

DIGITAL BORDERLANDS

Cultural identity and interactivity in new communication media

A cybercultural research project 1998-2002

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Digital Borderlands: Cultural identity and interactivity in new communication media was a cybercultural research project primarily financed by the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR).

Its research team consisted of project leader, Professor Johan Fornäs (first at the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication JMK at Stockholm University, later at the National Institute for Working Life programme for Work and Culture in Norrköping, Sweden) and the doctoral candidates Kajsa Klein (JMK), Martina Ladendorf (first JMK then Roskilde University, Denmark), and Jenny Sundén and Malin Svenningsson (Department of Communication Studies Tema K at Linköping University).

Four case studies investigated how meaning and identity is shaped through interactive, digital media of communication. The project combined cultural and communicative perspectives. It studied how people create meaning through interplay with various cybertexts, thereby developing personal and collective identities. It also scrutinized how digital technologies that carry different but concurrent symbolic forms are used interactively to produce communicative relations and public spaces. Qualitative interpretations of digital texts, images and sounds were thus combined with a cyberethnographic exploration of those identity- and relation-producing interactions that surround the use of such media forms.

Comparisons were made with other media forms (telephone, magazines, books, television, records, etc.). A special emphasis was put on certain aesthetic aspects and entertainment genres on the Internet. These shed light on late modern developmental tendencies within the cultural public spheres of the arts, popular culture, consumption and leisure which have also great importance for information processing, politics, economics, education and work.

The project emphasized the interplay of symbolic forms, since the Internet as well as various multimedia combines written and spoken words with images and music. Another important interplay is between older and more recent media types, where we strove to elucidate lines of development, parallels and differences. It is also important to distinguish between quite different communication forms within cyberculture itself. We also studied how transgressive communities are created at different levels, from intimate relations to global networks, and how the human body tends to be reintroduced in a communication form that is often considered to be disembodied.

In many ways and levels, this project thus studied how borders are drawn and transgressed – between people (individuals and groups), between areas (worlds and aspects), and between media types (genres and symbolic forms). It explored the digital borderlands.

Cyber centres: The world citizen as an Internet construction

Kajsa Klein

The Internet can be described as “world-forming”: it mirrors the world and creates a world of its own, which is also part of the world at large and deeply affects it. This study concerned how a globally or cosmopolitically transgressive “world citizenship” is thematized or created by transnational organizations, movements and other actors on the Net. It touched upon issues of globalization, democracy and postcolonial multiculturalism.

Cyber netzines: Net publications by and for grrls

Martina Ladendorf

This was a study of a popular culture genre which shares some traits with print mass media: women identified netzines, sometimes with a feminist orientation. The Internet is often conceived as a male world, but it has successfully been invaded by women as well. Cybergrrl is one example of such a netzine where women can find information and entertainment, meet each other and exchange ideas. Comparisons were also made with traditional weekly magazines.

Cyber bodies: Gender and identity in digital self-presentations

Jenny Sundén

While the Internet is often presented as a disembodied medium, various forms of bodily presence is continually reintroduced where people meet in the Net. This study explored how bodiliness is expressed, primarily in self-presentations within text-based virtual worlds, and how this communicates cultural conceptions of gender identity and sexuality. Analyses of such phenomena elucidated how body, gender and identity are (re)connected in our time.

Cyber relations: Social intercourse and relation-making on the Net

Malin Svenningsson

The Internet offers new ways for people to meet. Its chat-channels are primarily geared at the needs for interaction and relation-making. This study interviewed people who use chat to contact and relate to others, in a range from casual acquaintances to strong friendships or “cyber-romances”, where couples then meet off-line and form a relationship. Participant observation was also made on chat-channels, in order to study how social interactions are formed in this medium.

Activities

The project *Digital Borderlands: Cultural identity and interactivity in new communication media* started in 1998 and ended in 2002. In 2000, the project organized a *conference* on cyberculture, with specially invited participants. The digital Swedish *discussion list* ITkultur was also opened, to enhance interdisciplinary cooperation between researchers who study digital media from cultural perspectives.

The project team published a joint English *anthology*, summarizing results and discussing a series of crucial issues within the field of cyberculture. Its four case studies also resulted in more extensive *separate reports*, generally in the form of published doctoral dissertations. Results were also presented and discussed in various other *articles and conference papers*.

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