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pandora's vox: on community in cyberspace

by humdog (1994)

when i went into cyberspace i went into it thinking that it was a place like any other place and that it would be a human interaction like any other human interaction. i was wrong when i thought that. it was a terrible mistake.

the very first understanding that i had that it was not a place like any place and that the interaction would be different was when people began to talk to me as though i were a man. when they wrote about me in the third person, they would say "he." it interested me to have people think i was "he" instead of "she" and so at first i did not say anything. i grinned and let them think i was "he." this went on for a little while and it was fun but after a while i was uncomfortable. finally i said unto them that i, humdog, was a woman and not a man. this surprised them. at that moment i realized that the dissolution of gender-category was something that was happening everywhere, and perhaps it was only just very obvious on the net. this is the extent of my homage to Gender On The Net.

i suspect that cyberspace exists because it is the purest manifestation of the mass (masse) as Jean Beaudrilliard described it. it is a black hole; it absorbs energy and personality and then re-presents it as spectacle. people tend to express their vision of the mass as a kind of imaginary parade of blue-collar workers, their muscle-bound arms raised in defiant salute. sometimes in this vision they are holding wrenches in their hands. anyway, this image has its origins in Marx and it is as Romantic as a dozen long-stemmed red roses. the mass is more like one of those faceless dolls you find in nostalgia-craft shops: limp, cute, and silent. when i say "cute" i am including its macabre and sinister aspects within my definition.

it is fashionable to suggest that cyberspace is some kind of *island of the blessed* where people are free to indulge and express their Individuality. some people write about cyberspace as though it were a 60's utopia. in reality, this is not true. major online services, like compuserv and america online, regular guide and censor discourse. even some allegedly free-wheeling (albeit politically correct) boards like the WELL censor discourse. the difference is only a matter of the method and degree. what interests me about this, however, is that to the mass, the debate about freedom of expression exists only in terms of whether or not you can say fuck or look at sexually explicit pictures. i have a quaint view that makes me think that discussing the ability to write "fuck" or worrying about the ability to look at pictures of sexual acts constitutes The Least Of Our Problems surrounding freedom of expression.

western society has a problem with appearance and reality. it keeps wanting to split them off from each other, make one more real than the other, invest one with more meaning than it does the other. there are two people who have something to say about this: Nietzsche and Beaudrilliard. i invoke their names in case somebody thinks i made this up. Nietzsche thinks that the conflict over these ideas cannot be resolved. Beaudrilliard thinks that it was resolved and that this is how come some people think that communities can be virtual: we prefer simulation (simulacra) to reality. image and simulacra exert tremendous power upon culture. and it is this tension, that informs all the debates about Real and Not-Real that infect cyberspace with regards to identity, relationship, gender, discourse, and community. almost every discussion in cyberspace, about cyberspace, boils down to some sort of debate about Truth-In-Packaging.

cyberspace is a mostly a silent place. in its silence it shows itself to be an expression of the mass. one might question the idea of silence in a place where millions of user-ids parade around like angels of light, looking to see whom they might, so to speak, consume. the silence is nonetheless present and it is most present, paradoxically at the moment that the user-id speaks. when the user-id posts to a board, it does so while dwelling within an illusion that no one is present. language in cyberspace is a frozen landscape.

i have seen many people spill their guts on-line, and i did so myself until, at last, i began to see that i had commodified myself. commodification means that you turn something into a product which has a money-value. in the nineteenth century, commodities were made in factories, which karl marx called "the means of production." capitalists were people who owned the means of production, and the commodities were made by workers who were mostly exploited. i created my interior thoughts as a means of production for the corporation that owned the board i was posting to, and that commodity was being sold to other commodity/consumer entities as entertainment. that means that i sold my soul like a tennis shoe and i derived no profit from the sale of my soul. people who post frequently on boards appear to know that they are factory equipment and tennis shoes, and sometimes trade sends and email about how their contributions are not appreciated by management.

as if this were not enough, all of my words were made immortal by means of tape backups. furthermore, i was paying two bucks an hour for the privilege of commodifying and exposing myself. worse still, i was subjecting myself to the possibility of scrutiny by such friendly folks as the FBI: they can, and have, downloaded pretty much whatever they damn well please. the rhetoric in cyberspace is liberation-speak. the reality is that cyberspace is an increasingly efficient tool of surveillance with which people have a voluntary relationship.

proponents of so-called cyber-communities rarely emphasize the economic, business-mind nature of the community: many cyber-communities are businesses that rely upon the commodification of human interaction. they market their businesses by appeal to hysterical identification and fetishism no more or less than the corporations that brought us the two hundred dollar athletic shoe. proponents of cyber- community do not often mention that these conferencing systems are rarely culturally or ethnically diverse, although they are quick to embrace the idea of cultural and ethnic diversity. they rarely address the whitebread demographics of cyberspace except when these demographics conflict with the upward-mobility concerns of white, middle class females under the rubric of orthodox academic Feminism.

the ideology of electronic community appears to contain three elements. first, the idea of the social; second, eco-greenness; and lastly, the assumption that technology equals progress in a kind of nineteenth century sense. all of these ideas break down under analysis into forms of banality.

as beaudrillard has said, socialization is measured according to the amount of exposure to information, specifically, exposure to media. the social itself is a dinosaur: people are withdrawing into activities that are more about consumption than anything else. even the Evil Newt says that. (i watched his class.) so-called electronic communities encourage participation in fragmented, mostly silent, microgroups who are primarily engaged in dialogues of self-congratulation. in other words, most people lurk; and the ones who post, are pleased with themselves.

eco-green is a social concept that is about making people feel good. what they feel good about is that they are getting a handle on what amounts to the trashing of planet earth by industrialists of the second industrial revolution. it is a good and desirable feeling, especially during a time where semioticians are trying to figure out how they are going to explain radiation- waste dumps to people thirty thousand years in the future. eco-green is also a way to re-package calvinistic values under a more palatable sign. americans are calvinists, i am sorry to say. they can't help it: it arrived on the mayflower.

i also think that the idea of electronic community is a manifestation of the triumph of sign-value over worth-value. there is nothing that goes on in electronic community that is not infested with sign- value. if electronic community were anything other than exercise in sign-value, identity hacking, which is entirely about surface-sign, would be much more difficult. signs proclaiming electronic technology as green abound in cyberspace: the attitude of political correctness; the "green" computer, the "paperless" office and the illusion that identity in cyberspace can be manipulated to obscure gender, ethnicity, and other emblems of cultural diversity; the latter of course being both the most persistent and most ridiculous. both of these concepts, the social and the eco-green, are directly nourished by an idea of progress that would not have appeared unfamiliar to an industrialist in the nineteenth century.

i give you an example: the WELL, a conferencing system based in Sausalito, California, is often touted as an example of a "social cluster" in cyberspace. originally part of the Point Foundation, which is also associated with the Whole Earth Review and the Whole Earth Catalogues, the WELL occupies an interesting niche in the electronic-community marketplace. it markets itself as a conferencing system for the literate, bookish and creative individual. it markets itself as an agent for social change, and it is, in reality, calvinist and more than a little green. the WELL is also afflicted with an old fashioned hippie aura that lead to some remarkably touching ideas about society and culture. no one, by the way, should kid themselves that the WELL is any different than bigger services like America OnLine or Prodigy—all of these outfits are businesses and all of these services are owned by large corporations. the WELL is just, by reason of clunky interface, a little bit less obvious about it.

in july of 1993, in a case that received national media coverage, a man's reputation was destroyed on the WELL, by WELLpeople, because he had dared to have a relationship with more than one woman at the same time, and because he did not conform to WELL social protocol. i will not say that he did not conform to ethical standards, because i believe that the ethic of truthfulness in cyberspace is sometimes such as to render the word ethics meaningless. in cyberspace, for example, identity can be an art-form. but the issues held within the topic, called News 1290,(now archived) were very complex and spoke to the heart of the problem of cyberspace: the desire to invest the simulacrum with the weight of reality.

the women involved in 1290 accepted the attention of the man simultaneously on several levels: most importantly, they believed in the reality of his sign and invested it with meaning. they made love to his sign and there is no doubt that the relationship affected them and that they felt pain and distress when it ended badly. at the same time it appears that the man involved did not invest their signs with the same meaning that they had his, and it is also clear that all parties did not discuss their perceptions of one another. consequently the miscommunication that occurred was ascribed to the man's exploitation of the women he was involved with, and a conclusion was made that he had used them as sexual objects. the women, for their parts, were comfortable in the role of victim and so the games began. of the hundreds of voices heard in this topic, only a very few were astute enough to express the idea that the events had been in actuality caused more by the medium than by the persons who suffered the consequences of the events. persons of that view addressed the ideas of "missing cues" like body language, tone of voice, and physical appearance. none of this, they said, is present in cyberspace, and so people create unrealistic images of the Other. these opinions were in the minority, though. most people made suggestions that would have shocked the organizers of the Reign of Terror. even the words "thought criminal" were used and suggestions about lynching were made.

hysterical identification is a mental device that enables one person to take on the sufferings of a group of persons. it is something that until the 1880's was considered a problem of females. in our society, many decisions about who a person is, are made through the device of hysterical identification. in many cases, this is brought about by the miracle of commercial advertising which invests products with magical qualities, making them into fetishes. buy the fetish, and the identification promised by the advertisement is yours. it is tidy, easy, and requires no investment other than money.

in october of 1994, couples topic 163 was opened. in this topic, user Z came on to discuss her marital problems, which involved a daughter who was emotionally disturbed. it began in a very ordinary way for this type of thing, with the woman asking for and receiving advice about what to do. in just a few days, though, the situation escalated, and the woman put another voice on the wire, who was alleged to be her daughter, X. the alleged daughter exposed her problems and expressed her feelings about them, and the problems appeared to be life-threatening. this seemed to set something off within the conference, and a real orgy began as voices began to appear to express their identification with the mysterious and troubled daughter X. the nature of the identifications and the tone of the posts became stranger and stranger and finally user Z set the frightening crown upon the whole situation by posting a twistedly lyrical monologue of maternal comfort and consolation directed at the virtual Inner Children who had appeared to take refuge within her soft, enveloping arms. the more that the Inner Children wept, the more that the Virtual Mommy lyricized and comforted. this spectacle, which horrified more than one trained mental health professional who read it on the WELL, went on and on for several days and was discussed privately in several places in disbelieving tones. when the topic imploded, the Virtual Mommy withdrew reluctantly insisting that only a barbarian would believe that she would commodify her own tragedy.

one of the interesting things about both of these incidents, to me, is that they were expunged from the record. News1290 exists in archive. that means that it is stored in an electronic cabinet, sort of like what the Vatican did with the transcripts of the trial of Galileo. it's there, but you have to look for it, and mention of 1290 makes WELLpeople nervous. Couples 163 was killed. that means it was destroyed, and does not exist at all anymore, except on back- up tape or in the hard disks of those persons (like me) who downloaded it for their own reasons. what i am getting at here is that electronic community is a commercial enterprise that dovetails nicely with the increasing trend towards dehumanization in our society: it wants to commodify human interaction, enjoy the spectacle regardless of the human cost. if and when the spectacle proves inconvenient or alarming, it engages in creative history like, like any good banana republic.

this, however, should not surprise anybody. aesthetically, electronic community of the kind likely to be extolled in the gentle, new-age press, contains both elements of the modernist resistance to depth and appeal to surface combined with the postmodern aesthetic of fragment. the electronic community leaves a permanent record which is open to scrutiny while maintaining an illusion of transience. in doing this, it somehow manages to satisfy the needs of the orwellian and the psycho-archeologist.

people can talk about cyberspace as a Utopian community only because it is literature, and therefore subject to editorial revision. these two events plus another where a woman's death was choreographed as spectacle online, made me think about what electronic community was, and how it probably really did not exist, except like i said, as a kind of market for the consumption of sign-value.

increasingly, consumption is micro-managed, as the great marxists alvin and heidi toffler suggest when they talk about "de-massing." so-called electronic community may be seen as a kind of micro-marketing of the social to a self-selected elite. this denies the possibility of human relationship, from which all authentic community proceeds. if one exists merely as sign-value, as a series of white letters, as a subset, then of course it is perfectly fine and we can talk about a community of signs, nicely boxed, categorized and inventoried, ready for consumption.

many times in cyberspace, i felt it necessary to say that i was human. once, i was told that i existed primarily as a voice in somebody's head. lots of times, i need to see handwriting on paper or a photograph or a phone conversation to confirm the humanity of the voice, but that is the way that i am. i resist being boxed and inventoried and i guess i take william gibson seriously when he writes about machine intelligence and constructs. i do not like it. i suspect that my words have been extracted and that when this essay shows up, they will be extracted some more. when i left cyberspace, i left early one morning and forgot to take out the trash. two friends called me on the phone afterwards and said, hummie your directory is still there. and i said OH. and they knew and i knew, that it was possible that people had been entertaining themselves with the contents of my directories. the amusement never ends, as peter gabriel wrote. maybe sometime i will rant again if something interesting comes up. in the meantime, give my love to the FBI.