Review of CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community

Editor: Stephen G. Jones

Publisher: Sage Publications

Year: 1995



Review By: Cecil Greek, FSU School of Criminology

Books about computer-mediated communication and the Internet now fill many shelves in most bookstores. Unfortunately few provide analyses of how computer networks are changing the fundamental nature of human interaction, since most of the books are about how to get on-line, surf the Web, and cash in on the Internet. CyberSociety is a thoughtful antidote to the Web mania sweeping the world.

Surprisingly, Stephen Jones' collection of essays barely mentions the Web, highlighting one of the major problems with traditional methods of publishing, marketing, and reviewing books. A book published in 1995 was probably written in 1994, and in 1994 few people used the Web. Given that the technology of computer-mediated communication is changing so rapidly, almost any book in this area is outdated prior to its release. (E-publishing appears to be the only solution to instant disposability. I could update this review instantly if I wanted to, but this book will soon be out of print, never to be updated.)

Since I've done little else but create Web pages for the past three years, I was tempted to simply return the book when asked to review it. However, as I started to read it I found much of it quite relevant, particularly as I was in the middle of constructing a course on how to use new media for criminological research and distance education instruction. CyberSociety provided a number of thoughtful insights on how technologically-based communication might be redefining selves and "community," and handling problems of on-line deviance.

Several basic components of the Internet discussed in the book, email and newsgroups, are actually used much more than they were three years ago. Video games and virtual reality are only now making their way to the Internet, where multi-user gaming and simulations are changing the very nature of computer games. Strangely, chat is not discussed in CyberSociety, but many of the points made about MUDs and newsgroups are equally relevant to IRC chat. Also, audio chat and desktop videoconferencing have emerged since publication of the book.

Particular chapters in the book were quite insightful. Ted Friedman's contribution on computer [End page 21] games is a good example. Given that until recently most games were sole player versus the computer, the types of interactivity were limited. Many games are simply interactive cinema, in which the game player must first solve puzzles or mysteries before being permitted to move to the next scene. MystTM and the Police QuestTM series are examples. As the genre evolved puzzles became more elaborate, multiple paths and outcome possibilities were added, and finally, multi-player capabilities were added. Such games might have value in teaching investigation or forensic courses, but often lack adequate scientific knowledge of real procedures. On the other hand, simulations like Sim CityTM, offer a fully immersive experience, in which the game player merges his or her identity with the city as organic system in dynamic equilibrium. Talcott Parsons would love it! The city even mirrors real world crime problems, but unfortunately has an inadequate criminological understanding of crime causation and cessation. Alas, Friedman makes no attempt to analyze the most popular form of computer/video games, a genre I call "shoot-em ups." These may provide another example of what Twitchell called "preposterous violence," be "hardwiring" the video game generation to be complacent about deviance, and/or holding girls back from using computers, depending on your point of view.

Margaret McLaughlin et al's piece "Standards of Conduct on Usenet," was quite enlightening, demonstrating how community boundaries are created by defining and enforcing on-line standards against deviant behavior. If one has spent much time in the newsgroups (or on mailing lists or listservs), it is inevitable that as a "newbie" you will violate a group rule and be censured. You might even be symbolically terminated or executed. McLauglin was able to locate specific examples of netiquette violations in a number of major categories including: bandwidth waste, ethical violations, inappropriate language, violations of networkwide conventions, etc. So what type of community is newsnet? While many computer pundits celebrate the emergence of new mind communities emerging on the Net, in reality, these communities are often dominated by a few hardcore users while most remain lurkers. In addition, newsnet communities are ephemeral and often disappear with the demise of group leaders. On the other hand, without firm rules on posting and responding, many newsgroups have become virtual Spam pits.

Newsgroups are not the only Internet realm forced to create and enforce rules of decent behavior. Thievery has emerged in 3D chat spaces like WorldsAwayTM. According to Robert Rossney, chat participants interacting as avatars have responded with vigilantism to those who steal the valuable heads and tokens from newbies. The computer programmers who created the simulation are enjoying themselves as a [End page 22] real community takes shape, develops its own norms, and attempts to get its citizens to follow them.

Elizabeth Reid is the expert on MUDs and their equivalents: MUCKs, MUSHes, and MOOs. There are a number of similarities with all M worlds, including their emphasis on fantasy, use of text-based scenarios, multiple player role playing, etc. Some worlds feature sex and violence, others do not. In some individuals vie against other individuals to move to higher levels, in others only collaborative group effort leads to success. Reid focuses on the creation and recreation of identity through textual interaction.

There is certainly a vast potential or the use of such technologies in active learning environments, a largely untapped realm within criminal justice education. Until recent, it was mostly English and Writing faculty who were using MUDs. Given the strong emphasis on creative writing which is at the core of the MUDs, this was a natural alliance. At the University of Florida, MUDs were set up to serve 2,500 students per semester in introductory composition and literature courses.

Other essays in this collection are not as important. Several attempt comparisons: video games are compared to New World travelogues, while Hobbes' Leviathan is used as a model for analysis of Usenet . Also, I was not sure of the point of Aycock and Buchignani's "E-Mail Murders." The event described: the rampage murders committed by a Canadian faculty member, Valery Fabrikant, following his rejection for tenure and posting of his case favorably on Usenet, is fascinating. The events were discussed in several Canadian newsgroups for months. However, the impact of this case pales in comparison to the response throughout the Internet to the O.J. Simpson murders and trials.

As CyberSociety points out, Internet users weaned on anonymous game playing have turned to networked computers. MOOs, MUDs, chat rooms, and networked versions of games like Dungeons and DragonsTM or QuakeTM helped to create an expectation of the Internet as a world of competitive fun with people one need never meet face to face. The OJ trial became a medium for many to test their detective or legal skills against other gameplayers. As mediated characters, OJ, the courtroom attorneys, and key witnesses became 'cool' icons for a postmodern generation raised on media constructions of celebrity. However, like some who play games, Internet OJ trial fans occasionally took themselves too seriously, thinking things they said might or ought to influence the real trial's outcome.