

Multiculturalism on the Internet : A case study of Nettime, an e-mail discussion list

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Lead-in / Abstract	Taking in consideration diverse studies on multiculturalism, this paper interrogates how Internet can be a tool to different cultures expresses their ideas. It is a case study of Net time, a list with different language groups. It was done interviews with list moderators and an analysis of e-mails flow. The list served as a small sample of what occurs in Internet.
Participants and speakers	Schuch Brunet, Karla (BR)

Short biography of participants

Karla S. Brunet was born in Brazil in 1972. She has a degree in Social Communication and another in Language. She got a grant for a MFA (Master in Fine Arts) in USA, where she studied and worked in digital imaging for 3 years. Back to Brazil she participated in diverse projects involving photography and Internet and worked for a few years doing commercial design work. She taught to Multimedia students in universities in São Paulo. Currently, with another scholarship from the Brazilian government, she lives in Spain to write a PhD thesis on Network Projects.

Full text**1. Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism as a mixture of cultures existing together, one respecting the other is still being discussed by governors, sociologists, and anthropologists. What is taken here as multiculturalism it is Christine Inglis¹ definition of the ideological-normative. She divides the term multiculturalism in three usages: the demographic-descriptive, the ideological-normative and the programmatic-political. Being the ideological-normative the usage of the term multicultural when it refers to ethnic diversity and the rights of people to guarantee their cultural background and participation in society.

There are also the theories of "melting pot" and "salad bowl" or "mosaic". Melting pot is when different cultures get together and these individuals are encouraged to discard their cultural background in order to form a new, more homogeneous, culture. The individuals lose some of their cultural identity. "Salad bowl" or "mosaic" denotes a common identity preserving the individual's cultural background. Here the individuals learn to respect other cultures and to be respected. This paper will face multiculturalism with the "mosaic" approach. Actually I prefer the term "mosaic" to "salad bowl" because of its semantic connotations. It is the idea that in the mosaic each little piece is very important to form the design, everybody can notice when a piece is missing. On the other hand, in salad bowl, when a piece of lettuce is missing anyone will notice the difference. So, the mosaic, in a way, gives a strong importance to any kind of cultural manifestation.

The utopian idea of Internet being a place where everyone could interact and where there was no place race and ethnicity is not valid anymore. Lisa Nakamura,² in her book *Cybertypes: race, ethnicity, and identity on the Internet*, shows that this doesn't happen. In the whole book she used examples of race in the net. After researching on search engines about race, she found out that there was no section for "white". In the races there was, for example, black or African ... and no white because white is considered to be the default option. People in the net are, in general, white, so if you are searching for races it means the other ones, the non-white ones.

2. Internet Culture

It is already known that Internet is a place where many cultures can manifest but only a few can survive. The mechanisms in the net make a culture disappear or stand out. This mixture of cultures and interests are creating an Internet culture. For Castells³ the internet culture is based on academic and scientific work. Since in its beginning, the net was widely used by scholars and researchers with its BBS (Bulletin Board System). It was a way to exchange ideas, researches, experiments and discuss the results. That had an influence in what we see today as Internet Culture.

This historical fact that Internet culture comes from research groups, scholars and academia, makes it a more open and intellectual medium. That according to Castells⁴ makes Internet a medium for a new freedom of expression and horizontal communication media. He thinks that it can be a tool for collective action and social organization.

Another influence to the Internet culture according to Castells is the hacker culture, as an important element to form it. The hackers made the Internet an open place for distributing information and doing collaborative work. The author also states that the interest of the big companies is also a part of this culture. Concluding, Castells says that⁵ "La cultura de Internet es una cultura construida sobre la creencia tecnocrática en el progreso humano a través de la tecnología, practicada por comunidades de hackers que prosperan en un entorno de creatividad tecnológica libre y abierto, asentada en redes virtuales dedicadas a reinventar la sociedad y materializada por emprendedores capitalistas en el quehacer de la nueva economía."

Another author that discusses this new form of culture is Mark Poster⁶. For him the

culture nowadays is processed by technology. Thought machines we assimilate our cultural objects. He also states that in Internet people represent themselves by home pages, and in those, identity and ethnicity might be portrayed.

3. Multiculturalism in Internet

It is hard to talk about multiculturalism in the Internet when we all know that the majority of the world population has no access to the web. It is just to see any statistic table on the worldwide Internet population and it is shown that North America and Europe have the great majority number of people with Internet access. Follow there is a short description on some of the studies done on the subject.

One of the important works on the theme is *Cybertypes: race, ethnicity, and identity on the Internet* by Lisa Nakamura⁷. After 10 years investigating the net she comes up with some conclusions regarding its multiethnicity: there is race in Internet. Even in games such as MOOs and MUDs, when users do their self-description, there is no field for race because they assume that the players are white. She presumes that by the demographics of the net, where the majority is white, male, educated and middle class.

Nakamura⁸ also criticize some "multicultural" web saying that this kind of webs many times instead of helping to create a more multicultural Net, they end up creating a "form of tourism, benefiting from difference in order to make the American/Western self feel well-rounded, cosmopolitan, postracial. This is not digital identification, but digital disidentification _ disavowal of the recognition of race in local contexts in favor of comfortably distant global ones." It can be retaliated to the Coca-Cola and Microsoft advertising of people all over the world, different races, being the same, drinking Coke and using Windows system.

For Nakamura⁹ Internet is not such a negative place. In the net there are many possibilities of community and space for discussion themes as identity, race and ethnicity. Statistically speaking, the web is not a demographic representation of the cultures and races in the world. This is due its beginning as predominant white upper-middle-class male user. The usage of the net by other cultures is increasing slowly, but that could be a good sign for new opportunities in Internet.

Another important work is by Olu Oguibe¹⁰, *Connectivity, and the Fate of the Unconnected*, where he discussed about the ones there are unconnected. He shows that the offline ones are not only the ones in Africa, Asia and Latin America but, besides that, there are also a great number of people in developed countries that aren't connected. Those are the ones, for example, that have some problems with the written language or with computers, such as seniors or people that psychologically aren't comfortable with computer and browsers. When discussing the statistics of the ones online, he points out that from the number of the connected ones, there are a small number of users that have access at home. And it seems it will still take a long time for that to change.

4. Virtual Community

Here it will be discussed some theories on virtual community taking for granted nettime as an online community. It is not the intention of the paper discuss if nettime, an email discussion list, is a community or not.

I will start with Benedict Anderson¹¹, who considers the nations and/or communities to be imagined; they are created by the individuals. In his book, *Imagined Communities*, he says that a nation and/or community "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." He said that referring to "real" communities, but it applies perfectly to communities in the Internet also. People interact with a small group within the community that has some similitude on interests and tastes.

It is common to see authors comparing the virtual communities with the actual physical spaces. Sometimes these virtual spaces are even considered as a parallel to the "real" life, what can be questioned. What happens is virtual communities are really real for the people who are there interacting. Some studies and interviews showed that, in virtual communities, people don't differentiate their actions. They behave similarly inside and outside the virtual space.

Benedict Anderson¹², in an interview by Eric Gower called *When the Virtual Becomes the Real*, said he is not hooked up in the net. He, based on observation of his students, has a critic to this engagement in virtual communities. He says, "I think it isolates them, but it does both. It puts them in touch with communities, real communities in the sense that they are talking to each other all the time. On the other hand, they are even less likely to have any real contact with their neighbours down the street because of these other worlds that they are hooked into."

There are studies showing that in the post-modern society people don't make their circle of friends or communities based on their geographic location but what approximate a person to other is the interested they have in common. For that, virtual communities are an excellent medium, because one can meet and interact with people that have the same interests than you. The problem might be that not meeting people with different interested than you, one can have a very narrow view from the world.

5. Email discussion list

This paper studies the multiculturalism in an email discussion list. Being an e-mail discussions list a group of people who subscribe to a specific list and receive and replay email on a subject. The lists, regarding moderation, can be divided in two types: moderated and unmoderated. Moderated is when the e-mails sent pass through one or more persons (moderators) that select the ones that are really important to the group. The advantage here is that the participant doesn't receive a huge number of emails every day and also can be sure that the things discussed will be about the list's theme. Unmoderated is the list where everything, which is received, is sent to the participants of the group. The advantages of this type it is that there is no kind of censorship, it is an open channel to anyone express ideas.

Kat Nangel¹³ says that the majority of the lists have a circle. For her the first stage it is an initial enthusiasm, when people introduce themselves. Second it is evangelism, when people ask the others for participation. Third it is the growth, when more and more people join. Fourth it is the community, when information and advice is exchanged. Fifth it is the discomfort with diversity, when people start to complain about the number of messages and that they are not discussing only about the subject proposed. This leads to two sixth results. One it is the smug complacency and stagnation, when people start to argue about silly subjects and traffic drops and the participants start to do the discussion on private email. Or the other one it is maturity, when few people quit and many stay at the community level, many just delete what do no interested and the list continues.

6. Nettime (www.nettime.org)

Nettime is a moderated email discussion list for media. Its subtitle says: "mailing lists for networked cultures, politics, and tactics." The list is divided in groups depending on the language. These groups are:

Nettime-I English, moderated: a moderated list in English. It started in 1995.

Nettime-nl Dutch, unmoderated: an unmoderated section in Dutch. It started in 1996.

Nettime-fr French, moderated: the French list. It started in 1999.

Nettime-ro Romanian, moderated: the Romanian list. It started in 2001.

Nettime-lat Spanish/Portuguese, moderated: the list in Spanish and Portuguese. It started in 2000.

Nettime-see South-East Europe, moderated. It started in 2003.

Nettime-zh Chinese, moderated: the Chinese list.

Nettime is an open discussion list, which means that anyone can join, there is no moderator to decide who can be a part of the list, but the moderation is on the emails sent. Anyone can go to their web site and read the mails sent, even if you are not a list subscriber. This makes the list a good source material for researchers.

Regarding the stages of the list cycle proposed by Kat Nangel before, Nettime reached the Maturity. In the list the participants discuss about the related subject, a few participate actively sending emails, some send messages sporadically and a great number just read the information that interested and delete what they don't consider important. In the list it is discussed all sort of themes related to media, politics, art and Internet.

The language division of the list covers probably a wider variety of cultures than when it was only in English and Dutch. Even though the choices of language is broad nettime is considered a mainly European and North American discussion list. Critical Art Ensemble¹⁴ when defining nettime used that description "Nettime is a loosely knit coalition of activists, artists, theorists, techies, collectives, and organizations from all over Europe and North America that have come together for reasons of generalized support for radical cultural and political causes."

Follow there is a list with the numbers of subscribers to each list and its active participants.

Nettime-I English, moderated
 Number of participants: +- 3000
 Estimative of active participants: from 10 to 20% per year

Nettime-nl Dutch, unmoderated
 Number of participants: a few hundreds
 Estimative of active participants: two dozen

Nettime-fr French moderated
 Number of participants: 431
 Estimative of active participants: no answer

Nettime-lat: moderated Spanish/Portuguese
 Number of participants: 725
 Estimative of active participants: 45 in a month

Nettime-Ro Romanian Moderated
 Number of participants: no answer
 Estimative of active participants: no answer

Nettime-see South-East Europe moderated:
 Number of participants: 61
 Estimative of active participants: 15

Nettime-zh Chinese, moderated
 Number of participants: 91
 Estimative of active participants: no answer

This list was created based on the interview done by email (May 2003) with the lists moderators, in the case of the Dutch list, I sent an email to the whole list and someone (a participant, not a moderator) answered saying it was her opinion. Nobody else contested, so I took her opinion as the data.

Another base to analyze Nettime list is the number of emails received. This can give some information on how much people really participate in each language. The number of posters, people active who send emails, is really small compared to the number of lurkers, passive subscribers, the ones who only read the email.

Maybe this situation was different in the beginning of the list when there were not so many subscribers. Geert Lovink¹⁵, one of its founders, in a text from 2001, assumes that there was not a great incidence of lurkers then. He stated "However, the content and the life of nettime is provided by its growing and changing subscriber base, using the many-to-many capabilities of Internet-based communication. The problem of "lurkers" (read only members) is virtually absent."

This list has the number of emails received on May and June (2003) in each section. The numbers were extracted from the Nettime's archive web pages.

Nettime-I English, moderated
 Number of emails received in May: 95
 Number of emails received in June: 144

Nettime-nl Dutch, unmoderated
 Number of emails received in May: 76
 Number of emails received in June: 79

Nettime-fr French moderated
 Number of emails received in May: 125
 Number of emails received in June: 126

Nettime-lat: Spanish/Portuguese moderated
 Number of emails received in May: 67
 Number of emails received in June: 73

Nettime-Ro Romanian moderated
 Number of emails received in May: 80
 Number of emails received in June: 62

Nettime-see South-East Europe moderated:
 Number of emails received in May: 27
 Number of emails received in June: 20

Nettime-zh Chinese, moderated
 Number of emails received in May: no data
 Number of emails received in June: no data

The list above shows that in these two months there was a good level of participation in the different languages lists. Of course English had more emails but the amount of subscribers in this language is enormous. It can be seen also that a list that is 3 months old like the South East Europe received a considered number of messages compared to the other ones that exist for more than 3 years.

This shows that there is a space new culture in the net, especially nettime. There are a growing number of different cultures that contribute and be a part of nettime. In a phone interview with Felix Stalder (May 2003), he said that they are open to new list, if someone comes and say they want to make a nettime on their own language, there is no problem. They do the support and their server is available for that.

6. Conclusions

With this small research we can see that there is a bit of multiculturalism in the net, especially in virtual communities and email discussion list such as Nettime. Of course this mixture of culture is far from being representative of the cultures in the world. And it is impossible to think of that, at least for the next years or decades, due to the fact that the majority of the world population (the majority in the southern hemisphere) has no access to the net.

The Internet is not a democratic medium as it was thought in the beginning of its uses. It is a portrait of the society where we live. I believe, though, it is a good portrait because it seems to be a more accessible medium than any other we had it before.

The participation level in lists as such is still really low. I am a lurker as many others (maybe thousands). For me one of the problems of participation is the written language, something that I am not so confident with. And also, I considered nettime a public space, and my public is a high level educated people, the authors of the books I read. That makes me think twice, three times, ten times before sending a post. This might restrain my active participation. The only time I sent email was about a happening in Brazil, something that I had experience from being close by.

Regarding that I agree completely with Alain Sondheim¹⁶, when he discussing if nettime was a community or not, said that in nettime "speaking is somewhat parasitized - by that I mean, it's a T-formation; one is much more aware of audience, lurkers, etc., than elsewhere. It's a form of publication, already reified in a list aura composed of books, newspapers, meetings, groupuscules, and so forth. So a reply (such as this) is always already deflected elsewhere - it's not that one is more 'careful' here, but one's more aware, perhaps, of the political economy of electronic community."

I believe this consciousness of the public and the carefulness to write make many not to participate, especially the ones from other cultures (none European and North American) because, of course, first language, but not only that. In third world countries, particularly in South America, where I come from, people were raised to look up to European and North American. We were taught, through media, that everything that comes from there is better. So there are some difficulties to us to participate in an equal basis level. We are not used to that. For that, email discussion list might be considered an excellent medium.

Even though nettime has different language groups, a common language is still a problem. In the Latin Nettime, which I subscribe (besides the English one), the emails are mainly in Spanish. The Portuguese speaking ones never discuss anything, only post announcements of events and exhibitions. I attribute that to the difficulty to write in Spanish. It is accepted emails in Portuguese, of course, but I

believe people do not want to state something or defend an idea in a language that they might be misunderstood. So, I see the level of Portuguese speaking participants really weak compared to other lists only in Portuguese which I participate. A solution, perhaps, could be a mainly Portuguese section.

To conclude, it can be said that the level of participants of online community is still mainly European and North American. Virtual communities, such as Nettime discussion list, can be an example of a beginning of multiculturalism in Internet. They are not representative of all the cultures in the world but they could be an open channel for diverse people to interact and have different points of view on events.

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