

People and the Internet

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In the Information Society we must not forget that people matter. How people present themselves, react to the new stimuli of cyberspace and converse with those from other cultures will have a dramatic effect. The issues of identity, culture and conversation illustrate this point.

Identity. There has been much speculation that people can play with their identities on the Internet and present different electronic persona. This might be possible in the short term but such mimicry is likely to be spotted in the long term as identity is more than simply learning and applying rules, it is about learning within a context and reacting intuitively to different situations as they arise. In the Information Society, the impact of physical characteristics of those communicating has been minimised. This is potentially beneficial as removing the visual cues about gender, age, ethnicity and social status allow different lines of communication to open up that might have been avoided in the physical world.

Culture. The Information Society crosses traditional boundaries and as such comprises individuals from many different cultures. This cultural variability means that the expectations of individual cybercitizens can differ considerably. There are two important dimensions to consider regarding this variability. The first dimension is the continuum from individualism to collectivism. Individualism emphasises self interest and promotes the self-realisation of talent and potential. Its demands are universal. Collectivism emphasises pursuit of common interests and belonging to a set of hierarchical groups where, for example, the family group might be placed above the job group. The demands on group members are different to those on non group members. The second dimension concerns cultural differences in communication. In low context communication the majority of the information resides in the message itself whilst in high context communication is implicit. It has been suggested that the USA utilises low context communication whilst Japan uses high context. Given such cultural variability it is clear that there are great difficulties in achieving an Internet that is acceptable to all.

Conversation. There is concern by psychologists that computers are having a detrimental effect on society in that the "social glue" of casual conversation is being eroded. The increasing use of email at work, the elimination of bank tellers and shop assistants, and the use of telephones and laptops to telecommute from the home illustrate how the opportunity for small talk is decreasing. This phenomena is thought to be one reason why shyness is increasing in the population. There is of course a counter argument in that by utilising computer based communication tools such as the Internet

those who are naturally shy become more outgoing since the psychological pressure of face to face contact is removed.

One Planet, One Net - Principles for the Internet Era. In the USA, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) has been addressing how the Internet might be administered to ensure that it evolves for the benefit of all humanity. CPSR recognises that the Internet comprises the collective knowledge and experience of countless communities, each with its own modes of interaction, languages of discourse, and forms of cultural expression. This has led to a proposal for the adoption of seven principles that must be understood and respected if the Internet is to evolve in an acceptable manner. The principles are as follows (extracts from the original CPSR document):

1. The Net links us all together.

The nature of people and their use of networking technology provides a strong natural drive towards universal interconnection.

2. The Net must be open and available to all.

The Net should be available to all who wish to use it, regardless of economic, social, political, linguistic, or cultural differences or abilities.

3. Net users have the right to communicate.

Every use of the Net is inherently an exercise of freedom of speech, to be restricted only at great peril to human liberty. The right to communicate includes the right to participate in communication through interacting, organising, petitioning, mobilising, assembling, collaborating, buying and selling, sharing, and publishing.

4. Net users have the right to privacy.

Without assurances of appropriate privacy, users of the Net will not communicate and participate in a meaningful manner.

5. People are the Net's stewards, not its owners.

Those who want to reap the benefits of the shared global Net are obliged to respect the rights of others who may wish to use the Net in different ways. We must work to preserve the free and open nature of the current Internet as a fragile resource that

must be enriched and passed on to our children. Just as the ecosystem in which we live cannot be owned, the Net itself is not owned by anyone.

6. Administration of the Net should be open and inclusive.

The Net should be administered in an open, inclusive, and democratic manner for the betterment of humanity. The needs of all who are affected by the Internet - including current users, future users, and those who are unable to or choose not to be users - must be considered when making technical, social, political, and economic decisions regarding the operations of the Internet.

7. The Net should reflect human diversity, not homogenise it.

The Net has the potential to be as varied and multi-cultural as life itself. It can facilitate dialogue between communities and individuals that might previously not have encountered each. In order to preserve the vitality that comes with a diversity of viewpoints, we should work toward helping the whole world participate as equals.

Clearly there will be different suggestions as to how the Internet should evolve. An Information Society that empowers the disabled and less fortunate members of society and sustains equality of opportunity regardless of race, colour or creed is achievable. The policy makers, developers and service providers of the Information Society have the wherewithal to make this happen but they must have the commitment as well else disaster beckons.

A full copy of CPSR's proposals can be found at
(<http://www.cpsr.org/onenet/index.html>) CPSR's contact is Marsha Woodbury,
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Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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