

5. The Internet and Identity

Recent studies in the field of communication media have paid special attention to the internet and its potentials concerning identity construction and identification process among individuals and socio-political groups. Since early 1990s, special attention has been given by researchers to the internet as a space for identity reconstruction (Lamb and Poster, 2000). Most of these issues indicate the interactions among individuals in the cyberspace and online discussions in chat rooms, etc. Generally, modern information revolution, by terminating unilateral mass communications, has principally changed the relationship between audience and the communication media. The interactive bilateral nature of the internet has caused an individual to be both the receiver and sender of messages at any time. Therefore, it is increasingly hard, in essence, to differentiate between producers and consumers of information. These features have all caused some theorists to consider the internet and its potentials predisposing to the introduction of human society into a modern civilization and identity; an era that has been viewed under various terms such as reflective modernity, postmodernist community, and information society.

Mark Poster, in his book *The Second Media Age*, considers electronic media-based communications a main factor in the formation of unstable multiple identities, casting doubts on past beliefs; therefore, the possibility of formulating unstable multiple identities is also reinforced (Poster, 1998). Decentralization and possibility of developing a less censored bilateral relationship as well as a person's anonymity in the internet cyberspace may provide the formation of a particular kind of public area. People, in this area, are practically able to challenge many absolute concepts in different aspects of life and develop it as a topic for public discussion and reflection. The internet makes it possible for individuals to face experiences that are usually removed from the order cycle of their everyday life. Moreover, the internet may provide individuals with the possibility of changing their lifestyles and obtaining new experiences by exchanging their experiments and challenging most of their life concepts and interpretations as well as mutual investigations. In this regard, while delocalizing social relations, it usually opens our cultural horizons to various customs and lifestyles and develops a new understanding of the world as a socio-cultural and moral context (Thompson, 2001).

Therefore, as Harvy also points out, we may know the most significant features of this epoch as fragmentation, plurality, and absence of determining identity policies, whose consequences can be witnessed in the displacement, decentralization, analysis, and weakness of social identity resources such as class, community, and decreases in political bonds and loyalty (Gillespie, 1995).

6. The Internet and Culture

At present, the internet is one of the most significant instruments to exchange information in socio-cultural areas. Shortening the distances and removing the physical borders between various tribes, nations and civilizations,

the internet not only provides the possibility of familiarizing different cultures with one another but also contributes to mutual understanding among these cultures. By means of the internet, countries may typically reach cultural development through exchanging cultural information and giving awareness to their domestic and foreign audience.

Considering culture, language is a main point in relation to the internet. In fact, language is one of the most significant cultural elements through which different fields of culture may be conveyed properly. The dominance of English in the internet is an unquestionable reality that may easily contribute to the transfer of English-speaking cultures (Rezvani, 2002).

In current periods, it is not exaggerating if we consider cultural damages of information technology (IT), particularly the internet, the most harmful, serious and advanced kinds of cultural invasion. Those who are optimistic about the internet have always spoken about its advantages and considered it a powerful means for cultural exchanges between nations. However, critics believe that the internet is just a means for wide-ranging dominance, including cultural domination, by western colonizers and assume that terms such as global culture, digital culture, and internet culture are synonymous with the western culture. Yet, another group with a moderate approach believes that, while maintaining basic values and original traditions, we can welcome modern communicative innovations and technologies and use them to serve the culture (Shojaei, 2008).

The moderate approach appears more realistic and acceptable than both of the previous approaches. However, if viewed more moderately in particular, statements by the critics also indicate bitter realities that should not be neglected. The internet can actually be used as a means for promoting the objectives of the Islamic native culture, as many admirable activities have been done up to the present time. However, propaganda of the western culture on the internet is so wide that its different forms are often expected to dominate other cultures (Rafipour, 2008).

The ulterior motives backstage the internet and objectives of its managers are specifically important to study its cultural damages. The approach known as "cultural imperialism" or "media imperialism" falls within the research areas in this field. Based on this approach, cultural dominance (i.e., unilateral exchange of cultural elements and phenomena) is a negative function of the media. The term "cultural imperialism" shows a type of social penetration through which a country imposes its basic assumptions, values, knowledge, norms, behaviors, and lifestyles on other countries (Shojaei, 2008).

There is a wide range of issues on identity and cultural damages, and the influence of cultural invasion also involves a large extent. Yet, the main damages discussed here include (1) social isolation, (2) weakening the under-present cultures, (3) propagating intellectual superficiality, (4) creating confusion, (5) development of giving lawful

liberty, and (6) developing the cultural products of deteriorated cultures.

1. Social Isolation

Social isolation involves withdrawal from society and running away from family. The mechanism of initiation and maintenance of social isolation problem originates from family relations (Ahmadi, 2010). Television and the media, more specifically the internet, usually engage young people and university students in the virtual world, depriving them of opportunities to experience the real world and familiarize with attractive, lively, and even hazardous realities. Spending much time with the media also means reducing the rate of human relations, particularly with children and the young. This trend may lead to increasing individualism and decreasing pluralism, serving as a main factor in damaging family integration.

Concerning individualism, Scheffers has pointed to the theory of structurelessness in young people. To explain it further, he writes that Ferechhoff, Hornstein, Hurreiman, and Olek developed the hypothesis of structural change in youth and its other form, that is, structuredness of youth. Their theory was based on the fact that social differentiation is developing in all parts of the society (i.e., social systems). This differentiation may be seen as pluralism in lifestyle. These changes have caused the young not to be able to live the common known lifestyles as the past. All the stages of life have already undergone changes so that we are witnessing the emergence of new structures and development of individualism among the youth (Scheffers, 2003).

The internet serves as a way for acquiring knowledge, raising awareness, and making friendship with others. However, since the internet offers a mass of positive and negative information, its potential dangers are worrying, particularly for the young generation (ibid.).

It is likely that easy internet communications makes individuals spend more time in isolation, speak with strangers online, and develop superficial relationships. They do these activities at the cost of losing face-to-face talks as well as relations with family and friends. Social relations through the internet are weaker than the real ones, leading to a person's social isolation in the end. In a two-year research on internet users, results suggested that increasing use of the internet is associated with decreases in family relations and participation in social communities (Kraut, *et al.*, 1998).

2. Weakening the Under-Prezent Cultures

Any kind of serious malleability is, in fact, a developed presentation of cyberspace features. Although this space provides a bed for presenting various cultures, only the culture with more active presence will be leading. The debauched western culture has actually cast a shadow over the cyberspace, and the dominance of English has caused the users to get involved in this language and move away from their own national language. This situation naturally leads to domination of the western culture over various

societies and, in particular, the Islamic communities. Accordingly, the values, methods, and identities favored by the western culture are injected into other societies and the process of changes in cultural elements accelerates (Taremi, 2008).

3. Propagating Intellectual Superficiality

Freedom of speech and expression of opposing thoughts are among the primary objectives in such a space. However, if a thought with no valid basis is expressed in this space, many doubts will be raised all of which cannot be studied, criticized, and analyzed by the audience. Therefore, the users are impressed by the thought without studying it carefully. As a result, the morale of accepting rights among the users, especially the young, may change into intellectual superficiality in the acceptance of new thoughts (Hosseini, 2011).

4. Creating Confusion

Accumulation of good and bad information makes it difficult to select the right information. Moreover, its indefinite unclassified plan leads to the confusion of those who are weak in analyzing thoughts. Hence, it is necessary to teach the right classified use of this space to the users beforehand (ibid.).

5. Development of Giving Lawful Liberty

Respecting the social rules and observing the moral doctrines are among the most basic principles in every culture. Obviously, development of giving lawful liberty in the cyberspace may ultimately influence the rate of people's refraining from committing immoral and abnormal acts in society. Some immoral acts in society originate from their development of receiving lawful liberty in the cyberspace.

6. Developing the Cultural Products of Deteriorated Cultures

The west, and sometimes the east, produce the most important cultural products including movies, pictures, texts, as well as computer and internet games and then advertise and distribute them in the cyberspace. Therefore, one of the dangers arising from the cyberspace is directed toward those countries whose cultures are opposing to the culture dominating the internet space (Hosseini, 2011).

7. Results and Discussion

Along with its undeniable positive applications in different fields, the internet is associated with undesirable consequences that should be considered by parents, teachers, all educational authorities, and cultural planners of the society.

The internet, as the most significant modern means of communication, is naturally a cultural technology. It serves as a means of production, reproduction, and diffusion of symbols and meanings, which directly relates to the cultural area and influences it. It may be stated that this

modern technology has traveled over many life areas, and its potential and capacities are so developed that it has created great wonders. Despite all the capacities and potentials of this modern technology, its damages and variations should not be neglected. For the users who have not a considerable thinking basis, the internet is “identity-generator” not “identity-creator,” because it is not governed by the life values described by our Islamic culture and religion. In fact, transcendent humanistic identity has been victimized by mechanical identity. By decreasing the importance of place and time and increasing the significance of cyberspace in social life, the modern communication media, the internet in particular, may provide new opportunities for the interaction between self and system as well as the process of identity development. Since identity is always formed in the context of paradoxical dialectic spaces, it seems impossible for individuals and social groups to establish a certain integrated identity. Under these conditions, the process of identification due to its continuous changes has ever remained open and paved the way for developed interactions among socio-cultural and political groups. This fact may weaken some traditional and religious values, because cyberspace users directly speak about their values and meanings. In this process, while new values and meanings are established, past values are challenged or reproduced.

Authorities and socio-cultural institutions are responsible for teaching the society, particularly the adolescents and the young who are more vulnerable, how to use the internet correctly. It is worth noting that although filtering is required and may temporarily prevent from misusing the internet, the government should invest on immunization and reinforcement of religious beliefs as well as fertilization of piety and self-control spirits among the people. It is merely in this way that the culture of correctly using the internet is institutionalized in the society and its negative risks and damages can be prevented.

References

- [1] Ahmadi, Khodabakhsh (2010) Cultural, social and educational vulnerability in adolescents and the young. *Journal of Behavioral Science*, 4(3): 241-248 [in Persian].
- [2] Ameli, Saeid-Reza (2006) Modern individualism and cell phone; individualism technology and identity. *Journal of Rasane-ye Jahani (Global Media)* [in Persian].
- [3] Bullen, P., Harre N. (2000) The internet: Its effects on fataty and behavior implications for adolescents. Department of Psychology, University of Auckland.
- [4] Castells, Manuel (2005). An interview with Manuel Castells. Tr. by Hassan Chavoushian. Tehran: Ney Publishers [in Persian].
- [5] Gillespie, M.(1995)Television ethnicity and cultural change. London: Routledge.
- [6] Goodwin, I. (2004) Westminster papers in communication and culture. University of Westminster, London.
- [7] Gorgi, Abbas (2006) The internet and identity. *National Studies Quarterly*, 25(7)1 [in Persian].
- [8] Hosseini, Abbas (2011) The role of the internet in changing religious values. *Journal of Religion and Media*, 9(4) [in Persian].
- [9] Kazemi, A. A. (1997). Modernism, cultural and political crises in contemporary Iran. Qods Publishers [in Persian].
- [10] Kia, A. (2007) professional users' cyberspace and identity. Allameh Tabatabaei University, Tehran.
- [11] Kraut, M., Patterson, V., Lundmark, S., Kiesler, T., Mukopadhyay W., & Scherlis (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist*, 53:65–77.
- [12] Lamb, R., Poster, M.(2002) Transitioning toward the internet Culture: An Inter-organizational analysis of identity construction from online services to the internet. <http://lamb.cba.hawaii.edu/pubes/Inetculture.pdf>.
- [13] Poster, Mark (1998) The second media age. Tr. by Gholamhossein Salehyar; Tehran: Iran Institute Publishers [in Persian].
- [14] Rafipour, Faramarz (1999) Mass media and change of values. Tehran: Ketab-e Farda Publishers [in Persian].
- [15] Rezvani, Mohammad-Reza (2002) The effect of the internet as a major means of communication on culture. *Journal of Farhang-e Ghomes*, 6 (19) [in Persian].
- [16] Rheingold, H. (1993) The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, ISBN 0-201-60870-7.
- [17] Scheffers, Bernhard (2004) An introduction to the sociology of the young. Tr. by Keramatolah Rasekh. Tehran: Ney Publishers, p. 63 [in Persian].
- [18] Sharafodin, Seyed Hossein (2007) Globalization: Identification and cultural variety and national policies. *Ma' refat Quarterly*, Vol. 123 [in Persian].
- [19] Shojaei, Mohammad-Sadegh (2008) Psychology and pathology of the internet. *Journal of Interaction between Psychology and Religion*, 1(1) [in Persian].
- [20] Suler, J. (2007) Psychology of Cyberspace, *Science Monitor*.
- [21] Taremi, Mohammad-Hossein (2008) cyberspace; damages and risks. *Journal of Rahavard-e Noor*, Vol. 22 [in Persian].
- [22] Thompson, John (2001) Media and modernity: A social theory of media. Tr. by Masoud Ohadi; Tehran: Soroush Publishers [in Persian].
- [23] Torbati, Sarvenaz (2009) Interpersonal relationship in cyberspace. *Journal of Media Age*, Vol. 15 [in Persian].
- [24] Ziv, A. (2010) The social function of humor in interpersonal relationships. *Journal of Springer Science & Business Media*, 48:11-18.
- [25] Zokaei, Mohammad-Saeid (2005) The relationship between presence at cyberspace and modern identity: A research on young Iranian internet users. *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 33 [in Persian].
- [26] Zokaei, Mohammad-Saeid (2004) The young and cyber leisure. *Journal of Studies of the Young*, Vol. 6 [in Persian].

Authors' Profiles



Kheironesa Rashnou has an MA degree in educational psychology, Department of Psychology, Kashan University, Iran.



Soroush Ghodratizadeh is a student of biochemistry, Department of Biochemistry, Faculty of Medicine, Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Turkey.



Masoumeh Delfan is an MA of cultural studies, Kashan University, Iran

