
COURSE: Youth & Cyberculture S6 / Spring 2020

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Handout 5

Subcultures in the Digital World

Cyberspace has transformed the way that new social movements organize and operate, both by globalizing them and by facilitating the decentralized, web-like structure of networks and groups. The variety of subcultures in cyberspace can be roughly divided into two groups: First, those subcultures that make use of new media to further their project in the real world. In this category we can include fan groups (of bands, movie stars, TV shows), ‘fringe’ groups and eccentrics, political organizations and worldviews, anti-capitalists and new social movements, far right-wing groups and their likes. Websites and bulletin boards are used to convey each group’s or individuals’ opinions, and the decentralized network of cyberspace encourages their proliferation. Second, subcultures that have an expressive relationship with the cybertechnology are produced by hackers and cyberpunks. These subcultures are about cyberspace; hackers and cyberpunks do not simply use this space as a means to achieve goals that one can pursue in real life.

--Fan cultures

Cyberspace has given fans a new forum to meet, chat, create and disseminate their views. In this way, the Internet becomes a technology of enlargement; it provides fans with a global meeting-place for communication and marketing.

What is it that fans do online? They do what they do offline, too: the principal fan activity is discussion and analysis of storylines, character motivations, plots and so on. Star Trek websites devoted to the show, its different characters, and its main storylines; X-Files fans talk about episodes, trace long-running narrative plots, deploy the knowledge they have of the show in order to make sense of storylines, and share their thoughts with like-minded people.

--Conspiracy cultures and fringe beliefs

The web lends itself to the propagation, proliferation and circulation of ‘fringe’ beliefs like conspiracy theories; it has enlarged the number of participants in conspiracy culture, and accelerated the propagation of conspiracy theories. The meme and flaming are the pervasive discourse of conspiracy cultures.

The **UFO** (Unidentified Flying Object) is a term that is widely used for claims about extraterrestrial life and aliens. **Ufology** online can be broached in terms of the ‘**meme**’ – an inflammatory or contagious idea that spreads and gets amplified across

cyberspace. Memes can be read as an accelerated form of urban folklore--hearsay and rumour-- which spreads through a locale or a culture, sedimenting as 'fact' through repetition. Cyberspace has facilitated a speeding up of this **memetic contagion**, as well as disembedding it from a particular place, thus rendering it global.

'Fringe beliefs': The enthusiastic promotion of the Internet as a propaganda tool by extremists to spread **'cyberhate'** is an example. Also a widespread response to **Far Right** presence in cyberspace is apparent through **'flaming'** – sending hostile messages to newsgroups and mailing lists, often with the aim of jamming or crashing hosts by overloading them with incoming mail. We also speak of **'flaming out'** extremists, meaning bombarding them with messages that contest their world-view.

--Technological subcultures

The 'hi-tech' subcultures such as hackers and cyberpunks are, in a sense, all about technology – they are subcultures that have come into being because of cyberspace, rather than those above, which pre-existed it.

--Cyberpunks

There are two important themes: the first is the depiction of subcultures in **cyberpunk fiction and film**, and the second is subcultures that borrow the aesthetic and philosophy of the cyberpunk genre to create **group identities** – such as the readers and writers collectively clustered around the cybermagazine **Mondo 2000**.

William Gibson : the ways in which technology intersects with the body have been a central concern in Gibson's work and in cybercultural writing-- **aesthetic** and **functional** modifications of the human body are visible in **cyberpunk**: the former include forms of cosmetic surgery, grafting and transplant that restyle the body, the latter implant technology in order to enhance the body's capabilities, resulting in **Technophilic cyborgian bodies**. (Johnny Mnemonic, for example, has his brain rewired to carry data, like a hi-tech smuggler, the short story 'Johnny Mnemonic' by William Gibson).

--Hackers

Computer hacking has a particular kind of public image, associated with two acts: the breaching of high-profile computer security systems (The Pentagon, MI6, banks) and the writing and releasing of computer viruses (for example, the 'Love Bug'). The hacker subculture similarly has a particular public image – of disaffected, geek-ish young men, whose technological expertise is matched by their social alienation. Hacking is usually criminalized and demonized as a 'fringe' activity that has the potential to wreak havoc in today's information society – exposing our vulnerable relationship with computers.

There are hackers, to be sure, who practise their skills for **personal gain** (hacking banks, for example) or for illicit reasons (releasing a virus in an act of revenge), but this masks a whole spectrum of activities and a dense network of subcultural work that is different.

Consider, for instance, **the 'hacker ethic'** that expresses the common values of the computer underground:

1. 'All information should be free.'
2. 'Mistrust Authority – Promote Decentralisation.'

3. 'Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not by bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race or position.'
4. 'You can create art and beauty on a computer.'
5. 'Computers can change your life for the better.'

This neatly summarizes the technophilic, anarchic, egalitarian stance that governs the majority of hacking practice.

The contrast between benevolent hackers (who use their skills to shore up security systems and crack other hackers' codes) and malevolent hackers intent on world domination is vividly played out in the movie **The Net** – between the lone heroic figure of Angela Bennett and the shadowy, evil Praetorians (who invert benevolent hacking by hiding their virus inside computer security software).