

Introducing Cyberculture

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Cyberculture is broad. It exists within and extends throughout the Internet, the global, computer-based "network of networks" constructed in the 1960s by the United States Department of Defense. Although cyberculture is made possible by the network's wires, cables, servers, and terminals, it thrives where users meet within the wires and upon the interfaces. These online social interactions, or what Allucquere Rosanne Stone calls "virtual systems", are as broad as they are diverse and take place within basic email, newsgroups, reflectors, and listservs, bulletin board systems (BBSs) and Usenet, MOOs and MUDs, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), electronic chat rooms, and interactive sites on the World Wide Web.

Cyberculture is deep. Although it can be as shallow as a single unanswered email, it is often a product of complex and collaborative communicative practices which take place over varying segments of time and "space". Indeed, within a particularly healthy listserv thread or MOO space or collaborative Website exists dynamic interactions, social constructions, political negotiations, sexual posturing, and institutional histories. Like its *in real life* (IRL) counterpart, cyberculture resembles a collection of mini-villages, replete with the village idiot, the sage, the argumentative curmudgeon, the idealistic student, and the den mother, not to mention the town hall, the playground, the shopping mall, and back alley.

Cyberculture is in a constant state of flux. Of course, what we call cyberculture today may not exist tomorrow. Like other new technologies, computer-mediated communication technologies are evolving at an incredible rate. As mainstream America, not to mention the world as a whole, continues to embrace and integrate basic Internet technologies into their personal and business lives, we can expect even more innovations. Thus, just as email and listservs dominated the Net from its induction and through the 1980s, Gopher altered organizational structures in the early 1990s, and Web browsers such as Mosaic, Netscape, and Internet Explorer completely transformed the Net from a text-based platform to one incorporating various types of media, so too can we expect new and dynamic technological advances to redefine what we call the Net. More importantly, we can expect original individual and collective applications of those developments to reinvent what we think of as cyberculture.

Cyberculture is broad, deep, and in a constant state of flux. Assuming this is true what hopes can we hold for understanding what cyberculture is, locating its boundaries, and determining its characteristics ? Before we get intimidated by such a daunting task, we must keep in mind that in many ways these are the same questions facing other, more traditional students of culture such as anthropologists and sociologists. After all, *all* cultures are broad, deep, and in a constant state of flux.

Significantly, it is much easier to put forth a number of dimensions of cyberculture than a single definition of it. Too often, the term is used to describe contemporary cultures and/or cultural products that have some relationship with technology. For example, in his book entitled *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*, writer Mark Dery conflates cyberculture with "computer-age subcultures". Although Dery's book explores interesting issues surrounding Internet identities and communities, it also includes chapters on Mark Pauline and Survival Research Labs and tribal tattoo artists. While the book is interesting, it is difficult to ascertain what is *cyber* about tribal tattoos.

For the purpose of this project, I wish to put forth my own working definition of cyberculture.

Cyberculture is a collection of cultures and cultural products that exist on and/or are made possible by the Internet, along with the stories told about these cultures and cultural products.

Thus, while Dery uses cyberculture to mean *computer-age subcultures*, I use the term to refer to culture and cultural products that are directly linked to not only computers but, more specifically, the Internet.

One way to better understand cyberculture is to examine its many elements individually. Some facets, including issues of electronic democracy, telecommuting, and the perennial favorite, virtual sex, have become popular topics in the popular media. Other elements such as cyberspace and race, online representations of gender and sexuality, and the political economy of cyberculture are beginning to be addressed by the popular media and within academic circles. Yet in a feeble attempt to impose a boundary (dare I use the term "containment" with respect to a topic so utterly containless ?), I have decided to explore cyberculture in terms of four categories. These categories include cyberculture in context, virtual communities, community networks, and virtual identities.