Cyberculture:
Anthropological perspectives of the Internet

Elisenda Ardevol
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

Internet as a communicational technology has opened a wide interdisciplinary field of research related with social and cultural change, a main topic in anthropological theory. My aim here is to discuss the anthropological perspectives of culture implicit in different approaches to the analysis of Internet, specially those that refers to "cyberculture", because this term contains a key concept of anthropological theory, and also because I think it could be a good example for examining the use of anthropological theory for understanding media forms and practices, in this case, the Internet.

Cyber-culture?

What do we mean by "cyberculture"? When I decided to study Internet from an anthropological view, in the 90ties, the term "cyberculture" was on the arena. On one hand, people were using, and still use, the prefix "cyber" to refer to activities and social movements carried out through Internet, such as "cyberactivism", "cybercafe", "cyberart", etc. It seems that the word "cyberculture" pretends to be a new concept to put together all these activities. On the other hand, "cyberculture" was used by some scholars as a concept for understanding Internet impact on society, such as the proposal of Pierre Lévy. Finally, "cyberculture" referred to a new interdisciplinary field of research, defined by the cultural analysis of communication and information technologies. My question then, was how to understand the multiplicity of studies that take a cultural perspective in their approach.

What I want to present now is a kind of mental map that I made up. A map that reflects my personal itinerary as a researcher and that shows a typology that comes out of my own experience trying to make sense of Internet from a cultural point of view.

The map of Internet galaxy studies has four attractors: a) Cyberculture as a new cultural model based on Internet technology, b) as an Internet emergent culture, c) as the cultural products developed in the Internet, and d) as a media form. These four elements are drawn down by using four coordinates or main trends in conceptualizing culture: culture as an adaptive strategy, as a system whole, as a symbolic order and as a signifying practice. These different cultural perspectives also can be related with four principal focus of research in cyberculture studies: a) Internet as a technology, b) Internet as a new social context, c) Internet as a new creative and collaborative tool, c) Internet as a medium of communication (see table bellow). Let us see each constellation in more detail.

A new cultural model	An Internet culture/s
- Internet as a technology - Emergence of a new society - Social and cultural change Culture as an adaptive strategy	- Cyberspace as a new social context - Emergence of cultural forms - Virtual society, virtual communities Culture as a systemic whole
A cultural product	A media from
- Internet as a tool - Creative and collaborative production - Digital culture Culture as symbolic production	- Internet as communication medium - Consumption habits - media form that challenges mass media Culture as social practice

Cyberculture, A new cultural model

During the 90ties and the beginning of the XXI century, Cyberculture was at the core of social studies about Internet, most of them assuming that a new cultural model was emerging from Internet use that would change patterns of social relation, self identity and community. Some researchers also thought that Internet would bring a new way of political practice and economic exchange; thus, Internet was seen as a new technology that will affect all spheres of our life. Internet has been seen as a technology that will bring a new era or that it is the maximum exponent of a new cultural order called Informational and Knowledge Society, Network Society –Manuel Castells- or Cyberculture –Pierre Lévy, Arturo Escobar. People, societies and states that will not participate in that technological revolution will be excluded of progress. Therefore, digital divide is seen as the new social definitive division, more important than other unequal divisions such as rich and poor, developed or undeveloped countries. Going further, technoculture, the imbrications of technology in human interactions and in human body itself, related with cognitive sciences, biotechnologies and genetics science, will change our conceptions of nature as opposed to culture, creating a new *anthropos* or posthuman cyborg –Dona Haraway.

David Hakken work *Cyborgs @ Cyberspace, An Ethnographer looks to the Future is* a useful contrasting point here, because he remembers us that these kind of theorizations need an empirical background and are strongly related with evolutionist and neo-evolutionist theories in anthropology, and that there is an important field in anthropological work about technology innovation and culture change, such as Leslie White thesis, or recently, the social construction of technology theories of Bruno Latour and Wiebe Bijker, among others.

Cyberculture, A culture born in the Internet

Another group of studies about Internet cultural analysis focuses on the social interaction that takes place in online social contexts such as forums, newsgroups and chats. A great deal of such Internet studies recalls anthropological theories and concepts to explain the emergence of community in that kind of online settings. The important

issue here is not the technology itself, but the social interaction that occurs in cyberspace. David Porter, for example, in his introduction to *Internet Culture,* points out that communication through Internet can be understood from the perspective of culture since in virtual spaces one can found shared systems of believes, values and norms, specific ways of doing, a common understanding of symbols as emoticons, a netiquette and other signs that can perform a collective sense of belonging and create community. We can find here theoretical background linked to a holistic perspective of culture, such as the structural-functionalist approach, in the sense that a social group can be studied in isolation, as a complete cultural system. Margaret Mead and Culture and personality model was used to some extend to develop ethnographic oriented studies to describe virtual communities as if they were a new "tribe". In fact, Elisabeth Reid - 1994- ethnography takes Geertz perspective to show how people involved in MUDs develops specific cultural forms as they create places, objects, subjects and actions, laws and social order, but over all, from these interactions emerge a sense of community and belonging of similar characteristics of offline social life.

The counter part of these positions, most of which view Internet cultures as new cultural forms that elude offline social and cultural categories, allowing more democratic and collaborative models of social interaction in metaphysic communities, was the ethnographic work of Daniel Miller and Don Slater, which situated online practices in relation with people daily life in a concrete cultural context. People construct online collective identities, but these online interactions could not be understood only in terms of a specific disembodied "virtual" culture. In fact, they said, these online groups only make sense in relation to offline social, political and cultural contexts. Breaking with the online/offline, real/virtual dichotomies was very useful to begin to understand online interaction as a part of daily life activities, as a social practice.

Cyberculture, A cultural product

Cyberculture can also be understood as the cultural production that use Internet and hypermedia tools to develop creative works of art, literature, music, etc. Culture is then associated with symbolic production, and also related, to much extend, with the western folk concept of culture as opposed to illiteracy, and meaning fine arts production. Cultural Studies have opened the "high" cultural production to popular culture, implying mass media production and consumption, but also current people crafts and appropriations of fine arts and media cultural products. These turn in literary and media studies also brought a new perspective of analysis from formal and semiotic studies to the study of the social meaning of cultural representations in concrete social and historical contexts, an approach that finds useful some anthropological theories about culture, especially those related with symbolic practices, such as religion and myth. So, cyberculture is seen as the sum of cultural products developed and exchanged through Internet, and the issues of research are, then, linked to the characteristics of these types of cultural production, distribution, regulation and consumption –following Hall and du Gay model-, stressing their collaborative and interactive aspects, and how people appropriated Internet technologies to express and to represent them selves.

Internet, a media form

The next step is, of course, to understand Internet as a media form. Internet can be seen as a media form in as much it is a communication technology that somehow develop and put together former communicative practices. Internet as a media form has also a relation with new modes of consumption. Internet, associated with other informational technologies, represents today a potential challenge to mass media and entertainment industries. Its technical feature developed since now, may not represent a serious challenge to mass media communication by itself, but it breaks the established circle of production, distribution and consumption regulated and dominated by big corporations, while others born for taking Internet advantages are arising. David Gaullnet reader, *Web Studies, Rewiring media for the digital age,* is an example of the kind of studies that relate intertextual media practices with topics such identity, representation, gender, ethnicity, political activism and new forms of sociality.

For closing

Anthropological tradition in understanding human action and being through the concept of culture has proved to be implicitly used in almost all approaches to cyberculture, and if not, it has been useful to critically analyse such views and outputs.

When trying to use anthropological theory to understand media forms and practices, what we are doing is trying to understand human action from a wider anthropological perspective. We look back searching in the anthropological tradition, for some theoretical tools, but we also look further, trying to explain our data by developing new concepts and theoretical frames.

Christine Hine in her book *Virtual Ethnography* makes a distinction between cultural oriented studies about Internet use. On one hand, the approaches centred in the analysis of culture, on the other, these that cope with a cultural analysis of technology use. The firsts, take culture as an integrated whole that can be described from an observer point of view. The seconds, take an insider perspective, in the sense that any cultural description must be necessarily partial and situated, following the links of the network that conform our field of study, being the researcher part of the weave. Following this distinction, cyberculture as a new cultural model and the studies about culture formations in the Internet will fit the first option, while, Cyberculture as a cultural product of Internet use and as a media practice will follow a cultural analysis approach.

Some scholars claim the necessity of a new anthropological speciality such as a Cyberanthropology –see an explanation of its contents defined by Budka-, to deal with the new field of study of Cyberculture, which needs its own theoretical frame and methodology development. An example is the extension of the term "virtual ethnography", meaning the adaptation of ethnography fieldwork to online social and cultural meaningful contexts. Even though I recognise the utility of adapting methods and concepts to new settings, I think that the term "cyberculture" could reified a concept and could lead to an objectivation of cyberculture as a social phenomena or a cultural entity that exists independently of our theoretical gaze.

Cyberculture is a theoretical concept developed in the 90ties that allowed researchers to think Internet form a culture oriented position, and to draw a field of study for getting together scholars that, coming form different disciplines, were impelled to search for the social and cultural aspects of Internet use. But, nowadays it seems to be disappearing as a key concept, and may be it is time to depart from it, as it solidifies Internet studies apart from other media forms and practices. I let the discussion open. Thanks for your attention.

Bibliography cited

Bijker, W.E. (1995). *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs, Toward a Theory of Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press.

Budka, Ph. and M. Kremser. 2004. 'CyberAnthropology - Anthropology of CyberCulture', in S. Khittel, B. Plankensteiner and M. Six-Hohenbalken (eds.), *Contemporary issues in socio-cultural anthropology. Perspectives and research activities from Austria*, 213-226. Vienna: Loecker. http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/bibliographies.htm.

Castells, Manuel. (1997) *La era de la información*, 3. vol. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

Castells, Manuel. (2002) *La galàxia Internet*, Barcelona:Rosa dels Vents.

Escobar, Arturo. (2000) "Welcome to Cyberia, notes on the Anthropology of Ciberculture", en *The Cybercultures Reader*, Bell, David, Kennedy, Barbara, eds. NY & London: Routledge.

Gauntlett, David (2000) *Web Studies, Rewiring media for the digital age*, London: Arnold.

Geertz, Clifford, (1987) *La interpretación de las culturas*, Barcelona: Gedisa

Hakken, David. (1999) *Cyborgs @ Cyberspace, An Ethnographer looks to the Future*, New York, London: Routledge.

Hall, Stuart. (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage Publications.

Hine, Christine. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*, London: Sage Publication

Latour, B. (2001). La esperanza de Pandora, Ensayos sobre la realidad de los estudios de la ciencia. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Lévy, P. (1997*) La cibercultura, el segon diluvi?* Barcelona: Edicions UOC-Proa

Mead, Margaret, ed. (2000) *The Study of Culture at a Distance*, NY & Oxford: Berghahn

Miller, Daniel & Slater, Don. (2000) *The Internet, An Ethnographic Approach*, Oxford: Berg.

Porter, David, ed. (1996) *Internet Culture*, NY & London: Routledge.

Reid, E.M. (1994) *Cultural formations in text-based virtual realities*. M. A. Thesis, University of Melbourne. Available: http://www.ee.mu.oz.au/papers/emr/work.html

White, Leslie A. (1982) *La ciencia de la cultura*, Barcelona: Paidos

The Anthropology of Cybercultures. Course Home. Syllabus. Â We'll examine social histories of automata and automation; the trope of the 'cyber' and its origins in the emergence of cybernetics during the last century; cybergeographies and politics; robots, agents and humanlike machines; bioinformatics and artificial life; online sociality and the cyborg imaginary; ubiquitous and mobile computing; ethnographies of research and development; and geeks, gamers and hacktivists. We'll close by considering the implications for all of these topics of emerging reconceptualizations of sociomaterial relations, informed by feminist science and t Internet and cyberculture enthusiasts come from all shades of political persuasion. Conservatives applaud the Internet's subversion of state functions such as taxation and regulatory interference with the free activity of commercial interests. Liberals applaud the Internet's capacities to network disenfranchised groups and coordinate efforts toward greater social equality. Â Social conservatives railed against the excessive openness of the Internet and its attendant capacity to spread materials and ideas they find indecent or morally or socially unacceptable, while left-leaning advocates warned against the excessive commercialization of the Internet and its tendency to transform social needs and relationships into personalized consumer needs, fracturing social solidarity. The anthropology of cyberculture is then not an inherently new discipline, but rather, the necessary application of traditional ethnographic research to a modern society that is becoming â€œpost-organicâ€, with complex and drastic changes in the ways life, labour and language are producted. Anthropology in Information Technology. Â With modern technologies and the Internet, lifeworldly experiences are subject to an entirely new order of production of reality which calls for the re-theorisation of concepts like time, space and complexity.