

QUESTIONING THE OBVIOUS? ETHICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF CMC AND ICTS (CHARLES ESS, DRURY UNIV.)

[Note: Portions of this text will appear in my article, “Can the Local Reshape the Global? Ethical Imperatives for Humane Intercultural Communication Online,” in J. Frühbauer, R. Capurro and T. Hausmanninger (Eds.), *Localizing the Internet. Ethical Aspects in an Intercultural Perspective.*]

As late as 1998, U.S. citizens constituted the significant majority of Internet users (84%: GVU 1998). Given this demographic dominance, it is not surprising that U.S.-specific visions also dominated both popular discourse and English-language scholarship regarding computer-mediated communication (CMC). Such dominance, of course, goes hand-in-hand with ethnocentrism – and so it is perhaps not surprising that the rapid diffusion of CMC technologies among diverse cultures and settings issued in a range of conflicts, from the minor to the catastrophic, that collectively began to demonstrate two central points. One, far from serving as value-free or morally-neutral tools, CMC technologies themselves appear to embed and foster the cultural values and communicative preferences of their Western designers. As a first example: South Africa has attempted to establish Learning Centres intended to empower indigenous peoples by helping them take advantage of the multiple potentials and capacities of ICTs. A series of observers have noted, however, that these Centres repeatedly fail – in part, because of basic cultural conflicts. Briefly, the Centres reflect their designer’s Western emphasis on individual and silent learning – in contrast with indigenous preferences for learning in collaborative and often noisy, performative ways (Postma 2001). This conflict is also captured in Edward T. Hall’s distinction between high and low context cultures (1976). In this schema, contemporary societies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Germanic countries show a preference for literate (i.e., textual), high content (but low context) information transfer – while societies such as Arabic cultures, indigenous peoples, and many Asian cultures prefer instead more oral, low content (but high context) modes of communication. As the CMC technologies and social context of the Learning Centres favors the cultural values and communicative preferences of their Western designers – these values and preferences clash with those of the indigenous peoples the Centres are intended to serve, with almost total failure as a result (see Snyman and Hulbert 2004; cf. Duncker 2002). Similarly, Western Group Support Systems (GSS) that favor anonymity as a feature intended to encourage open and direct communication proved disastrous in the Confucian cultures of South Asia, as this indeed succeeded in encouraging subordinates to make comments that were culturally interpreted – and condemned – as attacks on one’s “face” (Abdat and Pervan 2000). These and multiple other examples make clear that CMC technologies carry and further a specific set of cultural values and communicative preferences - ones that, far from being universally shared, are indeed limited to specific cultural domains.

Secondly, because these technologies thus clearly embed and foster specific cultural values and communicative preferences - the initial enthusiasm for these technologies inadvertently but powerfully only aids and abets a form of “computer-mediated colonization” that threatens to override diverse cultural values and communicative preferences with those defining the dominant economic and political powers of the West.

These conflicts thus provide the initial settings and foundations for specific ethical imperatives regarding the design, implementation, and use of these technologies, if these are to realize whatever potential they have for contributing to genuinely egalitarian - or better, I would suggest, humane - cross-cultural communication and just commerce. That is, these conflicts not only make clear how ethnocentrically assuming the universal validity of one's own cultural values and communicative preferences indeed contributes to a computer-mediated colonization, one that threatens to override and replace often radically different values and preferences: at the same time, however, such conflicts help uncover and make explicit the cultural values and communicative preferences of both the "cultures of origin" of CMC and a range of cultures and peoples around the globe. By helping us better articulate these contrasting values and preferences, these conflicts can help us develop alternatives to ethnocentric approaches to design and implementation - what I characterize as "culturally-aware" approaches that seek to avoid ethnocentrism and colonization. So, as a first example, Japanese engineers, in the face of the cultural conflicts they encountered in Western-designed CSCW systems, developed their own high-bandwidth video systems that succeeded in conveying the critical details of high context/low content communication, including body distance, gesture, and gaze (Heaton 2001). More recently, when the Malaysian government sought to introduce Internet access to the Kelabit, a highland people on the island of Borneo, a research team - including an anthropologist originally from the Kelabit community - first developed a base-line socio-economic profile of the community in order to establish the context and content of Internet use most suited to the extant community culture and communication preferences (Harris et al, 2001). This profile - and the subsequent success of the project - demonstrate the importance of structuring ICT content and use to meet the more collaborative and oral orientations of the community - i.e., in sharp contrast with the failure to do so that we have seen documented in South Africa.¹

These and numerous additional examples help bring to the foreground the ethical issues at work here. Very simply, in order to avoid and overcome computer-mediated colonization, such culturally-aware approaches to design and use of CMC technologies are ethically imperative. We can see this in terms of what ethicists refer to as deontological and utilitarian approaches. To begin with, as such design overcomes "computer-mediated colonization" and seeks instead to preserve and foster cultural values and communicative preferences central to distinctive individual and cultural identities - culturally-aware design thereby works to ensure individual and group rights (deontological claims) to autonomy and cultural integrity as specifically encoded, for example, in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001). Within the European Union, these rights are further articulated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000) and in the principle of subsidiarity, the "third pillar" of the European Union, as emphasizing the fundamental value of national identities and cultures.

From a utilitarian perspective, moreover, it is clear that violence in human history is often a reaction against various forms of colonization and imperialism. Insofar as we seek to minimize such violence, if only for self-interested and prudential reasons, we must then seek to overcome the colonization, in all of its forms, that fuels this violence. Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, while the more overt and obvious forms of

colonization may have ended in the 20th century – the more subtle forms of such colonization, including “computer-mediated colonization,” are among the most important to understand and overcome: precisely because computer-mediated communication is relatively subtle, it is easy to ignore – and thus all the more likely to continue to inflict otherwise avoidable damage. ii

(It can also be observed that the frameworks of information ethics and computer ethics also provide grounds for condemning such colonization – first of all, as such use of CMC technologies conflicts with a primary commitment in these fields to develop technologies so that they contribute to human flourishing: see Ess (2004b) for a fuller discussion.)

In addition to developing frameworks and inducements for culturally-aware design – avoiding and overcoming computer-mediated colonization would be further helped by specific sorts of education that help persons learn to use CMC technologies in ways that recognize how these technologies may indeed privilege the cultural values and communicative preferences of only some cultures, at the expense of others. I have argued more fully elsewhere that such an education coheres with both Western models of humanistic education (including Aristotle and the Renaissance) and a primary Eastern framework, that of Confucian ethics (Ess 2004a). My suggestion is that such an education, as it entails these important resonances between Western and Eastern thought, thus holds out the possibility of serving as a genuinely global (in part, because pluralistic) education - i.e., precisely the education, ethics, and communication skills required for using a global communication medium in ways that avoid colonization and ethnocentrism, and instead recognize and foster rights to cultural and communicative diversity.

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Charles Ess est un professeur de philosophie et religion de l'Université Drury (<http://www.drury.edu/ess/>), il est membre d'un important réseau sur l'éthique de l'information qui a organisé son dernier congrès (<http://icie.zkm.de/congress2004>) sur le thème "Localizing the Internet: Ethical Issues in Intercultural Perspective" et où il a présenté: "Can the Local Reshape the Global? Ethical Imperatives for Humane Intercultural Communication Online - Views from the Centers and the Margins.". Il coordonne la conférence CATAC (Cultural Attitude Towards Technology and Communication- <http://www.it.murdoch.edu.au/catac/>) qui se réunit tous les deux ans depuis 1998.

ⁱ Similar comments can be made regarding gender and gender differences vis-à-vis ICTs as these function within a given culture. That is, significant differences can be observed in how women and men take up ICTs – especially as ICTs are strongly associated with male communication preferences (e.g., Herring 1996, 1999). The literature on women and computing is too extensive to review fairly here: but it must be noted that women may likewise resist and redesign ICT contexts and uses that clash with their preferred

communication styles – in part, as Barbara Crump argues, because ICTs themselves are flexible enough to allow for such redesign (2004).

ⁱⁱ Indeed, despite the now extensive body of evidence documenting both culturally-rooted failures and successes in the design and implementation of CMC technologies, attention to the role of culture among design professionals remains very limited. For example, within the field of Human-Computer Interface (HCI) design, by 2004 Kamppuri and Tukiainen documented that virtually no HCI literature paid explicit attention to “culture” – and when “culture” was used, it’s meaning was limited to a culturally conservative notion of culture as something single, fixed, static, and hermetically sealed off from other cultures: but of course, whatever else “culture” may be – it is multiple (i.e., we are all members of multiple cultures and subcultures), dynamic, continuously developing, and, with rare exceptions, always hybridizing as the members of one culture interact and exchange with members of other cultures (Kamppuri and Tukiainen 2004).