new media & society


London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi
Vol5(3):307–312 [1461–4448(200309)5:3,307–312;034858]

ARTICLE

# Cybercafés: debating the meaning and significance of internet access in a café environment

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Cybercafés[1] are relatively new phenomena, their birth often attributed to the opening of Cyberia in London in 1994. Tracing the growth of cybercafés accurately is problematic (as some contributors to this journal issue discuss) because there is no agreed definition, or shared view by owners or managers or a definitive list. Where lists exist their accuracy varies both in terms of coverage and keeping track of turnover in what is agreed to be a rapidly changing sector. However the current (March 2003) listing of 6189 cybercafés in 170 countries on http://www.cybercaptive.com, one of the main cybercafé search engines, suggests that the phenomenon is alive and well. Cybercafés exist in urban and rural locations, and central as well as peripheral areas worldwide. In the UK, out of the 53 percent of the adult population who had accessed the internet by October 2001, 10 percent had done so from an internet café or shop, the same proportion as those who had gained access from a library (Bowman, 2002). In other countries referred to in this issue (Norway, Finland and the US), cybercafés may not be as significant in terms of the proportion of the population using them, but they remain important for specific social groups in particular locations.

This finding might seem surprising given the widespread growth in home internet access, at least in the developed world. However, as contributors to this collection argue, cybercafés are not the 'last resort' for access that would

be suggested by such an analysis. Instead, they suggest that cybercafé users may make a positive choice in favour of this type of provision because the forms of sociality associated with a café environment are seen as enhancing, or complementing, the experience of internet access that they could gain elsewhere. How to characterize this sociality and explore its significance is a central concern for contributors to this journal issue, but they agree that it is what makes cybercafés distinct from other public access points such as libraries and computer business centres. Confusingly, the decision by a particular site to call itself a café or not, may not be a good indicator of that distinction: some 'cafés' may fail to create a 'café environment' while some community centres or libraries may succeed.[2] The meaning of the term 'cybercafé' remains somewhat fluid and organizations may choose to identify, or not, with the label for a variety of reasons.

There is some evidence that the make-up of the commercial part of the sector is changing – at least in the UK. Originally, this consisted overwhelmingly of independent units, with a few franchises which had developed from successful independents such as Cyberia. However, in recent years 'chains' of cybercafés have opened. The best known are the easyInternet cafés, part of the company which owns the easyJet budget airline. The first one opened in Victoria, London in 1999, claiming to be the 'world's biggest internet café' and housing 400 computer terminals. Its other innovation was its pricing structure, which varies with the level of demand and is normally much cheaper than the tariffs of independent cybercafés. easyInternet currently has eight outlets in London, one each in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Manchester, others in mainland Europe and the US and advertises the availability of franchise arrangements as a route to further expansion. However their growth has not been unproblematic. In 2001 the company only survived as a result of a £15 million cash injection from its owner Stelios Haji-Ioannou, taking his share in the company up to 95% (Arthur, 2001). This model, which is clearly only viable (if at all) in the centre of large towns, is perhaps a limited commercial threat to most independent cybercafés.

However, there are signs that multiples with origins in the mainstream café or fast food sector are also interested in this market. Their decision to move into internet provision may create a more significant challenge to existing cybercafés. One example is Starbucks (2002) who have declared their intention to roll out high-speed, broadband, wireless internet access in a range of their cafés. The way in which they have expanded their mainstream café outlets has been described as a 'cannibalization strategy' (Klein, 2000: 136–7) and involves saturating an area with outlets. While a multiple can experience cumulative growth at corporate level from such an approach, the consequences for individual independent café outlets has been disastrous.

Liff et al.'s research[3] suggested that small independent cybercafés are already experiencing problems in establishing a viable business model. The provision of internet access rarely seemed to be viable in its own right. Those that were successful had developed a mixed business model, where internet provision was combined with other (also often marginal) revenue-generating activities including restaurant facilities, performance venues, and the provision of more technical services such as website design or ISP-related activities. This approach may prove increasingly problematic given the developments described above – although this journal issue shows that it is still possible for small independents to survive within relatively close proximity of multiples if they are targeting a distinct clientele.

Cybercafés are assessed here mainly as social and cultural enterprises rather than commercial ones. They are seen as finding innovative ways of addressing (various) social objectives and creating distinctive cultural spaces. Some of them, particularly if they are located in peripheral or socially deprived areas, are partly or fully financed by the public sector as community ventures. In these cases they tend to have a normative function, be it to enhance local community resources, keep kids off the street, or include the local community in the information society. Such public support is mainly evident in the Nordic cases reported here. In the UK, the government has not been involved directly in setting up cybercafés or providing them with any form of financial support, despite government ministers' willingness to be associated with the novelty and glamour of the cybercafé model.

Cybercafés are not always viewed benignly by governments. Their international growth has been associated with changing and more hostile discourses about their role in promoting social change. Countries whose political regimes attempt to tightly control news media have been alarmed at the ease with which these can be sidestepped by using the internet. The BBC (2002) reported that in 2001 the Chinese authorities had shut down nearly 17,000 internet cafés which failed to install government-approved software restricting access to banned sites and records users' online activities.[4] In the wake of 11 September there have also been repeated reports that terrorists have made use of cybercafés to communicate with each other. The attraction of such access sites is said to be that one's use cannot be traced 'much like public payphones, internet café terminals are available for use by anyone', said one commentator, without a trace of irony (Eng, 2002).

Perhaps because of their more explicit role within public policy or community action, other sites of internet access such as libraries and community technology centres have received far more academic attention than cybercafés (e.g. Keeble and Loader, 2001). In light of both changes in the sector and the way in which cybercafés are being represented, it is

particularly timely to have this collection of articles which review their development in a number of countries and which reflect on what might be novel and interesting about them. The empirical work drawn upon in all the articles for this issue focus on the organizational level and draws primarily on qualitative methodologies, including observation and interviews. As such they can be contrasted with the analysis of larger scale data sets of internet users and their use patterns which have been reviewed recently by Castells (2001) and Haythornthwaite and Wellman (2002). Our approach shares with theirs a rejection of accounts of the internet which counterpose the 'real' with the 'virtual'. For example, Haythornthwaite and Wellman conclude that the internet 'does not function on its own, but is embedded in the real life things that people do' (2002: 7). Their interest nevertheless remains with tracking in broad terms the 'impact' of the internet on changing patterns of everyday life. In contrast, the methodologies used by the authors of this collection of articles are particularly well suited to understanding the *way* in which such changes come about.

Contributors to this issue share an interest in analysing cybercafés in depth as places which are part of a local community and are themselves sites for social interaction, but which also make connections both symbolically and through the activities of their users with wider social networks with a potential global reach. They all see such social interactions as significant for understanding how the internet itself, participation in both real and virtual networks, and the ways these are understood, are shaped by social relations – and in particular in this context, by social place. This perspective can be broadly characterized as the social shaping of technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1985). Such approaches stress that all stages of the design, development and use of any technology are social processes. In relation to cybercafés contributors highlight the role that they play in shaping adoption, and patterns of use of the internet, not simply in the sense of providing a venue within which people accept pre-given patterns, but rather through the distinctive ways in which users construct a version of the internet by integrating its use or presence into their (in various ways transformed) everyday practices.

Yet the articles also make distinctive contributions through their focus on particular aspects of cybercafés and their operation, and/or through the choice of different analytical approaches. The presence within a 'real' café of representations of other times and places via the internet is seen as central by Liff and Steward. They analyse this using Foucault's concept of heterotopia, arguing that the juxtaposition of the real and the virtual creates distinctive opportunities for internet participation. They suggest that this potential is realised if successful boundary spanning occurs between the sociality of the café and the internet via networks of practice. Lægran and Stewart, and Wakeford focus on the way in which the internet is 'translated'

within a specific social space. Lægran and Stewart use an actor network approach to explore the ways in which the intentions of those creating cybercafés and the practices of those using them lead to different types of 'technosocial' spaces. The choice of coffee machine may be as significant as the specification of connectivity or the (allowed) behaviour of customers in shaping forms of participation. Wakeford uses Appadurai's cultural concept of technoscapes to understand the specific spatial and temporal translation of a generalized technological experience. She argues that this is key to analysing virtuality as a social accomplishment. Uotinen sees the significance of the particular cybercafé that she analyses as the integration of computers within a particular type of community centre, based on interlocking social networks which encourage debate, dialogue and dissenting views rather than conformity.

While all the contributors focus on micro-sociological analyses of particular places they are also interested in relating this 'local' experience to wider 'global' concerns. Liff and Steward point to the synergy between the cybercafé model and public policy goals for internet access, suggesting that this has been partially recognized but not effectively understood or supported. Uotinen explores the ways in which national information society rhetoric influences individuals' attitudes towards information and communication technologies (ICTs), but which can only become embedded (to whatever extent and direction) within their everyday practices when they are exposed to its possibilities in a local supportive environment allowing rejection as well as acceptance of the dominant discourse. Lægran and Stewart stress that the form taken by an individual cybercafé is a local configuration of global concepts – the café and the internet. Wakeford locates the cafés described in relation to their location within predominantly immigrant communities living in a multicultural city. But rather than seeing the internet links to their 'home' communities as a way in which ethnic minorities escape their current location, she argues that the internet practices observed engage locally meaningful knowledge which cut across everyday practices in their current location.

The variety of sites discussed in this issue and the different analytical perspectives adopted underline the complexity of cybercafés as places where people engage with the internet and new social practices emerge.

## Notes

1 The term 'internet café' has become common and is preferred by a number of contributors to this issue. We use 'cybercafé' in this introduction because it was the original label used by this form of internet access facility and is still the dominant label used by sector level organizations or listings.

2 This of course means that not all the organizations listed as cybercafés on search engines necessarily display the characteristics which are seen as significant by

particular authors in this journal issue and that some organizations which are seen as displaying such characteristics are not necessarily widely classified as cybercafés.

3 ESRC project 'Gateways to the Virtual Society: Innovation for Social Inclusion' funded under the Virtual Society? Programme, grant number L132251022. Unpublished reports and presentations available from the website http://www.virtualsociety.org.uk.

4 If the quoted figure is true, it more than amply demonstrates the problems of keeping track of sector growth when compared with the global figure quoted above from the cybercafé search engine.

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