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The Ethnography of the Digital World, or How to Do Fieldwork in a "Brave New World"

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Is the world digital? (Simon 2000)

"Speed" is one of the first words people tend to use when they describe the Internet. A well-known French politician Alain Madelin recently echoed this consensus view when he said that electronic communications had brought about a "new world where it is no longer the big who triumph over the small, but the fast over the slow" (*Le Monde*, July 2-3, 2000). Several years earlier, Paul Virilio (1993) wrote, "The reality of information lies entirely in its speed of propagation." If so, *Digital man*, Negroponte's (1995) successor to *Homo sapiens sapiens,* would be distinguished primarily by the speed with which he processed information, not by the content of what he processed. Natural selection, operating to the advantage of the swift, is, according to this logic, in the midst of creating a new species whose new, true, name will be Einstein's famous formula, $E=mc^2$.

Predictions that a new era, or even a whole new epoch for humanity would result from new means of collecting, processing, and transmitting information began only half a century ago (Wiener 1948). In the 1950s, they indirectly inspired a group of American sociologists to predict the end of the ideology, and the start of a new era of information or knowledge in a post-industrial world of participatory democratic society administered by the community of Science (Bell 2000). Already, James Burnham (1941) had envisaged the convergence of the capitalist and communist models within a *managerial society*. Less than three decades later, Zbignew Brzezinski (1969) announced the coming of the first world society dominated by communication.

In 1994, Vice-President Al Gore officially proclaimed that a new epoch had arrived for the new human family, and one year later, the world's leading

industrialized nations, members of the G7, hailed the "global information society." American self-satisfaction had reached its peak. American society, always open to the flow of information and eager to develop better channels for it, stood poised to benefit from its "information edge" (Nye & Owens 1996). The victory over the Soviet system had thus reached its logical conclusion. The new age that was beginning would no longer mean the end of ideology and history, but rather the age of their rebirth, as Daniel Bell (2000) wrote in the preface to the new edition of his 1962 work. To emphasize the striking but covert symmetry between liberal economics and communist ideology, at least where self-satisfaction is concerned, we need look no further than the fact that Walt Rostow's classic book *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960) bore the subtitle "*A Non-Communist Manifesto.*"

Circumscribing the Unfathomable

In electronic space — as we might expect when we enter a free market zone where Darwinian principles apply — it is the entrepreneur, whose turf it is, who best understands the rules. Research-oriented intellectuals do not seem to be able to see the forest for the trees (Costigan 1999: xvii), except for those researchers who have recast themselves as entrepreneurs. One such case is Thomas Middlelhoff, head of Bertelsmann, the world's third-largest media conglomerate. In the 1980s, Middelhoff wrote his doctoral thesis on electronic commerce. Businessmen understood sooner and better than researchers and politicians that speed, while it might be an immense asset in computer science, was of little use for making profits unless it was linked to content that consumers would buy. In this light, AOL's recent merger with Time Warner stands out as an example of the importance of "content." Similarly, the recent deal takeover of the young "delinquent" Napster by the very "respectable" Bertelsmann (BMG) recognizes these young entrepreneurs' ability to realize the enormous commercial potential of the Internet by creating, maintaining, and connecting a virtual community with tens of millions of members. (See Esposito 2000 for a definition of community in terms of the Western philosophical tradition.) Here too, researchers lag behind business, locked in debates over how best to decide who is really a member of such a community.

Let us consider this question in the light of the Napster example. In a little over a year, the young pioneers behind this software for sharing music files over the Internet, currently held responsible for allowing massive copyright violations, were able to build a following of 60 million faithful adherents. Is

this a community? We will call it an e-community to avoid all possible confusion with a community like the one that meets in a church or resides in a village. Are regular Napster users faithful to the company only because they can easily exchange music for free? Or do they share something more, like a common view of a social or political issue, or an interest in exchanging information on something more than what music to copy? Bertelsmann, along with several other major corporate leaders, is gambling that this e-community also constitutes a potential market for books, images, and maybe even ideas. Perhaps, eventually, it might even be a good market for political campaign messages.

While we cannot yet evaluate these commercial prospects, they direct our attention to two major questions concerning the Internet and, more generally, to the whole range of topics relating to distributed electronic communications and processing. The first is that speed really serves its purpose only insofar as it allows the creation of large, durable communities that cross boundaries of all types. On entering such a community, the individual constructs her or his own identity beyond the reach of traditional constraints of gender, age, and, to some extent, social milieu.[1] These communities have no way to claim the exclusive loyalty of their members. Nor do they try to, since, given enough time and imagination, individuals can have as many identities as they can think up and keep track of. Secondly, no one knows today what impact these virtual communities may end up having on individuals' civic or political conduct outside the world of virtual electronic exchanges. Historically, voting has always meant voters physically going to polling stations in order to mark their ballots. Could their voting behavior already reflect their connections to e-communities, their exchanges within groups or their reading of texts on the Web? According to an original, though limited-scale enquiry that Tessy Bakary

1. Since communication always takes the form of digitized writing (and digitized speech is coming), the social characteristics of writing and speaking, while less marked now than a generation or two ago, can still betray someone as a member of a particular social category. But the fact that communities cut across borders, communicating often by means of an e-language based on languages that are widely spoken, mainly English but also French and Spanish, makes this involuntary "betrayal" of oneself less likely. In fact, the e-world imposes its own rules. Despite the spatial or cultural distances which separate cybernauts, all at least share the culture, however equivocal, of the Internet. Even in the practice of real-time chatting, where contact between cybernauts is most direct and most personal, it is primarily IRC culture that governs exchanges. This makes it possible to overlook cultural gaps, though perhaps only temporarily (Ma 1996: 181-182).

conducted on an experiment with online voting in Senegal, of which the results are presented here, it seems that there at least, this is not yet the case.

Philippe Lejeune's (2000) new travelogue, about the world of online personal diaries and autobiographies (see for example www.onelist.com/messages/journal), has just come out in printed form only. Likewise Daniel Scheidermann (2000) has produced a personal account of his Internet voyages, impressions of his excursions in cyberspace, in the form of a series of articles printed in *Le Monde*. Today, though the general public has been familiar with the Internet for less than ten years,[2] the cyberworld has already become the subject of travel writers. It has also attracted its own explorers, including some who, like Conrad's Kurtz, drunk with power, have tried to set up imaginary kingdoms there. When, we ask, will we see the first full ethnographies of these virtual universes[3], these cybercountries that one can enter at any hour, though sometimes to get in one has to click on the box to ask for a visa? Meanwhile the practitioners of e-politics, of e-sovereignty, and of the e-UN are building up nations that any curious surfer can visit at www.aericanempire.com, at www.republic-of-lomar.org or at www.sealand.gov.com, etc.

E-voting has been tried in the United States as an alternative to voting in person. How will this change electoral behavior? Will the voter as a cybermember of an e-community replace the flesh and blood citizen? What political issues will he or she support when clicking on the screen? Will they be the same ones that the same voter would mark if using a pencil? It is difficult to tell for the moment. Whatever emerges, we suspect that because of the way the Internet compresses time and space, it will transform important features of social, political and economic organization. Thus, today, "software allows automated management of document reading and document flow without human intervention. At the same time, networks have brought emancipation from geography" (Bulard 2000: 24). As a result, the volume of work has grown sharply, and there is an increasingly greater proletarianization of the middle classes (Cascino 1999). On the other hand, the Internet has made it possible to unionize workers who are too spread out geographically to form a traditional

2. A very long history has nonetheless been put together. See *History of the Internet: A Chronology, 1843 to the Present* (Moschovitis *et al.* 1999).

3. In 1998, a learned society, the Association of Internet Researchers, was formed, gaining 500 members by its first colloquium in 2000. Its current president, Steve Jones (University of Illinois, Chicago) announced the launch of a new series of print volumes called "Digital Formation," from publisher Peter Lang.

labor organization. In April 1999, the employees of Elf in the town of Pau, France mobilized employees elsewhere and organized a network strike. In 2000, IBM management had to give in to a revolt by employees who inundated the company with email messages. To e-exploitation and e-proletarianization, workers respond with e-struggles and e-strikes.

In introducing this special issue on cyberethnography, the most important aspect that we have considered is the powerful but unequal capacity of the Internet to give birth to electronic communities, to create groups of loyal members whose shared adherence is always and only based on specific objectives and specific ways of doing things. Never does this adherence imply exclusive commitment by social and political persons. This form of belonging without complete commitment is very appealing to those who want to free themselves from particular social constraints. Without wishing to trivialize the phenomenon, we can raise the question, for example, of whether what seems to be a veritable epidemic of pedophilia on the Internet is not, in actual fact, compounded by this apparent liberty to experiment with multiple adherences. Perhaps many visitors, or even creators, of sites for this pornography would never have imagined such practices in the real world. In the e-world, the same gestures may seem to them to be without consequence, since no real child appears to be involved. The child, the desire, would not exist outside of this semi-dream and they tell themselves that no one can be held responsible for dreams. However the state does prosecute the pedophile, but not violence. A murder on the Internet, in a video game, is not only not a crime but is socially considered to belong to the field of leisure! And how should we react when a history student decides to take an address like "hitler@hotmail.com?" Should we just refuse to respond to messages from such addresses, cut off communication with that particular e-person? Or should we just take it as the bad joke of an immature adolescent?

Margaret Wertheim compares the Christian utopia of Paradise to the new utopia of cyberspace, welcomed by its enthusiasts as "a place where the self is freed from the limits of physical incarnation" (1997: 296). Clarisse Herrenschmidt adds that the Internet "broadcasts its own particular spirituality. One finds statements made in quite different contexts, on how cybernauts experience 'horizontal transcendence' and come to embody a 'humanity reconciled with itself,' who should spread the glad tidings to all their unconnected fellows" (2000: 111). Herrenschmidt concludes with a warning to the reader: "This isn't something for us to laugh at. [...] A transformation

affecting signs that are known to everyone in society will most certainly affect all aspects of life. It will alter the ways people think about life; it will break their conceptions apart and put them back together again" (Herrenschmidt 2000). Chat channels prosper in part because of the utopian quality of this reticular form of writing, in which the message can reach many addressees simultaneously, producing the illusion of holding a conversation in a real room that extends to the four corners of the globe (Herrenschmidt 2000:109). This space without borders or constraints, where everyone enters and leaves at will, is not only always available, but can even be used to subvert itself at any time simply by using it to arrange a meeting in what is known as the "real world."

A number of studies and experiments have suggested that the ultimate aim in joining an e-community is in fact a return to the world of flesh and blood human beings who are not able and do not want to evade the traditional markers of their identity like gender, age, appearance, preferences, etc. This was the conclusion reached by Madeleine Pastinelli (1999), one of the editors of this issue, in an article on her experiences in an electronic chat room which was the beginning of the process leading up to the publication of this special issue. She found that face-to-face meetings are the end product of all prolonged chat relationships, though this does not necessarily put an end to active electronic chatting. The second stage in the preparation of this issue was a jointly conducted analysis of listservs, news forums and web sites created by supporters of the political struggles in Burundi, the Congo and Kosovo. Particular attention focused on the ways the past was used (not necessarily the past of the society concerned) to infuse the information supplied online with meaning, and to orient community members to actions to be taken in the offline world. Finally, the favorable response by participants at the colloquium "Lieux de mémoire, politiques de la mémoire et avenir de l'histoire" (Places of Memory, Politics of Memory, and the Future of History), held in Quebec in 1999 in honour of Pierre Nora, encouraged us to go ahead with the idea of publication (articles by Tristan Landry, Barnabé Ndarishikanye and Madeleine Pastinelli), and this issue was produced with the help of the warm welcome proffered by *Ethnologies.*

Despite the broad range of topics covered in this issue, the selection of articles and research notes included still falls short of providing a complete overview of the new field of Internet research. At best, this issue and the explorations it contains constitute a kind of beginning, an invitation to research. Our hope is that it will generate more interest in e-world ethnography, especially

in e-sociability, a phenomenon that not only has the advantage of taking place all around us, but one that is also more and more central to the world we live in. The e-world is playing an increasingly integral role in what we still tend to refer to as the "real world." In the past, we tended to restrict what counted as the "real world," the world that really mattered for the future of humanity, to a social and political sphere whose scope was narrowly restricted to the bourgeois West, the Victorian universe. But ethnography, ethnology and anthropology have explored, explained, and exhibited other universes, the worlds of the exotic tribe, of the peasant, and more recently, of the worker. These were worlds that were being left behind by progress, worlds condemned to disappear. But now speed, if taken as a synonym for progress, formerly the hallmark of the first world, has become the main feature of the e-world. As a result, we find ourselves asking, "Who will udertake the ethnography of whom from now on?" Will it be cybernauts from the world formerly known as real or citizens of the only "true" world, the virtual universe? Simple dichotomies seldom have an easy time of it, at least in the social sciences. Should we not rather view the Internet as a tool for being in the world, a new tool and, in that sense, one that is likely to transform our manner of being in the world, without assuming that it will entirely replace the world? The comparison with print media presented by Baptiste Campion in this issue seems especially relevant because it forces us to recognize the ordinariness of the new.

While we can characterize the Internet by analyzing the three elements of speed, adaptation to content, and the community of "passers,"[4] a secret combination discovered by businessmen without alerting researchers, we also know that we will not understand the cyberuniverse or its relations with the offline world without analyzing all three elements together. In this issue we

4. In her expression "the passer of time," Sylviane Agacinski (2000: 57-67) proposes this term, playing on the double meaning of the word "pass." "Our passer of time evokes these two meanings: he or she is open to time without trying to master it, is available to make it pass, to work out a way of passing from one time to another by leaving him/herself open to the solicitation by the traces, the imprints — imprints left by the past in the city, or imprints of books. The passer is a *witness*, a passive observer, but one without whom there would be no time. To the extent that he or she is at once active and passive, the passer is also the one *through whom* things happen, a personal "place" of passage. Time passers are finally the impossible contemporaries of themselves, living in a time when everyone has had sharp experiences of passage" (p. 57-58, author's italics). Is that not a good idea of what distinguishes a member of an e-community? Is this the direction in which we are moving? Is it where we want to go?

propose a very modest step in that direction. It seems to us too ambitious to speak yet of a full contribution to this new field of study. Since history repeats itself only through the nostalgic haze of the present, with its expectations shaped by the narrative structure of the account, we find it risky to say whether or not the revolution has already taken place. By comparing the impact of computer technology to the invention of printing, we do not intend to claim that it will be of the same type. Without necessarily seeing a cause-effect relationship, however, we should note that several profound transformations were in progress in Western European societies during the same period as the invention and spread of printing. This suggests that we should pay particular attention to the contemporaneity between the new electronic technologies for information distribution and the deep changes taking place in the world at the present time. We can leave aside the false chick-and-egg question of which came first, the Internet or the globalization of social movements, the economy, and crime, or the unprecedented scale of migrations which have created diasporas where yesterday were immigrants' communities, but we still must confront the fact of their conjunction.

The e-real revolution

Recently a rather stuffy but very influential American magazine announced, "Liberal Arts post-docs need a web site too. The *New Republic* is now online" ([Politics/Books & Arts/Cyberspace] *New York Review of Books*, November 2, 2000: 63). Many believe that e-publication is a revolution whose time has almost come (Epstein 2000). PricewaterhouseCoopers, quoted in *Publisher's Weekly* before the recent collapse of e-commerce stocks (see The Industry Standard, www.thestandard.com/article/display), forecast that electronic books would account for one quarter of the book market by about 2004. The first ventures, consisting of online distribution of written texts that consumers buy, download, and print, have more to do with the book's distribution than with the inner nature of the book itself. It is symptomatic that when Stephen King attempted to sell his latest novel *The Plant* online, the results were inconclusive.[5] This form of distribution is rather like sampling music before going to buy the record at the store. It involves a dual circulation of the text, first in digital form, often free of charge, and then in printed form, with the sale at a bookstore of the book in its ordinary format. The intention is "for the first time in centuries

5. See www.stephenking.com.

or even since the invention of writing, to dissociate the text from its material support, thus enabling the distribution of knowledge or stories in ever-increasing quantities in the most economic and efficient manner" (Arbon, Gèze and Valensi 2000: 30).

However, since downloading does not necessarily diminish the quality of the text, and since e-publication has thus far failed to attract much enthusiasm, this is still just a revolution in the making. Halfway between these dual modes, we find publication on demand, where the customer orders a book and the bookstore prints a single copy within fifteen minutes. In essence, this form of publication, like direct online publication by an author without a publisher (and without much regard for such details as profit), simply reproduces what the Web already is. Once again the reader faces the greatest challenge. How can you tell what is interesting, useful or reliable before you try or buy or read? Who can you trust? This challenge is all the more difficult outside of the fields where your own knowledge allows you to judge the quality of content. This is the promise of the world without authority that, for the moment, the Web has become (as long as one overlooks the power, essentially financial, which allows one to attract and persuade others through advertising). Studies of Internet use during the American election made this power evident: it was expenditures for "traditional" ads, mainly on television, that grew, not the web. Here too, the Copernican revolution lagged behind.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the era of the keyboard as the primary intermediary between members of online communities seems to be entering its final phase. With microphones, webcams, and faster connections, we are seeing the emergence of communities of dialogue and visioconference where the visual and aural, now both fully interactive, are taking the place of the written word. The latest versions of chat programs like the popular Messenger and ICQ are all capable of transmitting sound for dialogue. One click on the "talk" or "call" buttons in these applications allows cybernauts to break free from the limitations of the keyboard and express themselves orally as they would in a face-to-face interaction. The "keyboard period" in the evolving history of communications technology and the curious epistolary revival which has resulted from it now stand revealed as mere accidents of history. As Jacques Anis (1999) expressed it, the language of electronic chatting by keyboard, which is closer to oral language than to written, implicitly called for the displacement of the keyboard as the medium of exchange. All that was needed was for the technology to catch up, and now, after some delay, it has.

Already the introduction of sound and image have affected the nature and functioning of e-communities, mainly by considerably reducing the size of groups and by re-introducing certain aspects of individual identity such as age, gender, and skin color. The coming of the webcam has profoundly altered the situation. It is no longer a question of disseminating and watching an image produced by an intermediary, but rather of projecting yourself and your own reality into the cyberworld. The attraction of these hyper-real images is enormous. *Survivor* (CBS) and *Temptation Island* (Fox), which draw audiences of from ten to twelve million viewers for one broadcast hour once a week, are completely outdone by the success of sites like www.jennicam.org, which registers five million hits a day, every day! The two television shows, despite all the effort that goes into making them "real," remain "real-like," unable to escape the aesthetics of television. In contrast, the line between private and public seems to be abolished when the web surfer spies on Kaye Ringley, who shows herself at home to "her" camera, twenty-four hours a day. Or if you prefer more detailed information, you might like to spy on Theresa Senft, who is writing a thesis on "webcamming" at www.echonyc.com/janedoe.

Having examined the passage from the realm of the gaze, structured by the aesthetics of the cinema, to that of the glance, which structures that of television (since television consumption is integrated into daily activities), specialists are now already at work theorizing the impact of the passage to the grab, the function of the webcam, structured like the actions of a consumer in a hurry, grabbing a Big Mac at a drive-through. In the daily life of e-communities, the passage to the webcam upsets all the rules, because it will no longer be possible to pretend that you are someone else, or indeed several other people at once on different chat channels. The freedom to construct your age, your gender, your social attachments, that was a product of the keyboard, gives way to the raw realism of real-time online imaging. What will happen, for example, to e-sexuality, which would seem to have its best days still ahead, to judge by what has been on Netmeeting up to now. The practices described there involve a realism that leaves *cinéma vérité* so far behind that they have become the subject for a special issue of *Women and Performance.*

Just how are we supposed to react to the visual autobiographical performances that individuals launch around the clock into cyberspace, like bottles into the ocean? The pioneers have become stars, like Ringley, who freely admits that without the camera, she would have remained an unknown. As the number of cybernauts with webcams increases, we may well wonder how long the attraction for "naked" reality will last; might it be an antidote to

the invasion of ordinary life by publicity and television? Having watched someone go about their most prosaic daily routines, will we still want to meet them in the real world? Perhaps it would be preferable to set up a meeting in cyberspace, getting the keyboard and its written words to help fantasy win out over daily life.

Space in the Cyberworld: Between the Local and the Global

The 1999 report of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) stated that 2.4% of all human beings were connected to the Internet, but that only 0.04% of the inhabitants of South Asia were, less than 0.1% in Africa or 8% in Latin America. Meanwhile, 88% of cybernauts come from the 17% of the world's inhabitants living in the industrialized countries. Everywhere in the world, the wealthy and the better educated are over-represented among those connected to the Internet. The data in Tessy Bakary's article illustrates that for Africa, this inequality of access, which is both geographic (rich countries versus poor, cities versus rural areas), and social, means that the Internet works in favor of men and of the young, especially the educated. These observations show a usage pattern similar to that for new software like Instant Messaging, which makes it possible to have rapid exchanges without access to fully equipped computers (you can use it with some types of mobile phones, for example). Its use is largely confined to the young in the industrialized countries. In the United States, more than 80% of cybernauts aged between 13 and 18, and more than 60% of those between 19 and 35 use Instant Messaging, while only 40% do so in older age groups.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapiello (1999) contend that having an Internet connection is essentially a means of exclusion which gives rise to a contemporary form of exploitation. Those who are linked to the giant networks exploit the unconnected. Along similar lines, Bauman (1999) stresses that the Internet, and more particularly the Web, are not for everyone, and that interactivity only works in one direction since the "locals watch the globals." This confers authority on the latter, but sets them apart as well. The globals are literally "not of this world." Nevertheless, they are much easier to see (since they float above the local world every day without restraint), than the angels who once hovered over the Christian world (1999: 85).

Statistics on connection rates can be misleading, however, since one cannot unproblematically equate them with the ability to access information on the Web, just as the print run statistics for books and newspapers should not be

confused with the actual number of readers. It is possible to state that in a reasonably educated society, the more difficult it is to gain access to books or newspapers, the more readers there will be for each copy in circulation, and the more information will be repeated orally to others. It goes without saying that, in the industrialized countries, Internet travel takes place almost exclusively as a solitary activity, like reading in the nineteenth century. Because of this, Nicholas Negroponte (1995) coined his celebrated formula that the Web is the first "individualized mass media." But in poor countries, where access to cell phones and computers is a privilege, each internaut passes on to dozens, perhaps hundreds, of other people information concerning family, politics or social life to which he or she has access. The Internet certainly does not make all the poor of the planet into sophisticated surfers directly plugged into life in the global village. Nevertheless it does permit social groups to mobilize across national boundaries in ways never before seen. Feminists, anti-globalization activists, and aboriginal groups have all seen the benefits to their movements. The Internet allows them to go from a stage of intermittent coordination to one where they jointly maintain a continuous planetary mobilization. The World Women's March in New York City in the autumn of 2000 would probably not have been possible without Internet communications.

There undoubtedly is a historical relationship between the utopian vision of the counter-culture of thirty years ago and the Internet culture, with its radical dream of a space for free communication between fully sovereign individuals. For François Caron, the Internet marks the achievement of a technical synthesis comparable to that between the railway and the telegraph in the nineteenth century (Mattelart 2000). From that technical revolution mass culture arose, but now the electronic network has grown up precisely because it offers a "global response to aspirations born in protest against mass civilization" (Caron 2000: 31). Caron sees the Internet as the instrument of destruction for all situational sources of revenues; it makes a mockery of borders. Many consider it to have the potential to end the control of the mass media, an infinite ability to transform relations between humans. The Internet is the ultimate interactive instrument for dialogue between individuals connected together from all corners of the world.

Cybercafés and other sites offering access to this online dialogue, whether free of charge (installed in churches, non-governmental organizations, etc.) or paid (mobiles cabins mounted on vehicles), are starting to provide more opportunities, especially in poor countries, for people to gain occasional Internet access. Of course these new internauts, who are obliged to share infrequent,

short periods of access with others, are not like the Internet faithful. Nevertheless, their connection is all that is needed for information, especially personal accounts and local news, to leave the local area where most human lives unfold and to gain entry to global space. Always at the mercy of the intermediaries or moderators who administer its circulation, their information moves from the local to the global level, where it falls into its place in the cyberworld. Leaving behind its origins in the realm of persons, families, or communities, it becomes part of the raw material of global politics. The digitized story told by grandmother or grandfather suddenly bears witness in a form that is very accessible to many other people. This form can travel easily and instantly, so it becomes easily available as visible proof for someone else's contention, in someone else's argument. It serves as a sudden instantaneous "flash," a jolt of authenticity, validating a discourse constructed somewhere else, in pursuit of objectives other than its own.

More and more journalists get their supply of information from sites that apparently distribute it in real time. There, information circulates quickly and appears to be authentic because it was initially meant to be read by people close to the writers. The international information system draws on this reservoir of spectacular images, and then reaches back with them to the local level following similar, sometimes identical pathways. The texts or their fragments, often "cut and pasted" pieces of web pages, are detached from their larger context and take their place in the local political landscape. Thus local testimony can return to its sender within twenty-four hours, legitimated not only in its form but also in its content by its passage through the virtual space of the global village, a non-place (Augé 1992) of current modernity. The article by Eric Paquet presented in this issue deals with the ramifications of the Zapatista movement's presence on the Internet. It sheds light on the transformations undergone by a local discourse on its passage through global space.

Indirect access to the Internet, mediated by other individuals or organizations, is difficult to quantify, but its impact socially and politically is even less understood. In large part the influence on international (in reality mainly Western) public opinion of information circulating on the Internet derives from the supposed immediacy and spontaneity of testimony that apparently taps directly into the experience of other people, though the real situation may in fact differ radically from what is represented. On the one hand, depending on the causes they have chosen to support, there are fellow travelers and other interested parties running web sites which act as powerful

resonance chambers for locally generated information, but these sites can be highly selective. Counter-balancing this, since the number of press releases put online daily numbers in the billions, there is intense competition between sites to attract cybervisitors and to keep them interested. Ultimately, even if we look only at the dissemination of textual messages, one type of information on the Web, we see that it has its own rules, obeys its own aesthetic codes, as well as using Internet-specific codes (like hyperlinks) and the codes of the text itself (it remains predominately narrative) in order to reach its target, international public opinion or fractions within it. Thus to advance a cause, it is not enough that a web site's messages be carefully selected, their number limited, etc. Success also requires that the witness and the local moderator adapt the form and content of each message to the expected sensibilities of the information's target audience. Specifically, they must share with their audience the "ethics of the ephemeral" (Agacinski 2000), which regulate the type of communication they are undertaking. To make a visitor loyal to a site, to ensure his or her faithfulness, is becoming more important than simply selling access. "Goods exchanged over time become services" (Rifkin 2000), as in the cellular phone business, where customers are increasingly offered the machine or access time in exchange for a long-term subscription. Likewise, Internet access is becoming the motor for the commercial Web (Gensollen 1999). Should we view this as the growth of e-communities or of e-slavery?

Soon search engines equipped with software capable of summarizing a text in a few seconds (like the new software developed by Copernic) will impose new norms of access on the reader and thus new rules for the formation of e-communities. It may be necessary to insert into the text a sufficient number of words that the software will retain in composing its summary, so that the reader will accept the "reading contract" offered by the software. The need for such tools, despite their relative inefficiency, is being felt more and more because of the growth in volume of content available. Nevertheless, as Yves Lasfargue points out, "Networks permit us to share data, but certainly not knowledge" (2000: 25). Thus one should not be taken in, since, contrary to appearances, as Dominique Wolton (2000) notes, we are not necessarily any better informed just because more information is available. This mass of information, far from enlightening us, forces us to engage in research, analysis, selection, and prioritization, just as print journalists have always done, before we can actually get our hands on a new piece of information.

This brief overview of what is being written, spoken, or dreamt about the potential, present and future, of the Internet, especially the Web, brings us to

the realization that to a large extent this new space is laden with many of the age-old dreams and nightmares of humanity. We are almost tempted to conclude that there is nothing new under the sun! But, instead of giving in to total pessimism, we think it might be more useful to invite the reader to peruse this modest ethnographic dossier in hypertext mode, and then to pursue this quest to develop ethnographic descriptions of these technically new universes which, in spite of their novelty, are still very familiar. For the moment, cyberspace resembles an old Spanish inn, where the guests all depend for nourishment on their own provisions, i.e. their own databanks. When we get to the point where all these personal databanks can be effectively shared (but keep an eye out for Big Brother!), a true human community will be born. Is this any different from what is dreamt of and offered by all the great religions which strive to transcend the immediate community? Daniel Bell would answer perhaps yes, since, for him, ideology is dead. Reading the texts in our bibliography has made us sceptical. There is a vast ideological supermarket now emerging on the Web and, if only for this reason, we will always need points of reference for critical thinking, both on the Web and in the real world. For better or worse, we are "sentenced to Reality" in the words of the poet Yehuda Amichai.

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