New Media, Digitextuality and Public Space: Reading "Cybermohalla"[1]

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How do cyberculture and cyberspace get "postcolonialized," appropriated for specific, politically useful and significant purposes?

Lisa Law (2003) reading the online version of the Migrant Forum in Asia argues that the heterogeneity, contestability and contingency of the project's cybercultural domain makes for a cyber-public space. Employing Nancy Fraser's notion of competing publics, Law proposes that the diversity and politics of representation of this Forum enables a new configuration of community in cyberspace.

I see an (Indian) example of such a cyber-public emerging in the Cybermohalla Project, a collaborative project of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and the nongovernmental organization, Ankur (http://www.sarai.net/practices/cybermohalla), that focuses on alternative education. Sarai is supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology, and the Dutch aid organization HIVOS (Lovink 2002). The Cybermohalla project's work, I propose, is a move towards a postcolonial appropriation of cyberspace, a move facilitated by and through the digitextual nature of the new media of information and communications technology (ICT).

Discussing the postcolonial adaptations of the English language, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin refer to:

> The abrogation of the received English which speaks from the center, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language. (1998, 39)

My discussion of Cybermohalla builds on and expands this definition. I expand the semantic scope of the term "postcolonial" to mean a set of contrapuntal, counter-cultural and resistant practices that examines, questions and re-appropriates *locally* and in the *vernacular* not only English, as Ashcroft et al suggest, but also techno-cultural artifacts developed by corporate houses, industries and monopoly capitalism in

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"First World" nations. If in the postcolonial the modern is "resisted" and used at the same time, and strategies and techniques used without absorption into Western modernity (Ashcroft 2001), I see Cybermohalla as seeking and generating a whole new "ecology" of techno-cultural practices that "localize" "First World" technologies. It is the transformative absorption and adaptation of "First World" technologies into native languages, cultures and contexts by a formerly colonized nation in the era of the "raced" "digital divide" that makes Cybermohalla a postcolonial project.

Cybercultures emerge in the context of large-scale movements of people, miscegenation of cultures leading to hybridized forms, dispersed forms of production and, most importantly, the widespread "flows" of capital. Global networks connect capitals of finance with their places of production. Global capital's increasing moves to control the production, circulation and consumption of commodities demand greater connectivity. Flows of capital from "First World" nations—the key element in globalization – across the globe demand better connectivity. Communication technologies are inextricably linked to flows of global finance (Castells 1989; Stratton 1997)—flows that are *raced*. Cyberspace is, Ziauddin Sardar rightly argues, "the darker side of the west" (2002), just as ICTs serve as colonizing technologies. Cyberspace itself, as more contemporary readings demonstrate, is clearly raced, where older forms of racial difference, inequality, stereotypical representation persist (Kolko et al 2000; Nakamura 2002). The ICT "revolution" itself emerged—its genealogy, if you like—from the labour of "Third World", non-white software workers in USA's Silicon Valley. Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) works that enable global networking depend almost entirely on Asian labour (India, from where I write, is a major center for the BPO industry).[2] Finally, ICTs and globalization are often linked, not without some justification, with the globalization of American culture, the increasing dominance of English as the language of the Internet and consumerism at the cost of native cultures, languages and identities. It is this *raced* feature that, I argue, Cybermohalla subverts by *postcolonializing* cyberspace into something recognizably native.

This postcolonializing, I propose, is made possible through the new forms of "digitextuality" employed in Cybermohalla. Anna Everett's neologism combines digital with the now-conventional concept of intertextuality. Digitextuality refers to the collage of forms, registers and signifying systems that is visible in the new media. That is, the new media technologies build a new text through the "absorption and transformation of other texts, but also by embedding the entirety of other texts (analog

[2] By 1996 nearly half of the US government's temporary visas for high-tech workers were issued to Indians. Bill Gates is reported to have stated that Microsoft's Beijing research center is one of his company's most productive, before adding that when he met his company's ten best-performing employees "nine of them had names I couldn't pronounce" (Weber 2006).

and digital) seamlessly within the new" (7). The concept gestures at the inherently multi-register nature of the new media.

If, as Everett suggests, the new media "seamlessly" embeds the earlier aural, visual, linguistic and literary registers, then is it possible that it represents a domain, a technology where a non-hierarchic multiculturalism can flourish? Can multiple ethnic registers contribute to the domain in such a way that there is democracy of registers? Does it enable a new public space, especially in the postcolonial context where the public space is not truly "public" because disempowerment and processes of what I have elsewhere termed "postcolonial subalternization" (Nayar 2008, 69-70, 99-113)—through which particular classes, castes and groups are marginalized—persist? In the face of elite constructions and appropriation of the public sphere in postcolonial nation states—via disappearing pedestrian spaces, secured shopping malls that keep out the "undesirables" (Nayar 2008, forthcoming, see chapter Four), among others—such projects embark upon retrieving the voice of the (wo)man-in-the-street. It is a "tactic" in the face of state/corporate "strategy" (to adapt Michel de Certeau's formulation, 1988) through which the otherwise insignificant "commoner" appears on screens.

What I want to do here is to examine the ways in which the new media's digitextuality offers the potential for a cyber-public space that resists and redefines the hegemony of cybercultural practices and registers.

Introducing: Cybermohalla

Cybermohalla is a network of five labs across New Delhi—locality labs in LNJP (an informal settlement in Central Delhi), Dakshinpuri (a Resettlement Colony in South Delhi) and Nangla Maachhi (a Research and Development Lab in the Ankur office) and the Sarai Media Lab. It has its own mailing lists and blogs. It publishes its own Cybermohalla Diaries. The computer hardware is situated in spaces called "compughars." Each locality lab is a room with three computers, portable audio recorders (dictaphones) and cameras (digital and bromide print); and fifteen to twenty practitioners from the locality, between 15 and 24 years of age. The labs are self-regulated. Each practitioner spends five days a week at the lab. They record their responses to events, incidents in the street, conversations in the form of animations, sound, photostories and text.

Cybermohalla represents a network and approximates to an "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's justly famous formulation (1991). It represents a new form of comradeship, with its own virtual imagination. People record and interact with the street-users, shop-keepers and shoppers and then pass on. They also constitute the subject of short videos that are then broadcast through local cable service providers. One, titled "Chalte chalte," is about a "madari" (itinerant singer) who went through the streets playing his "dug dugi." The camera recorded the responses and reactions of the spectators to this spectacle. If print enabled

nations to imagine themselves through a sharing of cultural practices, as Anderson argued, digital technology enables us to imagine, and then visualize the Other on screen and via sound. Anderson is, to be sure, addressing questions of nation as tied to territory and a different form of (more humanized?) interaction that enables community.Virtual communications and communities may rely less on "human" nature of contact and sharing. Yet this does not mean that it is *not* a "real" community: it is only a different configuration of the community. As Ananda Mitra puts it, "a new set of possibilities for community and nation formation have emerged" with computer-mediated communication (2000, 677).

By focusing on the Other—in this case the ordinary, the everyday and the "common man"—Cybermohalla constructs a community for readers-viewers, a community that, unlike in Virtual Reality (VR) environments, brings other parts of the city to us. It *extends* the community-feeling into the online environment. It is also, incidentally, the *popular* Internet rather than any sophisticated VR environment.

Other community-building measures, in real time *and* cyberspace, include a weekly informal market, called simply, "thelas" (where materials produced by the cyber-labs are also exhibited), storytelling performances, the recording of graffiti and posters across the city. The practitioners also record everyday conversations in the street. "Street logs" were created by practitioners who simply recorded the events in a street, engaging, as the project put it, with "the familiar and the banal." Places of congregation and gathering attain special importance. The neighbourhood tea-shop, the barber shop, the broken lamp post, a book shop, the gym, the Public Call Office (PCO) booth are treated as sites of "multiple narratives." They constitute the "matrix of cultural and intellectual life of a neighborhood" (http://www.sarai.net/practices/cybermohalla).

Visitors, who can be passers-by or specially invited people, to the lab are interviewed as they converse with the "practitioners." The labs also collect stickers, postcards, pocket calendars and other "mobile forms" of words, images and texts. This constitutes an important material culture component, where t-shirts, gamchas (scarfs), handkerchiefs, earthen pots are collected. It also seeks what it calls "Indic-localization," a process "by which software and computing systems are adapted to a particular language and the specific cultural habits of a region." Linux, for example, has been indigenized as IndLinux.

Cybermohalla and Its "Real" Community

Cybermohalla is a mnemonic device, a mode of archiving that is truly digitextual where multiple forms of that community or locality's memories and the history of its emotions are stored, to be retrieved at a future date. This archive is also a place for/of that community's common history (such as that of the evictions), and once again serves the purpose of community-formation. Its main languages are Hindi, *khadi-boli* and

English. The community formed *as* Cybermohalla is built from very real material and face-to-face interactions. However, the discussion groups—and there are many here—constitute an important component of this community. That is, we have a unique situation where the cyber-domain is constituted through both a real time interaction *and* a virtual interaction where people who have never met (and probably never will) come together to discuss the city, cinema, the old and new media (these are the main discussion lists, going under various titles like *Deewana*, Urban Study and Reader-List). It is a "commitment to public dialogue," as the project puts it. "Open Place" allows interested people to contribute art work, text and multimedia works (it carries Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel, *Corridor*). This "blurs the line between artist and public," as the project phrases it.

Cybermohalla takes as its raw material the everyday life of people in various parts of New Delhi. It takes the experience of everyday life into the world of art and the space of cyberspace. By inviting responses—real and virtual—the project ensures that a public sphere is being created.

Like any imagined community, Cybermohalla uses symbolic events, collective memories and a shared language (of the street, of material culture, of stories, even of graphic language). Symbolic events that suggest a sense of unity include telecasts through local cable video operators. The "thelas" are events that are symbolic of a community-building exercise. What we have is not perhaps a national imaginary but a *local* one. There is a strong sense of participation and of community because the distant Other, the remote street and the unknown neighbour are brought to us. Cybermohalla is an unusual "imagined" community that has very strong local-cultural "origins." It is the result of a *dialectic* between the "real" Delhi streets and the software programme that constructs parallel worlds. It is not "imagined" in the sense of an entirely different scheme of reality as much as different sections of the unknown, unknowable and distant "real" being imagined and visualized *via* the virtual worlds unfolding on screen. Cybermohalla is the "space of appearance" (Silverstone's apposite term for the mediapolis, 2007) of the rest of Delhi.

While it may not herald a participatory democracy (as hagiographers of the Internet such as Howard Rheingold have argued), it does have the effect of recording public, everyday responses to developments in say, state policy (the evictions are a case in point). Thus, the Cybermohalla diaries record people's responses to technology (from the coming of the tube light, recalled by the older people, to the newest open source software by the more technologically adept generation). It records grief—upon the razing of Nangla Maanchi in August 2006, for instance—and joy.[3] These archives of sorrow or support recorded in multiple formats suggest that the

[3] The Cybermohalla diaries in the print version of the *Sarai Readers* document local individuals', families' and communities' responses to technology—from the arrival of fluorescent light bulbs to computers and multimedia.

"event" can constitute the public sphere not only in terms of rational debate (as Habermas would have it) but in terms of sentiment and emotion too.

The digitextual project enables coding of multiple kinds of narratives and memories and constructs a public space that is always already heterogeneous, polyphonic, contestatory, even conflictual. The digitextual Cybermohalla reconfigures a modernity at the micropolitical and cultural levels of everyday life (to adapt the formulation of Wilson and Dissanayake 1996). It generates new modes of sociability that do not necessarily efface the face-to-face in favour of the virtual, but build the virtual *through* the intimate and the corporeal. This cybercultural turn or twist to the local is a productive engagement with and counter to the "digital divide" as it foregrounds the subjectivities of individuals in cyberspace. This form of sociability where minorities, the marginalized and often the minimally literate can record their experiences appears to be a technology that furthers democratic debate. Cybermohalla mixes street language with English, the topos of the "sarai" and the "mohalla" (literally "locality") with that of a-geographic cyberspace, street conversation and the intimate diary with documentary forms.

Benedict Anderson argued that a homogenization of language was central to the construction of a national identity and imagined community through collective expression. It is now a truism that the language and resources determine the politics of (any) culture. English is the language of the Internet, a fact partly determined by the context where 75 per cent of the hosts are US-NAFTA based (Jordan 2001, 3). In such a context how does a multi-register digitextuality code culture? Since the language of communication is central to any community, real or online, the issue of language is central to any construction of a politics and political public sphere. This applies to Cybermohalla as well.

Cybermohalla, Audio-Visual Economy and Cyber-Public Space

Cybermohalla is an instance of what David Marshall (2004) has astutely termed the "cultural production thesis." Our interest is in the ways in which the populace of the mohalla (in real time) engages in the process of cultural production. In short, how do the people *make* a cybermohalla? In order to facilitate this line of inquiry I focus on one aspect of this cultural production: the making of a cyber-public sphere via an audio-visual economy.

English is not the sole language in the case of Cybermohalla, just as it is not the sole language in the case of the real mohalla where many languages and registers are spoken and used in everyday life and transactions.[4] While English dominates, without a doubt, there is another

[4] The print versions of these are, however, exclusively in English. See, for example, the *Sarai Readers*.

aspect that seems, at least potentially, to offset the linguistic hegemony. And this is the extensive use of other registers and languages: by exhibiting street conversations (in audio), scenes from the street (video), graffiti (in English *and* Hindi). The languages that bind the community together, through calls for protest and action (the subject of some wall writing, posters), the experiential moment (autobiographical accounts) and the critical intervention (by commentators and critics) are diverse. The mnemonic device that is Cybermohalla at one level captures the heterogeneity of the street but also moves beyond the perhaps fractured "reality" into a homogenous cyber-public space. That is, it uses the fractured registers of everyday life in the street and weaves them into the virtual. This is the effect of digitextuality where a real community's fractures form the genesis of a community in cyberspace. This is possible, I suggest, because of the very nature of the languages of the new media that Cybermohalla employs.

What we see in/ on Cybermohalla is an audio-visual economy with a "comprehensive organization of people, ideas and objects" (Poole 1997, 5). This is an economy with its system of production and distribution/ circulation where images (by which I mean sound, text and video) attain and accrue value. Value is accrued through the *viewing* of these images in cyberspace. When we view Cybermohalla, or when the community watches a video clip of the street via their local cable, we *imagine* the action on the street, the activists protesting, the spectators at a local cricket match or the conversations in a barber shop. That is, we exercise our *imagination* to visualize the contexts of these images. We *imagine* a shared purpose, a shared suffering (of the commuter, for instance), of experience of the community represented/ imaged in Cybermohalla. Further, emails and listservs enable and ensure social networking of people in any part of the world with this community (captured in Cybermohalla diaries and performances) and the practitioners.

The interactive nature of the new media makes the content personalized and customized, as seen in many of the visual texts of Cybermohalla. Everybody is an actor, and yet nobody is. It is reality television of a kind, where the roadside is the "setting." It empowers the user (though the editorial room still asserts considerable power, surely). Chat rooms facilitated by the project become feedback mechanisms as people's opinions inform subsequent projects and recordings. When at/on the website we also perform *with* them. While admittedly, interactivity and user information—including personalized search engines (Röhle 2007)—can be "corporatized" (that is, utilized by capital), and the illusion of participation is something all mass media forms have generated and sold. Projects like Cybermohalla in particular mark a step forward in the construction of a participatory public sphere. This contention is supported by three features. The first two are unique to cyberculture.

First, the inherently *distributed* nature of the Internet, despite the "protocols" that control distribution of information (Galloway 2004), makes its governance and regulation difficult. Local actions, events and

actors contribute to Cybermohalla – once again emphasizing the social dimensions and embeddedness of technology. Second, Cybermohalla is hypertrophic—the medium is modified by the events unfolding on it. The message, the video, the actors contribute to the "application" component of the software and hardware. Through both these modes, Cybermohalla roots itself in the local and the public. While the flow of information is enabled and "organized" by protocols, the *nature* of information is not (even though a fair amount of editing and splicing obviously goes on). Third, Cybermohalla is a postcolonial *place* where the thus-far absent Other appears to the world (an argument I adapt from Roger Silverstone, 2007). It is where the world of the Delhi street, the vendor and the schoolboy appears to us, *becomes visible* to us. The Other who is distant from us, who can never be truly proximate, is brought closer to us through the media. Thus the media constructs and expands our imaginary, where the elsewhere and the Other are also *here*.

What we get, therefore, is a community to which we are linked because we *imagine* and relate to them through our viewing of photos, hearing of audio clips and reading messages. The digitextual nature of the Cybermohalla creates a public space in cyberspace. We *share* that community space in cyberspace, and thus create an entirely new one. This online act of viewing- listening- reading does three things:

- partakes of the everyday life of the "real" community,
- asks us to imagine their contexts and lives, and
- invites us to respond to these.

In the "ritual" of clicks and links, *based on the cues provided* (the cues *instructing* us to "click here" are a protocol that determines *how* we explore the Delhi city streets), the user *co-constructs the venue of the street*. The video or audio might be a record of the community, but it takes the ritual of clicks to make it real for us on screen. Interactivity here is not simply between technician and the person-in-the-street, it is also the process by which the street and the everyday are *co-constructed*. This makes for community-feeling again.

However, it must be noted that I do not intend to oppose the "real" to the "virtual," as though they are essentialized and clearly definable categories. In the heavily mediated world we live in, the real is approached through, grasped and understood via the virtual (the mobile phone that connects you to your home via a virtual space, the GPS that gives you a virtual geography by which you negotiate the real) and the virtual is constituted by the real (the interaction between hardware, software and wetware). I see Cybermohalla's "virtuality" as deeply embedded in the local and the "real."

Four key features of Cybermohalla's constructions of place and community mark its audio-visual economy (I adapt this framework for the online construction of place from Cowan 2005).

First, Cybermohalla's discursive indexicality—the ability to discriminate between one place and another, on which notions of

community are based—is enabled by its digitextuality, markers of locality and community. “Thelas” and songs provide the highly local specificity.

Second, places are organized around the experiences and expectations of/ in that place. We know where we are when Cybermohalla’s camera gives us sights and experiences of, say, Karol Bagh or a temple.

Third, digitextuality organizes the place as a site of possible action, where the action is dependent upon the place presented to us: the school and discipline, the park and its sociability, the bazaar and the weaving-through-crowds. It structures the way in which we *might* behave in particular places.

Fourth, and most crucially, a place even in the virtual world becomes a platform for the community: like-minded devotees, a class of people, local traders and shoppers. While fragmentation is a feature that marks post-industrial society and culture—and has been appropriated by capital for its own purposes—in the case of Cybermohalla it generates a non-profiteering archive of community images that can present a commonality. Cybermohalla’s focus is a *counter-public* (or even a subcultural public). If subculture is, as Chris Jenks proposes (2005), a “fragmentation” of the social, Cybermohalla, in contrast to capitalist appropriations of identities and spaces for production and consumption, offers the otherwise marginal a space. Cybermohalla thrives on the distributed and the fragmented in order to offer non-exploitative (except in the basic sense of being source of images). It is not personalization or customization—the key processes of capital’s appropriation of the Internet—but rather a communitarianization via digital technology. The community is imagined through the coming together of its recognizable fragments on screen. Cybermohalla is less an independent “virtual world” than a “cybernetic space” (Mitra and Schwartz 2001), a “digital formation” (Latham and Sassen 2005) that draws upon and is constituted by the local and the everyday and is the result of a *dialectic* between the real and the virtual.

Arguably this means that the community or the Other is formed/ imagined without face-to-face interaction or the “normal” processes of sociability. In other words, while the “subjects” of Cybermohalla are “real”—as opposed to “avatars” constructed purely out of computer code—the virtual community exists only as processes of communication for the world. If a community is formed at least partly through *symbolic* media (such as money, love, truth, power, affection and sentiment) the Internet affects all symbolically mediated codes (Rasmussen 2002). It intensifies the function of symbolic media by telling and showing us: “this also is your city: love it” (or words to that effect). Cybermohalla’s diaries and records are the space and context of such social relations and feelings.

I propose, therefore, that digitextuality and its multiple registers are important not only for the construction of a community, but also for that community’s networking with the rest of the world. Cybermohalla postcolonializes cyberspace through its appropriation, adaptation and indigenization of the Internet and the localizing of technology and its language.

The production and consumption of "culture" here is a mediation between English and the local language, global technology and local adaptions. Cultural forms are made and re-made through the use of handy cams, sound recordings and graffiti. It constructs a cyber-public sphere entirely of users who have become producers of cultural forms, while bringing the Other onto our screens. The line between the object of the film and the film-maker dissolves (or at least blurs) in Cybermohalla. Technology has been *domesticated*. It constitutes what has been called the "digital glocalized" (Nayar 2007) for the ways in which techno-capitalism has been used for *local* purposes, even though its founders and researchers reject the "Third World" label, seeking, rather, a "truly international sensitivity," as its co-director, Ravi Sundaram puts it (Lovink 2002, 210, 215).

And now, at http://www.sarai.net/practices/cybermohalla , click Enter.

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