

Mainstream Rebels: Informalization and Regulation in a Virtual World

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the relation between informalization and regulation with respect to work related social interaction on the Internet. At focus are the dynamics and tensions between informal and standardized codes of conduct. We question the idea that virtual, mediated, communication differs substantially from 'real', face-to-face communication. One way to approach this tension between informality and standardization is to further investigate the relation between the virtualities achieved through electronic means, and the "real life" situation of those people creating these virtual worlds. These investigations have been made through fieldwork at Apple computer in Sweden, California, US, and France, where online and offline communication among professional software engineers and other Apple employees was studied. To grasp how computer professionals communicate while forming the basic structures of the Internet, participant observation has been made at meetings arranged by organizations involved in the process of defining and organizing the Internet, such as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the Internet Society (ISOC) and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

KEYWORDS: Cyberculture, Electronic Spatiality, Electronic Temporality, Virtual Reality, Virtual Worlds, Regulation, Standardization, Informalization

INTRODUCTION: AN OUTLAW IN CYBERSPACE

Becoming an outlaw in cyberspace is easy. All you have to do is try to adhere to established norms for social communication. And be ignorant.

What the growth of technology mediated communication does, is to problematize social relations, the ways in which these are to be established and maintained, and challenged, for that matter. It makes us reflect on what constitutes a relation as well as what constitutes a community (cf [2]). It places the norms and rules by which interaction in such communities are to be governed into the limelight. The fact that technology-mediated communication is often global or transnational, emphasizes the problem of taking for granted a

sharedness of rules and norms for interaction. As a newcomer on the Net, one is treading unsafe terrain.

This paper problematizes the relation between informalization and regulation with respect to work related social interaction on the Internet. The discourse of information technology raises hopes of transcending national, class, and gender differences, and of empowering individuals and groups. It is said to facilitate creative network constellations and formation of organizational communities of belonging in and across organizational, national or other boundaries. There are strong connotations of democratic ideals and egalitarianism. On the other hand, we argue, the networked world is also a highly regulated environment. There are sets of preferred values, social and professional codes of conduct that shape and restrain communication. Hence, social interaction on the Internet has a double edge to it. While it opens up possibilities for swift, informal, and potentially empowering communication, it also entails a specific kind of global structuration of ideas and practices.

We question the idea that virtual, mediated, communication differs substantially from 'real', face-to-face communication. We argue that virtual and real communicative patterns interpenetrate each other and that virtual communication to a large extent is modelled upon face-to-face communication. Instead of building upon Manuel Castells's [6] division of the real and the virtual as separate units and a 'culture of real virtuality', we prefer to regard the two as integrated. Virtuality is not a 'new reality' but part of everyday life (see also [15]). Virtuality is social, and should be thought of in terms of 'social virtuality'. Following Miller and Slater (Miller and Slater, 2000:6-8) we suggest that on-line and off-line worlds penetrate each other deeply and in complex ways. Whether people are writing online or offline, there are norms, codes of conduct, and rules that shape the way people communicate. The distinction between the 'real' and the 'virtual' is thus misleading to the extent that it misses the degree to which communication on the Internet is modelled upon and embedded in communication off-line. In spite of the enchanting rhetoric of informalization in on-line communication, off-line rules tend shape communication in cyberspace.

The paper builds on Garsten and Lerdell's research into the practices of online interaction. It draws on Garsten's earlier fieldwork at Apple computer in Sweden, California, the USA, and France, where on-line and off-line communication among professional software engineers and other Apple employees was studied (see [10, 11]). This involved some degree of participant observation on the Net, as it were, being involved in and observing discussions mediated through information technology. This virtual fieldwork by no means exhausted or dominated everyday communication. Face-to-face communication and communication mediated by other kinds of technologies was equally intense, providing a broad spectrum of social interaction. The paper also draws on Lerdell's research on professionals in organizations and networks engaged in forming the basic structures of the Internet. As part of his research, Lerdell made participant observation at a meeting of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), an organisation that coordinates Internet standardising procedures. During this meeting a number of interviews with attendees were conducted. Focus was set on how the participants in the IETF activities communicate with each other as more or less spatially distant colleagues. Much of the standardising work takes place electronically through various mailing lists, which is why studying electronic communication was an important methodological approach. We also draw upon ongoing debates about libertarianism and related issues; amongst others media debates carried out in Wired Magazine.

BEYOND THE CONVENTIONAL: THE TYRANNY OF INFORMALITY

When entering into discussions about the different aspects of Internet communication we are operating in what Schneider [17] calls 'an enchanted milieu', characterized by libertarian ideals, a great portion of individualism and strong anti-regulation sentiments. The Internet is in this sense an example of what has been labelled 'technologies of freedom' (see [14]). The rhetoric around the Internet invokes notions of a different, alternative kind of communication supposedly free from many of the normative constraints of face-to-face encounters. The enchanting power of Internet communication lies in the rhetoric of freedom, resisting domestication and escaping regulation.

The enchanted domain of the Internet, dominated as it has been by techno libertarian ideals, invites the idea that formal behaviour can be more relaxed and external constraints released. This may be described as a form of 'informalization' [14]. The process of informalization has been captured in Elias notion of the civilizing process, which describes changes in the relation between external social constraints and individual self-constraints [8]. Following an increased division of labour, the growth of individualism, the de-conventionalization of organized practices, the effects of new media communication and the pluralization of social life in general, 'modern' societies generally puts less pressure on people to

conform to the formalities of behaviour, it has been argued [19]. By the same token, we are left with higher levels of structural insecurity as we have to work out for ourselves a variety of strategies for everyday interaction. Nowadays, the concept of informality is most frequently used in relation to forms of interaction on the Internet and in relation to forms of social life in communist and post communist societies [14].

In Internet communication, with people being to a greater extent decontextualized from formal office roles and with formal codes of behaviour no longer corresponding to the actual relationships, informality emerges as the main code of behaviour. There has been, and still is, a fashion for informality, whereby it is openly prescribed, sometimes leading to 'the tyranny of informality' where 'being informal' is the order of the day (cf [14]). This was the case at Apple, where the stilted corporate code of IBM and others was explicitly rejected and a more informal, relaxed code of behaviour was encouraged. Being a Net wiz was part of what it took to be a 'real Apple'. Informality also has its implicit and taken-for-granted rules.

It is often argued that the liberation of exchange of communication from the constraints of time and space provides participants with an experience of informal and intimate interaction. Enthusiasts see the promise of a digital Utopia in an open, global forum to which anybody can contribute ideas and information in an informal way, and where democratic and virtual communities can form. The pioneering first generation of Net users, with their cyber-hippie romanticism, university campus culture, and counter-cultural impulses, left behind them for the next generation of users the informality and self-directedness of communication, and the idea that each individual has her own voice and expects an individualized answer [6]. Contributing to the atmosphere of informality is the fact that the Internet can be used for just about anything; for printing, publishing, marketing, debating, entertainment, education, exchange information and so on. Within Usenet one can join huge numbers of newsgroups or post a message at computer bulletin-board systems, participate in hosted conferences or play interactive computer games, send electronic mail or have an intimate chat within an Internet Chat zone. In Misztal's [14] words:

Although the Net's openness, the informality and self-directedness of this form of communication as well as its enormous complexity and formlessness, together with its continuous evolution, make it difficult to evaluate the character of the Internet and the related networks that make up the greater Net, we have enough evidence to suggest that it can offer some new opportunities for more flexible, interactive, decentralized and democratic modes of communication.

Electronic communication has been claimed by many to differ from face-to-face encounters in a number of

respects. For example, it has been described as less civil and more conflictual, less conventional, more risky, and more democratic [14, 18]. Not only does electronic mail broadcast organizational gossip or jokes, but also spreads organizational information, which may increase employees' commitment to corporate goals. Managers may also feel threatened by the flow of information, its lack of respect for hierarchies, and their lack of control over its content [20]. The ease with which recipients may be added to a message, messages can be distributed to large crowds through distribution lists, and resent across organizations makes it rather unpredictable and difficult to control. Electronic communication is charged with many of the fears and hopes of alternative and complementary forms of communication. It takes place before, after, and in-between face-to-face encounters.

TECHNO LIBERTARIANISM: THE RHETORIC OF FREEDOM

The world of high-tech and electronic communication brings to mind rationality, standardization and an engineered sterile kind of modernity. It is, however, a world in which flesh, blood and vivid ideas, have given places. In the words of Forsook [4], 'High-tech, like any human artefact is not culturally tasteless, odorless, colorless. It contains attitude, mind-set, philosophy; and with geeks, the attitude, mind-set, and philosophy is libertarianism, in many-blossomed efflorescence.' Libertarianism is often claimed to be the ideology of cyberspace [12], and others claim that libertarianism makes up the underlying value system of most cyberpunks. In Borsook's words; 'Libertarianism is a computer-culture badge of belonging, and libertarians are the most vocal political thinkers and talkers in high tech' [4].

The term libertarianism is very vague in itself. It is often understood as a set of political and philosophical ideas, where freedom for the individual is at the centre of attention and where coercion from others – may it be other individuals or the state – should not interfere with the individual's own rights. But the term is ambiguous, and the differences between libertarianism, liberalism and neo-liberalism are hard to define. One must therefore be careful not to use the term 'libertarianism' too loosely to describe more or less unorganised, erratic or anarchic behaviour of individuals. Wired, being one of the most influential magazines reporting on various aspects of the Internet, has been described as very libertarian in character [1] 'Wired, Agre argues, is made up of 'narratives of individualism, rational progress, technological determinism, and the autonomous development of the market' [1]. As is noted by a Wired columnist, critics often translate libertarianism into 'anarchism, egoism, and plain selfishness and greed' [13].

Individualism is a central tenet of libertarianism. The freedom of the individual is central in discussions about how the Internet and the world at large ought to be organized. Self-government of individuals is advocated,

as opposed to 'others-government' where other actors regulate the behaviour of the individual. In the Libertarian FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), the following is said about self-government:

Libertarians want a win-win world of peace and plenty. And we believe that the only way to get it is through self-government... NOT others-government [9].

Anti-regulation is another strong notion in libertarianism. Numerous are examples of high-voiced more or less self-appointed advocates representing the 'Internet community', claiming that the way to govern the Internet is for the authorities to stay out of the Net. One well-known example is the opposition that was organised by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, among others, against a proposed bill criminalizing 'indecent' speech on the Internet, the Communication Decency Act (CDA). Thus, in the libertarian view, the way to 'govern' the Internet is through self-government. There is almost a moralistic character to the idea, formulating what to do and what not to do, but also how to do it.

It should be noted here that in spite of the relative dominance of the libertarian and related technology friendly strands of thought, there are also other, more critical views. One such collection of thoughts is the neo-Luddite spectrum. Not yet an organized movement, the neo-Luddite approach contains multitudes of those who have in common an awakening from the technophilic dream and resistance to one aspect or other of the industrial monoculture [16]. Drawing upon the history of often active and violent Luddite resistance to the introduction of large-scale machines into cotton trade in late 18th century Britain, neo-Luddites argue that the technologies created and disseminated by modern western societies of today are out of control and threaten the fabric of social life. The Luddites were the first victims of the Industrial revolution and the first to resist its impact. Two hundred years later, neo-Luddites resist the political agendas of late industrialization and the enslaving impact of computing technology on social and individual life. These rebels comprise environmentalists, religious movements, anti-globalization movements, and a range of other groupings, while in no way exhausting them. Computers are polluting in their manufacture, the neo-Luddites argue; they increase the reach and power of transnational corporations, widen the gap between the wired-up rich and the computer-illiterate poor. The neo-Luddites argue against a worldview that sees rationality as the key to human potential and technological development as the key to social progress. According to the neo-Luddites, the political nature of technology should be recognized and technologies regulated (1996: Chapter 9).

Despite alternative views such as those represented by the Neo-Luddites, technolibertarianism and its rhetoric of freedom has shaped communication on the Internet to a significant degree. Conversely, the rise of the Net was

integral to the rise of technolibertarianism. It gave formerly isolated libertarians a place to find each other. As Borsook [4] has it, 'On the Net they found solidarity and a better land: They were not alone'.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS: SOCIALLY EMBEDDED VIRTUALITY (OR, WHAT'S SO INFORMAL, ANYWAY?)

In this paper, we have aimed at problematizing the relation between informalization and regulation with respect to work related social interaction on the Internet. We have suggested that while the discourse of information technology promises freedom from normative constraints of face-to-face interaction, the networked world is also a highly regulated environment. There are sets of preferred values, social and professional codes of conduct, which shape and restrain communication. Hence, while social interaction on the Internet opens up possibilities for swift, informal, and potentially empowering communication, it also entails a specific kind of global structuration of ideas and practices. We may expect more explicit forms of regulation and standardization of conduct of to merge with increased organizational complexity and globalization [5].

The reaction that Christina encountered when trying to communicate on the Intranet at Apple Computer clearly signalled the presence of rules and norms of communication. She was urged to be less formal, less stilted, yet to adhere to certain normative expectations she did not yet know. Furthermore, this remark was presented in a very high voice. At a meeting of a standardisation body that was drawing up the basic structures for the Internet, David saw that the more formal attendees – such as representatives from other parts of the world than North America – were more or less neglected since they were too formal, too business like and too conservative in their manners. Also, less experienced and more formal participants were told many times over by more established attendees to read the appropriate instructions and behave accordingly.

These two experiences highlight an interesting paradox on and around the Internet. Not only is it possible to see the often-claimed and fought for informality as indeed very formal in character, if you do not know what is considered 'informal' in this domain. Even more conspicuous is the high number of self-appointed monitors, or police officers, that you meet when trying to communicate on the Internet as such, not to mention when you get yourself involved in trying to influence – or merely just discuss – the rules of the Net:

Although much hyperbole maintains that everyone in cyberspace is equal, a study of online community reveals that this is not the case. The traditional form of regulation in cyberspace has been through an informal set of customary laws. Online transactions have been policed through the consensual actions of users accessing and interacting in cyberspace [7].

It is clear that these monitors, or police forces, are not appointed by anyone and that they are not acting on a mission from anyone other than themselves and their equals. The question that comes into mind is why so many 'netizens' feel they have the right to police over others? And who are these people requesting others to behave according to their rules?

The particular ways in which communication on the Internet is regulated speaks to the cultural, social, financial and political bias of the Internet. Communication patterns on the Net do not only reflect a particularly libertarian ideology, but a Western, middle-class way of life, including some and excluding others:

Contrary to what academics, themselves members of the new global elite, tend to believe, the Internet and Web are not for anyone and unlikely ever to become open to universal use. Even those who get access are allowed to make their choices within the frame set by the suppliers, who invite them 'to spend time and money choosing between and in the numerous packages they offer [3].

According to Wellman et al [20], the average user of the Net is 'largely politically conservative, white man, often single, English-speaking, affluent, residing in North America, professional, manager or student'. Although trends suggest an increasing participation of women, non-English speakers and people of lower socio-economic status, the dominance of a certain socio-economic and political category has had a great impact on netiquette rules. The do's and don'ts of cyberspace are to a large extent set up by the very same category that dominates communication on the Net. The wired neighbourhood or 'the third place', as the Internet is sometimes called, is a neighbourhood with particular cultural preferences, norms, and expectations. What at first hand looks quite informal, sub-cultural and to some extent even rebellious, appears at closer scrutiny much more mainstream.

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