must not overlook its direct relationship with and extension of offline social practices. Cyberculture is not to be viewed as a discrete or separate ecosystem that develops solely on virtual platforms. These letters are transmitters of the societies we live in and the social interactions we are engaged with in real life. Despite the fact that we live in a digitally-saturated world, we keep in touch with real life, which systematically interacts with cyberspace. It would be a sheer misconception to consider cyberculture only a mere simulation that generates hyperreality and minimizes its sinuous relationship with face-to-face communication. As Rheingold (1993) points out, “People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind.” Pete Simi and Robert Futrell (2006) argue that “real and virtual spaces are not completely separate spheres but rather closely intertwined. Consequently, virtual spaces provide an opportunity to parallel and extend the type of interaction present in the real world...”

The virtualization of human actions must not deter us from conceptualizing cyberculture as an extension of real-time practices and reflecting on how cyberculture could function as a transmitter of social, cultural, political, and ideological behaviours that pertain to human life. In this sense, power relations have incrementally infiltrated cyberspace, generating almost the same inequitable attitudes and beliefs that determine human relations in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, language, geography, and culture. In a globalized and digitally decentralized world, powerful and hegemonic nations disseminate/transmit their cultural artefacts on virtual spaces, making cyberculture a potential stage of power imbalance that “perceives globalization as a process that is producing globally transmitted cultures which emanate from a hegemonic ‘center,’ consisting of a few dominant nations and which reduce the cultural autonomy of less powerful countries that constitute a weak ‘periphery’” (Bennett and Frow, 2008).

Cyberculture replicates the same “ideological configuration” that articulates discursive and power-based hierarchies that sustain the epistemological, cultural, and technological gap between the ‘center,’ which presumably represents the West, and the periphery or the so-called Third World Nations. Even though power dynamics are changing and evolving in cyberspace (Barrinha and Renard, 2020), which could provide multiple venues for resisting and contesting hegemonic cultures, I believe new technologies are still in

the hands of powerful nations in terms of control, accessibility, affordability, digital infrastructure, and globalism. The inchoate claim of the Internet as globalizing societies, decentralizing control, and harmonizing people (Turner, 2006) is absolutely an idealistic/utopic vision that has to be seriously contested. Digital media, which potentially reaches all societies, “is shaped and governed by media relations rooted in media business and state politics,” as righteously confirmed by Manuel Gastells, who also unambiguously reminds us that “The new power lies in information codes and images of representations around which societies organize their institutions and around which people build their lives and decide about their behaviours” (Qtd. in Betlej, 2022). Indeed, Gastells’ argument outlines the premises of cyberculture as a transmitter of power relations that structure human life and, consequently, find locus on digital platforms.

The growing ubiquity of digital technology and its supposedly “democratizing process” does not conceal the inherent hierarchies and hegemonies that are consolidated by digital platforms where powerful cultures dominate. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s power knowledge theory, we can venture to assume that we live in a “mega- cyberpanopticon” (Betlej, 2020), a new networked order which nurtures the technological and civilizational cleavage among the world’s nations. The technological upheaval has drastically shaped people’s lives, producing new visions, values, practices, and paradigms that have basically transformed the world map. These remarkable technological advancements paradoxically unfold the same traditional social and cultural stratum that has always defined human relations and, therefore, has made cyberculture aligned with the rhetoric of power relations.

7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to lay out the main premises that outline the intrinsic structures of cyberspace and cyberculture as digital modes of communication and transmission of cultures, identities, ideologies, and power relations. It has also endeavoured to discuss and examine the extent to which virtual/digital spaces are utilized to enhance human memories and share collective experiences and emotional attachments on social networks. It has been clearly stated that cyberspace, being a metaphorical and imagined space, offers a plethora of opportunities and venues for people to transmit cultures and identities outside temporal and spatial constraints that pertain to traditional communities. Oral and textual transmission does not fit in the new society, which consists of digital aggregations that live together in cyberspace and practice new values and beliefs. Digital devices are not only carriers of cultures and identities but also ideologies and stereotypes, which, from a cultural studies perspective, reflect power relations in Michel Foucault’s power knowledge theory. I conceive digital spaces as platforms for dominant/ hegemonic voices and narratives that define the uneven relationships between East and West, on the one hand, and North and South, on the other hand. I also argue that cyberspace replicates the epistemological and cultural gap existing among the world’s nations; this gap has even been exacerbated by the rise of the digital gap. The paper has also delved into the exploration of digital transactive memory and the ways cyber technology has the potential to boost up human brain and complement its biological limitations. Digital tools empower human memory and its capacity to remember and retrieve information. They also allow individual users to interact and share the experience of collective memories on social networks. As pointed out earlier, it is high time we ceased to consider media a separate apparatus or an independent machine external to the human body, psyche, and cognition; media is the extension of man, as eloquently stated by Marshall McLuhan, who also deftly drew our attention to the fact that “We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us” (Qtd. in Jouhki and Hurme, 2017).

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