**Zeitschrift:** Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft = revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera d'etnologia

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

**Band:** 5 (2000)

**Artikel:** Cyberspace, Internet communities and the self : new technosocial possibilities for identity

**Autor:** Pecci, Anna Maria

**DOI:** https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007494

# Cyberspace, Internet communities and the self

## New technosocial possibilities for identity

Anna Maria Pecci

In postmodern societies, computer and information technologies not only accelerate the transnational dynamics that connect economic, cultural, social, political and ethnic flows, they also affect the ways people feel, perceive, live their selves and their social interactions[1]. Considered within a utopian theoretical framework and according to compensatory and homologating perspectives, individuals choose to enter the computer screen and live in simulational worlds in order to fulfil expressive needs related to flexible, mutable, never-fixed identities, as fragmented and fragmentary as are postmodern de-centred subjects. Individual and collective relations with cyberspace and Internet communities[2], two «cultural inventions» (Escobar 1996: 111), highlight the way in which the need for self-disclosure, identity exploration, representation, self-improvement and collective belonging has not collapsed under the weight of a hyper-specialised and technological process of dis-individuation.

Postmodern subjects, with a sense of risk and trust modified by their relations with computer and information technologies, look for and create technosocial interactive forms. These are not only processes of «sociocultural construction set into motion in the wake of the new technologies» (Escobar 1996: 112), but also more specifically forms of identification between nature and technology that allow users to live the Net as a social environment (Stone 1997: 50). Although seeking to escape from the defined and constraining structures of everyday life, jacked-in people find themselves enmeshed in the creation of new structures and new rituals that signal the decline of the exclusionary opposition between the real and the virtual, face-to-face relations and interfaced exchanges.

[1] I wrote an earlier version of this article while I was a student in the MA programme in International Cultural Studies at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). The essay was conceived as an introductory and transdisciplinary discussion of the ways in which people experience life on the screen. The original purpose was to map the hybrid features of such individual and collective experiences, starting from a theoretical survey based on a speculative research method.
I wish to thank Prof. Mike Featherstone, who supervised this work at NTU, for his comments and suggestions. The responsibility for any mistakes and misunderstandings is mine alone.

[2] Here I wish to make a distinction between the concepts of cyberspace and Internet communi-

# The interface as expressive mask

The disjunctive character of postmodernity[3] affects the private and public spheres of life through fluidity and mobility. The loss of a sense of unilinear history, the compression of time and space, the playful mixing of codes, enframe and enable a «de-centred subject» (Featherstone 1992: 268). The dispersion of the subject can, however, be seen as the continuation of a process which started in modernity, when identity became more mobile, multiple, personal and self-reflexive than it used to be in traditional (premodern) societies.

Following Kellner, «while the locus of modern identity revolved around one's occupation, one's function in the public sphere (or family), postmodern identity revolves around leisure, centred on looks, images and consumption» (1992: 153). Postmodernity, hence, enhances the character of fluidity through a major emphasis on the theatrical play of individuals with their identities, facilitated by the multiplication and diversification of cultural styles, social roles and commodities.

The individual's choice to experience cyberspace and/or Internet communities can be explained in terms of a search for new possibilities of self-reflexivity and identity formation. There are, however, few differences between the relation that an individual establishes with cyberspace and the way he/she interacts with a particular product of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as on-line communities.

Here I will first refer to the use of cyberspace as a means to fulfil the expressive needs of discovering the self and its psychological and social dimensions. For my purpose, I will discuss cyberspace in terms of a Gibsonian «fictional world» (Featherstone and Burrows 1995: 6)[4] consisting in an information network with which computer users can get connected, where they can experience dislocation in a three-dimensional system of cultural data and where they can interact with iconic representations of entities which have no human referent outside the system.

Cyberspace, seen in a compensatory perspective, is the medium through which individuals, captured by its seductive allure (Stone 1991), can fulfil those psychological and expressive needs that real life leaves unsatisfied, thereby overcoming a deep sense of insufficiency or inadequacy. According to Heim, «the world rendered as pure information not only fascinates our eyes and our minds, it captures our hearts. We feel augmented and empowered. Our hearts beat in the machines. This is Eros» (1991: 61). The drive to prolong our physical existence beyond its mortality is reinforced, and made possible, by the desire of mastering the material and conceptual world behind the computer screen. In some respects, one might say that the limits of the human condition can be overcome only by emulating God's knowledge (1991: 69) and gaining a form of immortality that, nonetheless, can only be virtual, made possible by sacrificing the desire for the material. Cyberspace seduces human beings through the promise of a safe and fast journey into a world where dreams and desires, aspirations and ideals become true.

The availability of a wide range of opportunities, the possibility of their accomplishment, the speed through which this process can happen and the sense of safety that accompanies it are all elements of the fascinating image that cyberspace conveys to postmodern individuals. However, the erotic connection that links the individual to the computer and, through it, to cyberspace can be explained in different ways. For instance, desire, immediacy, safety, or speed can help us view the human/machine interaction as a sort of therapeutic practice through which the self can be rediscovered and assumed as an object of reflexivity.

Actually, according to Giddens, it is in modernity that the subject began to feel a strong sense of anxiety and insecurity, due to the lack of a framework (such

ties, for the former is an original fictional product that has become a crucial issue for academic speculation, while the latter are to be viewed as research data, the result of non speculative statements.

[3] In this work I will not openly discuss postmodernism, postmodernity and postmodernisation. However I refer to Jameson's (1984), Lyotard's (1979) and Featherstone's (1991) theories.

[4] Following Featherstone and Burrows (1995), there are three variants of cyberspace: Barlovian cyberspace; virtual reality (VR) and Gibsonian cyberspace. The first «refers to the existing international networks of computers» (1995: 5); the second indicates «a system which provides a realistic sense of being immersed in an environment» (p. 5, 6); the third is, in Gibson's own words, «a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts [...] A graphic representation of data abstracted from the bank of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding.» (Gibson 1984: 51)

as the small community, or *Gemeinschaft*) that could protect his/her sense of identity. In modern societies, therapy becomes the «secular version of the "confessional"» (Giddens 1991: 34), and it functions as «an expression of the reflexivity of the Self» (p. 34). In postmodernity the PC becomes the technological version of the confessional and of therapy, or at least of that kind of relationship that, although established with a stranger (be it a human being, a machine, or an abstract entity), is based on a sense of trust.

I would also maintain that while in everyday actions and face-to-face relationships trust is linked to risk in a direct way (the more one trusts a person, the more he/she risks, with respect to expectations), in cyberspace trust can be authentic, but risk is virtual. In other words, the individual can dare to trust something or someone (as in Internet communities), because he/she is protected by the interface.

The «inter-face», in this sense, is not only constituted by technological equipment (the terminal screen), it is also associated with the idea of the mask that the individual can choose to wear when interacting in cyberspace. This consideration is strictly linked to the fact that role-playing is at the heart of human behaviour in CMC domains.

Individuals use cyberspace as a way of escaping from the constraints that postmodern society imposes on them, and they assume it as a liberating and empowering means for transforming a fixed and homogeneous identity, the one required by society, into a multiplied and mutable one. Apparently there is no risk for the individual in playing different roles at the same time, for he/she is aware that the fact of still having a body (of being incorporated in the social system) will lead him/her to experience a «controlled de-control of the emotions» (Featherstone 1992: 282), a partial evasion from a normative context. Furthermore, the possibility of wearing various masks seems to be similar to the process of temporary symbolic inversion and transgression that carnivals, festivals and fairs produce. In such circumstances, there occurs the opportunity of becoming the/an Other, the one which, because «excluded as part of the identity-formation process becomes the object of desire» (Featherstone 1992: 283).

Hence, cyberspace seems to act as postmodern *locus* of a safe symbolic inversion of those classificatory markers that define identity and roles in terms of a dichotomous logic, within which one pole excludes the other (i.e. nature/culture, body/mind, organic/technological). The experience with cyberspace is, in this sense, liminal, since it is determined by the blurring of symbolic boundaries and the suspension of individuals in a «betwixt and between» (Turner 1977) dimension. As Stone puts it, «penetrating the screen involves a state change from the physical, biological space of the embodied viewer to the symbolic, metaphorical "consensual hallucination" of cyberspace; a space that is a locus of intense desire for refigured embodiment [...] Penetration translates into envelopment. In other words, to enter cyberspace is to physically *put on* cyberspace» (1991: 109). The «hallucination» described by Stone echoes the altered states of consciousness produced by drug experience as well as by shamanic rituals, for its ritual dimension marks both the individual's empowerment and his/her decoupling from the body (Stone 1991: 99) in a similar way. Heim argues that «the terminal, or end point, marks the death of the subject within the Real – the ultimate limits of a user's ability to act fully. Passing the terminal involves a form of rebirth within a new symbolic» (1991: 163). Between the act of jacking into cyberspace and the ability to live in it, lies the period of initiation, when the individual, by accessing esoteric knowledge, learns how to use a new symbolic code[5].

[5] We should not forget that the basis of social interaction in CMC is represented by textuality and that both verbal and non-verbal languages need to be translated into written forms of communication. This does not imply, however, that people do not need to imagine their interlocutors' feelings, state, expressions anymore: «communicators add words in brackets to denote voice inflection, or body movements appropriate to the message» (Argyle and Shields 1996: 64), such as <shrug> or (LAUGH). The bracketed words bring the body into conversation with an action, while emoticons are another way to translate physical expressions on the computer net. Denotative marks are not the only elements of the new symbolic code however, for «Netiquette» constitutes the «book of etiquette» of this techno-social behaviour, thus implying that once in the Net, people still need to refer both to the body, as vehicle of emotions, and to common rules in order to avoid violence and anarchy.

# Internet communities as new «tribes»

The rite of passage that marks the gaining of new communicative skills and one's rebirth within a new context is the ritual moment that also signals the individual's new membership within on-line communities. The collective dimension through which cyberspace can be experienced is exemplified by the different kinds of on-line communities that exist on Internet.

From a homologating perspective, there is no sort of opposition between on-line and face-to-face (or real) communities[6]. According to Rheingold, virtual communities are «social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on [...] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace» (1993). He does not define virtual communities as opposite to real (face-to-face) communities, since the former share some aspects with the latter, such as the fact of having an affective basis of common emotions and feelings. Although one may argue that on-line communities cannot be compared to real communities because they lack two of the fundamental elements that determine «authenticity» (i.e. touch and the sharing of a common physical space)[7], I maintain that on-line communities do represent a computer-mediated recreation of *Gemeinschaft*. Through the transformation of a conceptual space into a common place, people recreate on Internet the sense of face-to-face communities.

Through the practice of a series of rituals (i.e. naming; learning new communicative skills based on textuality; being introduced to other members of the community) and the respect of norms and conventions (i.e. Netiquette and those rules that seek to prevent people from being attacked by flaming actions or lurking attitudes), members of on-line communities have adapted their need for a sense of belonging to a new dimension: space becomes place since it is felt like a familiar dimension wherein to express oneself and interact with other people. Proxemics in on-line communities is lived through social interactive rites that, once shared and recognised by all members, become the cohesive factor that keeps them together, lending them a sense of familiarity and intimacy. As a consequence, it is not rare to read of people that have formed a sort of «neighbourhood» within one community, thus replicating the effects that sociality usually has on human interactions in everyday life: preference is presumably given to those who respond to our cultural expectations better than others.

It is also in this sense that a principle of differentiation, *la distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), still operates within a computer-mediated context of social exchanges and needs. In other words, habitus, that cluster of classificatory principles and social markers that determines the different ways in which we perceive and interact with people, still defines our relationships. These social aggregations, however, seem to be ephemeral, since the speed that determines CMC and its fascinating effects on people also affects the way in which social interactions are lived.

Given such features, the various kinds of on-line communities operating on the Net (MUDs and IRC[8], for instance, which can mainly be considered as emotional communities, or soc.culture[9] and subversive groups that seem to be both emotional and goal-oriented communities) can be described in terms of «tribes» (Maffesoli 1996: 6), micro-groups in which every member, as a response to the process of disindividuation he/she is submitted to in mass society, emphasises his/her role as *persona* over and above the social function he/she has. In this sense, tribes are unstable because their members lack any fixed identity: as *personae*, they can play multiple roles, wear different masks and belong in different micro-groups at one time. Tribes are also temporary as they are based on emotions and on an affective interaction.

On-line communities are a conse-

6 Such a theoretical framework also explains why I have deliberately chosen not to use the adjective «virtual» to refer to on-line communities.

7 See Mitra (1997) for instance.

8 MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Dimensions/Domains) are services «in which users simulate personae (as in role-playing game(s) [...]) and interact with others in a real-time quest or game» (Bromberg 1996: 144). IRC (Internet Relay Chat) is a chat service «wherein users create an identity with a nickname and join "channels" where they discuss a vast array of topics and simulate actions» (p. 144).
Both services enable users to get connected to imagined virtual worlds with only the aid of cues from other users and the design of the simulated environment.

9 «Soc.culture» refers to on-line nations and/or ethnic minority groups which use Internet not only as a medium of political propaganda, but also as an environment wherein to recreate or simulate the lost unity of the nation and/or of the group. Soc.culture usually addresses diasporic people, spread all over the world, who aim to reconstitute a sense of belonging to a homeland. I will return to this point below.

quence of mass society which has enhanced the feeling of collective belonging shared by those people who decide to join tribes and live as personae, instead of individuals. While individuals have to achieve goals and play functional roles, personae depend on others, need an organic whole to belong to. They gather together to form groups around a principle of «sociality» (Maffesoli 1996: 66). While the individual is unified and homogeneous, the persona is heterogeneous and can play multiple roles. Tribes, which are composed by personae only, are characterised by the performance of ritual practices that function as «social glue» as well as symptoms of the presence of a mystical dimension in the collective interaction. A religious principle in fact regulates the social dynamics of tribes, while their members share a sense of bonding[10].

Tribes represent, in the end, a way of escaping from the fixed and unified essence of identity that acts as a source of stability and order in the functioning of modern and postmodern societies, and they also offer individuals the possibility of recreating a sense of belonging in an emotional aggregation, thus exemplifying what Martin describes as the «dynamic duality» formed by the «pure collective and the pure individual» (1981: 17). According to Martin, every society has a set of expressive needs that must be fulfilled through practices which appeal to the sense of community that individuals feel beyond the specialised and fragmented apparatus of society. Consequently self-discovery, self-fulfilment, richness of personality, variety and depth of relationships can be pursued through the experience of association. The more a society is specialised, the more the individual feels the urgent need for aggregation, so the ideal of a «purified community», such as Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* (1963), is assumed as a goal to fulfil expressive needs. The interrelation between the individual and the collectivity seems to be the only way in which one can find his/her unity with the whole. In on-line communities (now considered as tribal forms of aggregation), fluid identities (like the ones individuals can assume while interacting on their own within cyberspace) are accompanied by a sense of affective bonding and by the performance of rituals that reinforce the sense of belonging to a collective dimension where individuals can break the taboos imposed by society. Through the creation of narratives, individuals, now personae, share a sense of sacredness.

However, these aggregations cannot be conceived only in compensatory terms. They actually function both as means by which individuals can break the boundaries imposed by social order and as places where a new kind of normative system takes form. Internet communities' social dynamics seem to provide members with a text to read and learn in order to know how to interact and be recognised; a text that provides people with the possibility of sharing a common sense of belonging and a proxemics that, on Internet, is made of a physical dislocation and a symbolic incorporation. In this sense, on-line communities become places where people gather together, seeking to establish a new sense of commonality not determined by physical proximity but by a sense of intimacy and familiarity. Their members, through social interactive rites (i.e. naming or the practice of «idle-talk» as described by Rheingold), feel they belong in a familiar and social dimension, an in-group that defines their identity against out-groups. People finally fulfil their expressive needs by relating to other people and to the place they inhabit. The place they share with others, a site made of symbolic rituals and textual social interaction, is lived as a «personal history».

The new social formation implicitly develops a system of social conduct that guarantees the functioning of the group. Netiquette is one example of how a normative apparatus is transferred and adapted to on-line behaviours. It also partially makes up for the lack of habitus (in its embodied cultural form) that characterises on-line interactions. Members of Internet communities share a different sense of trust when interacting

[10] The etymology of «religiosity» and «reliance» derives from the Latin *religare*, «to bind together».

with other members of communities. The lack of non-verbal behaviour and of those social markers (gestures, posture, tonal voice, accent, clothes style) that regulate human interaction in everyday life affects the way people relate to each other. Similarly to the individual experience with cyberspace, members of Internet communities take advantage of the opportunity of wearing masks and/or being anonymous in order to trust strangers without risk.

## Concluding remarks, omissions, further developments

As I have argued, the individual and collective practices based on interaction with information technologies and products can be explained in terms of postmodern experiences of self-formation and fulfilment of expressive needs. Their effects are multiple, but all of them lead to a crucial observation: the blurring of the symbolic boundaries we are witnessing forces us to rethink our conceptions of communities, reality, virtuality, body and mind.

The combination of compensatory and homologating perspectives might also be helpful in explaining the functioning of a peculiar kind of Internet community, one based on common feelings, say emotions, and goal-oriented at the same time. For instance, on-line groups such as «soc.culture» (on-line nations and/or ethnic minorities), gay and lesbian groups, subversive and counter-cultural organisations (hackers and radical right groups) not only can be considered as homologous to face-to-face communities, but they can also be seen as collective attempts to take part in the public sphere in a more democratic way than the ones offered by real political life. All of them function as an arena or forum where multiple voices can be expressed. Dialogue is the fundamental way in which these voices construct human and civil rights, leisure activities and dissent actions. So, Internet acts as a polyphonic technology that allows the representation of those subjects who, in everyday life, still struggle to find their own place in society and/or are censored. The experience of India narrated via Internet (Mitra 1997) is a good example of how on-line communities fulfil both affective (seeking to reunite diasporic people through the sense of community) and functional needs (placing Indian people in the position to claim their civil rights), but it also demonstrates that there is no substantial difference between the way in which real and virtual communities are produced, since both of them are the result of an inventive process.

The practices with cyberspace and Internet communities exemplify how it is becoming increasingly difficult to think of social and cultural dynamics through a binary logic based on opposing poles. The interaction between human beings and information technologies represents a liminal practice that produces the collapse of the distinction between body and mind, body and machine, individual and collectivity, community and society, reality and virtuality. Hybridity determines the relations among all these elements. In a postmodern perspective, I would conclude by saying that these practices, so far fragmented and fragmentary, signal the possible emergence of new lifestyles.

In everyday life, a major role in determining habits and sociocultural practices is played by «cultural intermediaries» (Featherstone 1991) who mediate between the spheres of cultural production and consumption[11]. In this work I have not focused on the way in which they operate within the information technologies domain, but I cannot fail to acknowledge that the experiences I have discussed are influenced by their systems of values, beliefs, cultural assumptions, needs, even desires. There is then also a political side that must be analysed, a side that is defined by the power relations linking CMC producers to mediators to consumers. I might think of discussing such an issue in a work where it could also be

[11] All those specialists engaged in the production and distribution of symbolic commodities and services can be said to be «new cultural intermediaries». People working in marketing, advertisements, public relations, newspapers, magazines, fashion journalism domains (but the list is incomplete) mediate between intellectuals and mass audiences transferring the former's knowledge and lifestyles to the latter. In such a cultural process, that I would call one of democratisation, the intermediaries, belonging in western (white) upper-middle class, operate an acceleration of the collapse of the boundaries that separate symbolic hierarchies (see Featherstone 1991).

possible to focus on the postmodern practices of de-centred subjects more specifically. In fact, the «young "de-centred subjects" who enjoy the experimentation and play with fashion and the stylisation of life» (Featherstone 1992: 268-269) probably enjoy the same kind of pleasure with PCs, cyberspace, VR and CMC. The next step in the exploration of technosocial attitudes might therefore lead me to the exploration of Internet Cafes, real/virtual places in which people, between drinking a cup of coffee and jacking in cyberspace, discover a new form of association, a new self, a new lifestyle.

# Bibliography


ARGYLE Katie and Rob SHIELDS
1996. «Is There a Body in the Net?», in: Rob SHIELDS (ed.), *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, p. 58-69. London: Sage.

BOURDIEU Pierre
1984 (1979). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

BROMBERG Heather
1996. «Are MUDs Communities? Identity, Belonging and Consciousness in Virtual Worlds», in: Rob SHIELDS (ed.), *Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies*, p. 143-152. London: Sage.

ESCOBAR Arturo
1996. «Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture», in: Ziauddin SARDAR and Jerome R. RAVETZ (eds), *Cyberfutures: Culture and Politics on the Information Superhighway*, p. 111-137. London: Pluto.

FEATHERSTONE Mike
1991. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage.
1992. «Postmodernism and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life», in: Scott LASCH and Jonathan FRIEDMAN (eds), *Modernity and Identity*, p. 265-290. Oxford: Blackwell.

FEATHERSTONE Mike and Roger BURROWS
1995. «Cultures of Technological Embodiment: An Introduction», in: Mike FEATHERSTONE and Roger BURROWS (eds), *Cyberspace Cyberbodies Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, p. 1-19. London: Sage.

GIBSON William
1984. *Neuromancer*. London: Harper Collins.

GIDDENS Anthony
1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

HEIM Michael
1991. «The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace», in: Michael BENEDIKT (ed.), *Cyberspace: First Steps*, p. 59-80. London: MIT.

JAMESON Fredric
1984. «Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism». *New Left Review* (London) 146: 53-92.

KELLNER Douglas
1992. «Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities», in: Scott LASCH and Jonathan FRIEDMAN (eds), *Modernity and Identity*, p. 141-177. Oxford: Polity Press.

LYOTARD Jean-François
1979. *La condition postmoderne*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.

MAFFESOLI Michel
1996 (1988). *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage.

MARTIN Bernice
1981. *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

MITRA Ananda
1997. «Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet», in: Steve JONES (ed.), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*. London: Sage.

RHEINGOLD Howard
1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, MA: Wesley Publishing (Electronic version).

STONE Allucquere Rosanne
1991. «Will the Real Body Please Stand up? Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures», in: Michael BENEDIKT (ed.), *Cyberspace: First Steps*, p. 81-118. London: MIT.

1997 (1995). *Desiderio e Tecnologia: Il Problema dell'Identità nell'Era di Internet*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

TÖNNIES Ferdinand
1963. *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft, Comunità e Società*. Milano: Comunità.

TURNER Victor
1977. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.


# Abstract

## Cyberspace, Internet communities and the self: New technosocial possibilities for identity

Why do people decide to enter the computer screen and start to live a virtual life? Is their new identity really opposed to the old, the «real» one? What happens to the body? Do they really leave it behind? Going beyond the binary logic that opposes virtuality to reality, machine to body, individuality to collectivity and community to society, the author discusses computer-mediated environments in which technosociality regulates individual and collective behaviours. Seduced by the erotic invisibility of cyberspace, people cross it in order to fulfil those expressive needs that everyday life leaves unsatisfied. Thus, they play with their identities, explore new selves and gather together in new forms of collectivity, the process of wearing multiple masks going hand-in-hand with the creation of a new tribalism. As users cannot stop experiencing their physical existence, nor cease to «belong» to a variety of communities, technosocial interaction is governed by normative and ritual attitudes close to those that regulate face-to-face relationships, but implying a different degree of trust and risk. The computer screen ultimately acts as a liminal site where the boundary between real and virtual collapses, and new cultural, social and psychological meanings emerge. On the human/machine interface lies a whole range of alternative lifestyles, made available by the encounter between decentred subjects and new technologies.



# Author

Anna Maria Pecci (1970), cultural anthropologist, was an interne at the Musée d'ethnographie of Neuchâtel in 1997. In 1999 she was awarded a MA in International Cultural Studies at the Nottingham Trent University (UK). She is currently doing research on urban displays.

Address: Via Aurelia 532, 00165 Roma, Italy.