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Technologies of Despair and Hope: Liberatory Potentials and Practices of CMC in the Middle East

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The first conference on “Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication” (CATaC) in 1998 was organized in response to a troubling recognition. On the one hand, contrary to the then-prevailing belief in technology as a value-free and culturally-neutral tool, it was becoming increasingly clear that cultural values and communication preferences played fundamental roles in the design, implementation, and responses to the technologies of computer-mediated communication (CMC)—just as, after all, cultural values and communication preferences play such roles in every other aspect of our lives. On the other hand, there was very little attention to culture and communication vis-à-vis CMC, either on the level of theoretical analyses or on the level of empirical investigations into how these elements interacted with one another “on the ground,” i.e., in specific cultural contexts. This relative dearth of discussion in both theory and *praxis*, of course, was in part precisely because of the view that prevailed in at least the English-language literature of the time- i.e., the view that technology is a value- and culturally-neutral tool.

The CATaC conferences are now held biennially, and continue to address these gaps in English-language research and understanding. The CATaC conferences provide a forum in which scholars from a variety of countries and disciplines can come together to explore these complex interactions in ways not fostered elsewhere. The conferences also provide a forum through subsequent print and electronic publications that make some of the best CATaC work available to a wider audience (Ess, 2001, 2002; Ess & Sudweeks, 1999, 2001; Sudweeks & Ess, 1998, 1999; Zhu, Sudweeks & Ess, 2002). As well, beyond the circles of CATaC participants, scholarly attention to the cultural dimensions of CMC have become increasingly prominent in more recent work (e.g., Stald & Tufte, 2002). By the same token, over the course of a short four years in the CATaC conferences themselves, the cultures and countries represented have expanded so much so that at CATaC'02 (Université de Montréal, Canada), several domains missing from earlier conferences were well represented by participants and their presentations.

In particular, CATaC'02 included for the first time a strong series of presentations highlighting research and reflection from the Islamic world, including the countries of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. As well, Israeli political scientist Michael Dahan, a “veteran” from CATaC'98, returned to give us his latest, if very grim, insights on CMC in the context of the current pitched conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians.

The papers collected here - three originally presented at CATaC'02¹ and a fourth written specifically for this issue - are of interest for two reasons. First, they provide insights and observations regarding CMC technologies and the interactions with culture from cultural domains only recently highlighted in especially Western-based, English-speaking CMC research. Second, these papers are especially compelling, of course, because of the larger political, economic, and military realities that serve as their background.

The September 11 attacks against the U.S. and its subsequent responses—a war on terrorism involving military conquest in Afghanistan and the threat of war against Iraq—rightly command front-page attention in the U.S. and abroad. Of course, these conflicts are understood and represented across a wide range of perspectives and views. Unfortunately, if not surprisingly, most of these tend towards polarization and oversimplifications. First of all, despite token efforts to show that the war on terrorism is not a war against Islam (e.g., President Bush inviting Muslim clerics to the White House), both scholars and especially U.S. media frequently represent this conflict in the broadest possible terms, i.e., as a “clash of civilizations” (so initially Huntington, 1993) pitting modernity, liberal democracy, and global capitalism against at least the more extreme elements of Islam and the Arabic world. As Jillian Schwedler (2002) makes clear, however, if we look more carefully at how Islam and Islamic identity interact with the histories, traditions, and particular political ambitions of specific state leaders, both an ostensibly monolithic Islamic world as pitted against an equally monolithic West disappear quickly into much more complex local histories and politics that provide as many counter-examples to, as examples of, these broad categories.

By the same token, the papers collected here provide us with a careful, detailed, and nuanced look at the diffusion and impacts of CMC technologies in the Middle-East, as represented by Afghanistan, Israel, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.

To begin with, **Beverly Bickel** examines, in exceptional detail, the work of RAWA.ORG, a website operated out of Pakistan by Afghan women who first of all reject both poles of the otherwise prevailing “choice” between Islamic fundamentalism and contemporary U.S. policies. Bickel argues that the website and the discussions it has evoked through its interactive Guestbook serve as an example of how these technologies can construct and broadcast new cultural identities and discourse. Most hopefully, the website serves as an example of how the Web may yet serve as a vehicle for grounding and projecting alternative views and voices in the context of the war on terrorism - over against the otherwise overwhelming forces of U.S. military and conglomerate media dominance. In this way, she connects the *praxis* (our term) of RAWA.ORG with a number of theoretical frameworks, most notably that of Ulf Hannerz, who argues that while the center-periphery structure will continue to operate in cyberspace, the peripheries are now more able to “talk back” in new ways in their efforts to gain more voice in shaping their own politics, public spheres, and futures. In particular, Bickel draws the lesson for us that “the democratic potential of the Net for promoting ‘civic pluralism’ will partly rely on its being constructed by those capable of negotiating global differences, creating multiple, complex meanings and crossing boundaries.”

James Piecowye's article begins with a review of various attempts to define “culture,” concluding with Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* as a primary framework. Piecowye then describes the current social context of the United Arab Emirates as the environment within which his observations of student use of CMC, primarily e-mail and chat, take place. Contrary to more deterministic views of CMC technology (primarily those affiliated with Innis, Eisenstein, McLuhan, and Ong which argue that the new media create a “secondary orality of electronic culture” (Ong, 1988)), Piecowye's students seem less affected by these technologies as *media* and more impacted by the *message* of consumerism conveyed through the media. More broadly, his students support the view that “the people on the receiving end of globalization... have a choice of what to accept—and very often they choose bits and pieces that they mix with their own forms of expression” (Strelitz, 2001).

Readers will note that Piecowye's analysis rests on a survey and informal discussion with his students. While suggestive, his analysis clearly calls for more extensive sorts of surveys and interviews before any claims can be made that his findings are representative. Nonetheless, his analysis is helpful first of all as it gives us at least a small picture of how young women students in the UAE respond to CMC technologies, and in ways that highlight their ability to choose consciously what elements of local and global cultures they seek to sustain and appropriate. More broadly, it thereby provides a counterexample to the more deterministic assumptions found in CMC literature regarding the power of technology to override local cultural values and practices.

Deborah Wheeler provides us with a rare glimpse into young Kuwaitis' experiences of and views on how the introduction of the Internet is challenging basic social norms of an Islamic society. She brings to her essay an extensive experience of the Islamic world, including Kuwait, Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. It is clear, as is supported by other surveys and analyses, that the Internet does indeed allow young Kuwaitis to violate traditional separations between males and females, first of all as it facilitates relatively safe (i.e., initially pseudonymous) chatting and e-mail. Her interviewees worry about this, though, interestingly, the young women more than the young men. While the young women are quicker to denounce the moral dangers CMC technologies represent to Kuwaiti society, both young women and men also endorse their potential for changing the ancient Kuwaiti tradition of arranged marriages in favor of more Western-style marriages as initiated by the young people themselves. This transformation, moreover, fits a larger pattern noted by Wheeler, i.e., a movement from hype and use of the technology as a status symbol to the incorporation of the technology into the normal flow of one's life, a flow that in many ways remains thoroughly shaped by prevailing cultural values. In political terms, we might say that CMC technologies are potentially transformative, but not clearly "revolutionary," i.e., they will not entirely overturn traditional social and moral values.

In sharp contrast to these more optimistic analyses, **Michael Dahan's** account of "The Changing Public Sphere of Palestinian Israelis" is harsh witness to the many ways in which larger social and political contexts can override whatever democratizing and pacific potentials may lie in CMC technologies.

This contrast is even sharper given its background. Prior to the most recent *intifada* in September, 2000, Dahan had undertaken what, in our view, was one of the most remarkable efforts to realize the best potentials of *communication* as mediated by computer technologies, precisely in one of the most contentious and violent political contexts of our time, i.e., the ongoing conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians. Dahan's carefully structured efforts to use CMC to build new bridges of understanding and even friendship between young Palestinians and Israelis otherwise caught up in this seemingly intractable conflict achieved remarkable success, only to be almost entirely dissolved by the September, 2000, *intifada* (Dahan, 2001). While acknowledging the earlier ways in which CMC has brought about change in Israeli society, including an enhancement of the public sphere, Dahan now finds that emerging patterns of use of CMC and ICTs among Palestinians and Israelis instead serve to reinforce rather than ameliorate the growing chasm between the two sides. His analysis thus counters more optimistic hopes (for example, among Habermasian proponents of CMC (e.g., Becker and Wehner, 2001)) that CMC technologies might expand and enhance the public sphere as part of a larger democratizing effect. Rather to the contrary, what amount to fragmented and regional public spheres (if they arise at all, i.e., as basic economic, infrastructure, and cultural

barriers must be overcome to gain CMC access in the first place) work primarily to reinforce extant social, political, and economic divides. As Dahan points out, this example thereby supports the more “conservative” (our term) view of CMC technologies as largely reproducing rather than profoundly challenging the political and social structures of capitalism.

As these papers provide us, on the one hand, with new insights into how CMC technologies function in the diverse cultural contexts of the Middle-East, especially the examples of Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, they point to important sorts of middle grounds, places where CMC technologies operate less as the vehicles for an intractable homogenization and more as catalysts for significant processes of hybridization, as individuals are able to consciously choose for themselves what elements of “the West” and their own local cultural identities and traditions they wish to hold to. This would suggest that the powers of globalization and new technologies are not absolute; rather, they can be refracted and diffused through the specific values and preferences of diverse individuals and local cultures. In this way, these papers provide additional examples of what Thai philosopher Soraj Hongladarom originally introduced at CATaC'98 as a hybrid model of “thin” global/Internet culture coupled with “thick” local cultures and traditions as a possible middle ground between homogenizing globalization, on the one hand, and fragmentation, sometimes in the form of violence, in the name of preserving local identities on the other hand (Hongladarom, 2001). This is certainly good news for those who see in CMC technologies, as they indeed embed the cultural values and communicative preferences of their Western designers, the threat of “computer-mediated colonization” (see Ess, 2002, for discussion).

On the other hand, this optimism must be balanced by the harsh realities portrayed in Michael Dahan's account of CMC in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Dahan here uncovers a pattern seen by other researchers as well; namely, that despite initial promises of democratization and liberation, CMC technologies can be easily appropriated by the powerful and only with difficulty by the powerless, so that the implementation and use of these technologies, in the end, only mirrors and reinforces prevailing patterns of power and advantage.

Taken together, finally, these analyses support a crucial insight for those who recognize that technology indeed embeds and fosters specific cultural values and communicative preferences: by the same token, their impacts and uses can be shaped and steered only by careful attention to *the social context of use*. As Bickel, Piecowye, and Wheeler make clear, these technologies can have liberating impacts, but such impacts are by no means inevitable consequences of deploying them. Rather, as Dahan's analysis makes equally clear, the social, political, and economic contexts within which these technologies are introduced and diffused can easily override any liberatory and democratizing potentials proponents may claim for them.

In the end, this means that just as Piecowye's young women students must choose with a certain savvy and self-consciousness as to what to keep and what to reject from “the West” as it floods across their screens and e-mails, so those of us in the West must consciously endorse and shape the uses of CMC technologies that indeed fulfill their more liberatory, humane potentials. In addition to conscious efforts to shape uses of these technologies in more humane and democratizing directions, we must also become a specific kind of human being. Again, as Bickel puts it: “The democratic potential of the Net for promoting ‘civic pluralism’ will partly rely on its being constructed by those

capable of negotiating global differences, creating multiple, complex meanings and crossing boundaries.”

Our hope is that these articles will help our readers acquire additional understanding not only of technology, but also of distinctive cultural identities and values, to assist them in these choices and practices of hybridity and negotiation. In particular, we hope that these papers, both individually and collectively, will provide a picture of the diversity of rich and humane cultural traditions that contribute to the mosaic of the Middle-East, and thereby assist us all in moving beyond the oversimplifications of political rhetoric and media, towards rather a more nuanced and informed appreciation of the cultural, political, economic, and social realities that refract and illuminate CMC technologies in distinctive ways.

Notes

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