THE INTERNET AND THE WEB: HOW ASIAN-FRIENDLY?

Charles Ess
Philosophy and Religion, Drury College

Charles Ess, a member of the ASIANetwork Board of Directors, teaches "Religions of the World: Eastern" and incorporates Eastern thinkers in his "Introduction to Philosophy" course. He helped develop the curriculum for Drury College's "Values Analysis" course, one designed to prepare students to understand and work in a global society. Accordingly, ethical views are studied from Western and Eastern sources. Ess was Co-chair of the conference, "Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication," held at the Science Museum, London, July 31 - August 3, 1998. The following article reflects discussions at the conference.

Faculty are familiar with the push towards new technologies in teaching and research. But Asian Studies faculty will be especially sensitive to the underlying cultural dimensions involved in appropriating new technologies in teaching and research. This cultural approach is crucial precisely because a prevailing view of technology holds that technologies are "just tools," i.e., they are value and culturally neutral. If this view is correct, then we simply take up or impose new technologies, without concern for possible cultural conflicts (including the cultural imperialism that would result if technology did impose culturally specific values). But are technologies, including the computer-based technologies we use in our research and teaching, culturally neutral?

Computer-mediated communication (CMC)

Philosophers of technology have explored this question with regard to earlier technologies, including the technologies of mass communication (see resources on philosophy of technology, below). But the technologies of computer-mediated communication (CMC), including the Internet and the Web have been unexplored until recently. In earlier research in the intersections between culture, technology, and communication, some of the most striking and best documented conflicts between distinctive cultural values and those associated with the new communications technologies have emerged in Asia.

The popular Western vision of the Internet and the World Wide Web as bringing about an "electronic global village" (e.g., Gates, 1996; Negroponte, 1995; Mitchell, 1995) has encountered stiff resistance in several Asian countries. In cultures which value the social over the individual, hierarchy over egalitarianism, and strict controls over "information" in its broadest sense, the Internet and the Web, with their preference for the individual, egalitarianism, and uncensored exchange of information, threaten such traditional values. These fundamental conflicts have led several Asian countries to strictly control access to the Internet.

The conference on "Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Culture" (CATaC) brought together more than fifty scholars from eighteen countries to explore such conflicts and their possible resolutions. The conference uncovered examples of conflict between values and communication preferences associated with CMC technologies and those of diverse cultures and peoples. Conflicts emerge from the fact that most computer hardware and software rely on codes and standards written by and for (North) Americans, in English. These problems are magnified when we attempt to adopt Roman keyboards and American based codes to the non-alphabetic languages of China and Japan.

Conflicts between languages and standards become immediately problematic for the democratic promise of these new technologies. In India, the world's largest democracy, where only 5% of the population enjoy fluency in English, 95% of the population is excluded from an "English only" approach to CMC. While it is possible (given sufficient economic resources and infrastructure) to "localize" hardware and software (i.e., to revise computers and their programs for use in local languages), with fifteen official languages and hundreds of dialects in India, it is by no means clear how CMC technologies will facilitate communication among such diverse linguistic and cultural groups (Keniston, forthcoming).

Non-verbal cues

These linguistic difficulties, in fact, presage fundamental conflicts between cultural values and communication preferences. Especially well documented in the CATaC conference were the contrasts between Japanese and U.S./U.K. users of email and computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) systems. A Japanese emphasis on "Social Face" and Japanese practices of communicating social cues through non-verbal means (gaze, gesture, body language) conflict with Western emphases on the
individual and "high content/low context" direct communication (Heaton, forthcoming).

Insofar as specific Asian cultures may be characterized as more "masculine" (i.e., as having highly defined gender roles) than gender neutral, and as being more ethnocentric rather than less, (see Hofstede and Maitland, forthcoming), such cultures are less open to technological innovation. Finally, specific Asian cultures that encompass groups defined more by oral tradition than by literacy and print may resist the textual dimensions of extant CMC technologies. (Cf. Zaharna, 1995; see Communication Theory, below.)

**Thai coffee house on the Net**

The Asian experience with new technologies produced an important model for how diverse cultures might take up the Internet and the Web without losing their cultural identity. Thai philosopher Soraj Hongladarom (forthcoming) described a successful "Thai coffee house on the Net" and suggested we think about Internet culture and local cultures in distinct but related ways. Like airline pilots' English, an Internet culture may facilitate global communication without threatening local languages and cultural values. The Thai discussion group demonstrated that it is possible to take up the new technologies so as to preserve and enhance local cultural values and communication preferences. Hongladarom argues that while our communications technologies are laden with values and communications preferences distinctively Western, "other" cultures can reshape technologies in accord with their own preferences and values. Perhaps an electronic global village in which diverse cultures will remain distinctive and unique will be possible after all.

As constructive as the first CATaC conference was, much needs to be done. There were striking absences: we had no reports, research, or commentary on CMC and cultural issues in China or Arabic-speaking and/or Muslim countries. While presenters used a variety of theoretical frameworks (e.g., postmodern, hermeneutic, or social constructivism), the role of religion in shaping fundamental attitudes towards technology and communication was not addressed. These deficits identify areas of research of possible interest especially to ASIANetwork institutions and their faculty.

**Opportunity for you to respond**

Planning for the next CATaC conference is underway, and I invite readers to consider how they might bring Asian perspectives to the following questions:

What is "culture," and how does culture(s) shape the development and use of communication technologies?

What is "communication," and how do communicative practices influence the development and use of communication technologies or vice versa?

How does gender, which defines specific roles in different cultures, interact with patterns of technological implementation and use?

What theoretical frameworks, postmodern, hermeneutic, technology diffusion, or social construction, best describe and predict what is known of the appropriation and use of communication technologies?

How can software and hardware designers and users develop systems more readily adaptable to a variety of cultural and communicative preferences?

What can be done to improve access to information and communication technologies in developing countries, particularly in respect to cultural, communication, cognitive, religious and philosophical issues?

**References**


Additional resources:


In particular, John Street (The Politics of Technology, New York: Guilford, 1992) synthesizes many of these approaches in what he calls a "cultural approach" to technology, precisely in order to address the problem of democratic control of new technologies vis-à-vis the new communications technologies.

**Additional resources:** *Communication Theory*


**Endnote**

See Hongladarom, 1998, for an account of efforts in Burma. Asian fears concerning the new technologies are not groundless. There is evidence that the new media shape new, individualized conceptions of self-identity, conceptions directly in conflict with traditional Asian worldviews (Goonasekera, 1990). Singapore's effort to carefully control the information conveyed through Internet connections so as to preserve Asian cultural values against Western permissiveness is documented by Low, 1996; Wong, 1994; Sussman, 1991; on Malaysia, cf. Ang, 1990. For proponents of the view that CMC technologies foster Western values of individualism, especially of a postmodern, fragmented/decentered self, see Bolter 1986, 1991; Landow, 1992, 1994; Lyotard, 1984.