On the Internet and Cultural Differences

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I was greatly surprised when I received an e-mail from Jon Dorbolo inviting me to contribute to the APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Computer. I felt so honored. Our ensuing discussions through e-mails then turned toward a number of thorny issues and problems. Will the Internet eliminate all the differences among cultures? What roles does the Internet have in fostering intercultural understanding? Are there any obstacles to be overcome?

The questions are much timely and significant. The imminent arrival of the next century provides us with a chance to reflect on the direction the world is heading, and the rapid spread of the Internet is really an uncharted territory. What is clear, however, is that the Internet will figure prominently in the world. It will spread to practically every corner of the world, much as the telephones, fax machines, and televisions already did. What these older tools cannot do, however, is that they can't transfer computer files, and it is this ability that could allow for massive social and cultural changes. As the Internet is a many-to-many medium, it has the potential to create communities built around shared assumptions and values. This has led some to think that, when all parts of the world are wired to the global network, practically all significant cultural differences will be gone.

There is some doubt, however, to the idea that the Internet will bring about a culturally homogeneous world. The issue may be about how to define 'culturally homogeneous.' In one sense, the world is already culturally homogeneous because there are so many telephones and televisions around. I don't think that is an interesting sense. To be interesting, the notion should point to a situation which at present does not appear to obtain, i.e., when most or all of the world's cultures share enough of substantive values and ideals to get along well with one another. What these values and ideals are is a hugely complex matter, so I shall not even begin to discuss them here. My point is only that, whatever these shared values and ideals turn out to be, the Internet is instrumental in bringing them about, for whatever exactly these values are, they are the necessary presuppositions on which communication among culture is possible. And as the Internet is facilitating more of such communication, at least a way is there for these presuppositions, this set of shared values and ideals, to develop themselves. The Internet will also facilitate interpenetrations, each culture giving something to others and receiving something in return. Hence it is conceivable that the cultures will

share some set of values and ideals in common as a result. These shared values and ideals will not belong to any particular cultural tradition alone. As cultures learn from one another, they will eventually consist of elements from more than one tradition. There will clearly be continual adaptation and dynamism in the list of the values itself. Learning from other cultures does not imply that a culture will disappear or is absorbed into another. On the other hand, cultural differences will remain as strong as they are, except that some way needs to be found to make the parts differing seriously from the shared ideals harmless. Cultures will remain unique, while they gain respect and understanding from others because of the shared values and ideals.

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In the introduction to *Internet Culture,* David Porter writes:

The culture that the Net embodies … is a product of the peculiar conditions of virtual acquaintance that prevail online, a collective adaptation to the high frequency of anonymous, experimental, and even fleeting encounters familiar to anyone who has ventured into a newsgroup debate. The majority of one's correspondents in cyberspace, after all, have no bodies, no faces, no histories beyond what they may choose to reveal. There are no vocal inflections, no signatures, no gestures or embraces. There are words, but they often seem words stripped of context, words desperately burdened by the lack of the other familiar markers of identity in this strange, ethereal realm.[1]

In addition to the words "stripped of context," there are also words so full of contextual meanings that it becomes difficult for those outside the relevant contexts to understand them. I have in mind words one use when speaking with one's spouse. I remember writing and receiving many e-mails everyday from my wife who was writing her Ph.D. dissertation in the US a number of years ago. As conversations between married couples are, the words used are intimate and full of shared assumptions or backgrounds, words which are anything but "burdened by the lack of the other familiar markers of identity." The culture Porter mentions does represent the main culture of the Internet today, but that does not necessarily continue. It will certainly change when Internet use becomes more widespread and accessible.

As more people join the Internet, talks densely embedded with contexts will become more prevalent. People obviously use words that do not presuppose much when talking to strangers with whom they are not very acquainted. If the conversation is not allowed to go on, the words will fly away, and the depth of contexts and backgrounds and shared understandings won't develop. If the talk continues, the depth will emerge. Furthermore, if

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[1]David Porter, ed., *Internet Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. xi.

text-only communication becomes rarer as a result of technical breakthroughs, images and sounds could be parts of everyday e-mail correspondences. Hence the culture predicated on texts alone alluded to by Porter will change. Images and sounds will then be the required "familiar markers of identity," or at least they will supply the non-verbal means of communication which are currently lacking. When the Internet is really ubiquitous, one does not always use it to talk with strangers in the "ethereal realm;" there will be times when one wants to discuss issues of one's earthly realm with those whom one knows intimately. There does not seem to be any contradiction between being a member of both a local and a global community at the same time.

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The Internet may not be successful in creating a single superculture which supplants most of the details and nuances of the world's cultures, but the cultures will by no means be walled off from one another. Here I have in mind the world's major cultural traditions, such as Western and Asian.[2] What we are seeing is perhaps tremendous transformations within all the major cultural traditions. Challenged by outside influences, a traditional culture such as the Thai one will need to adapt. However, a dynamic, adaptive belief system is not a non-existent system. Ways will be found to change and to find a proper place for parts of the old system believed to be incongruent with the world. This change, however, does not necessarily imply that the cultures in which the belief systems are embedded will disappear. For example, the belief in hierarchy has been an important part of traditional Thai culture, but with the help of the Internet a new Thai culture is emerging which is more egalitarian. Such an emergence does not necessarily mean that Thais will completely forget the old belief in hierarchy. Instead, they should adopt the stance which regards the old belief as a benign fiction, or part of an alternate reality.[3] The belief in hierarchy, that is, should be kept within its own sphere, such as in traditional ceremonies or rituals. In such a ceremony participants are willing to suspend their actual beliefs and form a new set of beliefs as long as the ceremony lasts. We could say that during the ceremony there emerges a kind of "reality" which, though

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[2] It is likely, however, that the marginal or minority cultures could face tough times due to the spread of the Internet. But since the Internet is a tool, it can be used by members of the minority cultures to defend themselves and their cultures against the onslaught of the ruling majority cultures too. Besides, the Internet is being used by dissidents and activists against an oppressive regime, such as the Burmese junta. This illustrates the potential of the Internet in fighting *against* oppression and cultural hegemony.

[3] This is what I have been telling the Thai academic audience, hoping thereby to influence the course of Thai cultural change. I presented this idea first at a conference on application of information technology in language teaching and learning, organized by the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, late last year. The title of the talk was "Cultural Issues Pertaining to the Use of the Internet in Teaching and Learning in Thailand." I plan to write a full paper on this topic soon.

physically placed within the actual reality, is not strictly speaking a part of the latter, because the former has its own constitutive belief systems—those that give the ceremony its whole meaning and significance—which may not cohere with those of the latter. The situation is like when one watches movies, where its content could be regarded as constituting a kind of fictive reality. In a ceremony, however, the participants are integral to the event itself. Thus the traits that give Thais their cultural uniqueness and ties to the past won't have to go away. Thais will still be recognizably Thai. They will have their ceremonies, with all their usual pomps and circumstances, while remaining a player in the globalized world. Furthermore, the influences do not have to go only one way. The growing number of Thai restaurants and the increasing awareness of Buddhism in the West are some attestations of this cultural giving and taking that are already taking place.

As cultures interpenetrate one another, the situation provides for material which, I think, could become a subject matter for further philosophical research and reflection. One thing I have in mind is that the boundary between Western and Asian philosophies will perhaps become fuzzier. I don't mean just that there will be more comparative efforts, but that the natures of the two philosophies themselves may change. Perhaps Western philosophers will find inspirations and sources of new ideas from Eastern thoughts. They may even employ the methods of some schools of Asian philosophy (emphasis on the intuition, for example) in their inquiry. Perhaps Asian philosophy will benefit from the rigor of analytic philosophy in solving problems within their own tradition. Such interminglings of traditions are already taking place. Derek Parfit's work on personal identity, which draws upon some Buddhist sources,[4] proves to be a good example. On the other side, Thai philosopher and my colleague at Chulalongkorn Somparn Promtha is using both the Buddhist canon and works by Western philosophers to propose original solutions to problems in ethics and social philosophy.[5] He is representative of the interpenetration on this part of the world. The possibilities are many and various, and I believe they point to a very fruitful direction for doing philosophy in the future. The Internet could only facilitate and encourage this trend.

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[4]See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), pp. 273, 280, and 502-3.

[5]Somparn has done a number of works dealing with philosophical presuppositions and implications of problems in current affairs, including abortion, euthanasia, prostitution, among others, based on his reading of the Buddhist canon as well as Western philosophical literature. All of his works are in Thai, however. His most well known work, written in Thai, is *Buddhism and Ethical Problems: Buddhist View on the Problems of Prostitution, Abortion and Euthanasia* (Bangkok: Putthachart Press, 1992). In the book Somparn does not just explicate Buddhist thoughts on these problems, but he formulates his own position based on his interpretation of Buddhist teachings plus his study of such Western philosophers as Kant, Mill, Henry Sidgwick, Joel Feinberg, and Bernard Williams, among others.

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So I think I have answered at least some of Jon's questions. Now the big question is: Will this interpenetration of cultures facilitated by the Internet become a reality? I do know at least that the process is not automatic, and I don't think the situation will occur no matter what. There are many conditions that have to obtain first. One is that the world's cultures need to see the interpenetration to be good for them. As there are many actual cases today pointing to that direction, there is a reason to be cautiously optimistic. 'Cautiously' because things can always turn out contrary to what we expect if we do not keep up trying to convince the world that it is really a good thing.