Digital Navigators: Ethnic Communities in Cyberspace

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> *Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced*
> *daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every*
> *nation... A graphic representation of data abstracted*
> *from the banks of every computer in the human system.*
> *Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the*
> *nonspace of the mind, clusters of constellations of data.*
> *Like city lights, receding.*
> - Gibson 1984:51[1]

Abstract

This article looks at the nature of new communication technologies and the ways of mapping the substantial social and cultural changes of individuals and society influenced by new technologies. It seeks to identify how digital communication remakes traditional modes of communication and considers transnational social spaces as a key concept for understanding the current dynamics of the process of migration. It also suggests the need to innovate and reinterpret a sense of community and identity as well as new arrangements of the social and the spatial in human life in general. The Croatian community in Australia will be used as an example for such questioning.

1. Introduction: a possible dawn

The basic argument of this article is that, before the Internet, communities were people who lived or worked spatially close to each other.[2] The global Internet transforms this – for those, as always, who have access to it – because it enables like-minded people to form communities regardless of where they are located in the physical world. Never before has it been possible for groups and individuals to assemble, co-operate, explore, organise and discuss with so little interference from the barriers of time and distance. Instead of transporting the user to a different place, a

sense of presence may bring the objects and people from another place to the communication media of the user's environment.

This article is based on two main premises:

1. The migrant experience of cyberspace contributes to the complexity of the issue of identity and the process which results in the creation of a new hybrid identity.

2. The Internet is one of the central mechanisms for the production of contemporary culture and the creation of various forms of identity.

2. Virtual communities: searching for the like-minded

The concept of ethnicity is in constant flux partly due to new means of communication. With the increased use of new communication technologies, where the social space can expand over several geographic spaces, the concepts of identity, belonging, homeland, distance, presence and place will only become more complex. These new forms of (virtual) migration can bring together distant and separate geographic spaces beyond the grasp of physical proximity, thereby providing a potential for constituting virtual communities.

The word *virtual* is often used to describe graphic objects and animated personae which populate fictional, ritual and digital domains as representatives of actual persons and things. These software agents and virtual objects stand for physical persons and places, and have significant impacts on our understanding and construction of actual reality (Rheingold 1991). This is not such a new phenomenon, but it is gaining special relevance with the emergence of virtual communities (Rheingold 1993, Smith and Kollock 1999) which share their social space(s), as mediated by new communication technologies. This implies a process of the restructuralisation of social space and social relations (Jameson 1991, Virilio 1995). The opening of virtual or cyberspace began as a movement of hyper-deterritiorialisation. As Appadurai (1990) argues, "the new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models." He proposes a framework which identifies five dimensions of the

'global cultural flow' – ethnoscapes, mediascpaes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes (Appadurai 1990:296).

The virtual raises issues regarding our attitudes and actions towards our understanding of the importance of balancing the virtual with the actual in our everyday life, and the virtual and the abstract in our culture. Since the end of the previous century the concept of virtual community has been introduced into this theoretical context (Rheingold 1993, Porter 1997, Smith and Kollock 1999.) Rheingold's seminal text, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, is of special significance here. He defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold 1993:5).

3. Space – virtuality – virtual space

An information society is a society which is characterised by an increased use of communication technologies, technological convergence between computers and telecommunications, and associated social changes (Poster 1990, Bukatman 1993, Virilio 1995). I will discuss the potential implications of these issues, tracing them at the level of ethnicity, community, interpersonal relationships, culture and society.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century questions about nationhood, ethnicity and identity are in the forefront of political and theoretical agendas. These issues were raised in the theoretical discourse, at the end of the previous century, as being in a state of fragmentation (Giddens 1991, Beck 1992, Bauman 1995, Kellner 1997). They are as fluid as any cultural group, and are therefore difficult to define. However, there is a broad consensus in regarding virtual (Rheingold 1993, Smith and Kollock 1999) communities as a late modern phenomenon which came into the focus of interest under the influence of radical social changes caused by advances in communication technologies, which have become increasingly decentralised and have a tendency to be based around networks of mutually interdependent localised groups. This emerging cultural landscape requires a theoretical reassessment of cultural relations, including an appreciation of the complexities of simultaneously

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local and global networks of cultural production, communication and consumption. The nature of these interconnections has been shaped by the concept of *hybrid identities*, as discussed in recent cultural debates (Lash 1992, Friedman 1992, Radhakrishnan 1993, Morley and Robins 1995).

The new information technologies, as central mechanisms for the production of contemporary culture, are generating fundamental transformations in the structure and meaning of contemporary society (Poster 1990, Jameson 1991). The Internet has a key role in this electronically mediated communication that infiltrates interpersonal relations and permeates society. It is viewed as a universal tool, a human-created 'ambience' which is altering the local structures of the historical world into non-local structures. In a world of distributed virtual realities, multilocal net-links and online multiuser environments, any person can actively contribute to the shaping and function of the net as a creative media forum for exchanging information and expressing ideas without structural restrictions. Although basically textual at this stage of development, the internet is a multimodal type of communication (Kress and Van Leeuven 2001), where visual and sound components are equally important, and it is only through this media interplay that the diverse elements of identity construction emerge, and both stabilise and destabilise the notion of cultural identity. In this sense technology is not a neutral instrument that merely facilitates certain human activity, but it is involved in the creation of culture (Poster 1990, Benedikt 1991, Lunenfeld 1993, Heim 1993). Computer-mediated communication is, therefore, a projective medium for the construction of diverse public and private spaces. This results in the appearance of computer-mediated or virtual communities (Rheingold 1993, Foster 1997, Smith and Kollock 1999). One common element to all communities is mutually understood communication. Communication means encounter and interaction, and it happens somewhere. I will therefore briefly examine the concept of space as a frame of these interactions.

Lefebvre (1991) proposes a concept of space as a social construction and as a representation of social practices that are specific to a particular historic period. Lefebvre argues that "(social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre 1991:26). It incorporates the social actions of both individuals and the collective. They ex-

press themselves within it, and it is hence essential to society. It operates as a tool for the analysis of society through a complex structure of social actions, social locations, spatial functions and spatial forms. Social space is, therefore, a multi-dimensional set of relatively autonomous fields, within which the participants are constantly engaged in activities of different forms (producing symbols). It can be constructed and reconstructed according to different visions and divisions. Social space contains a great diversity of natural and social objects, including networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. In such defined space an individual is a

> ...continuously constructed product of intersections
> or junctions of spatial fields' and cannot therefore be
> considered to exist in a unified homogenous space. Only
> our bodies operate in Euclidean space, but our senses
> and our mind occupy more fluid spaces which are the
> result of cultural constructs. These constructs tend to
> develop towards a system of signs as representational
> spaces where 'the space as directly lived tends towards
> an imaginary, sometimes utopian system of textual
> or/and non-textual signs.
> (Lefebvre 1991:19)

So, what is space and how is it constituted? Considering that it might be defined as a prime organising concept of physics which defines the universe, I would propose a basic definition of space which determines its essence. Space is an abstract conceptual, logical and mathematical idea which defines the positions of things, their relations and the totality of possible relations of things. In this sense the concept of space is a rather complex frame which engages the participant in the multileveled meaning-making process. When we are talking about virtual space we are actually thinking of visual space, which is a two-dimensional representation of an *actual* space perceived by the sense of sight and transformed into a *virtual* space. It possesses the many characteristics of social space. Its main form is simultaneity, encounter, interaction of everything that is *there*, everything that is produced in space through the process of co-operation or through confrontation. Like any real space it is related to three general concepts – form, structure and function – and it can be analysed along these concepts. Therefore, virtual space is a form of language: it can be

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'read'. But instead of constructing a simple message, it is a set of overlapping multilayered directions and instructions (Lunenfeld 1993, Heim 1998).

4. Scratching the surface: diaspora, culture, identity

Migrants' connections to place and people are part of the process of migration embedded in issues of culture and identity. This process transforms individuals and results in the creation of multiple identities which construct a new unique hybrid identity. It also generates the simultaneous co-existence of the opposed processes of both cultural change and resistance to change in ethnic or migrant communities. Migration has a significant impact on cultural values. The previously distinct hierarchies of 'here' and 'there', 'self' and 'Other', centre and margin, influence national self-identification. Ethnic and national identities manifest themselves in the lives of individuals by connecting them with some people and dividing them from others. Such identities are often deeply embedded in a person's sense of self, defining an 'I' by placing it against a background 'we'. Foster argues that a community is built by 'a sufficient flow' of 'we-relevant' information. The 'we' or the collective identity that results is structured around others who are seen as similar to the 'me' (Foster 1997:25).

Croatian actual and virtual communities have been formed mainly according to national, ethnic and regional affiliation. If the relationship is hierarchically structured, such that the national is supposed to subsume or transcend ethnic identity, then it produces a 'hyphenated identity' such as Croatian-Australian, Vietnamese-Australian and so forth, where the hyphen marks "a dialogic and non-hierarchical conjuncture" (Radakrishnan 1996:204). But this only indicates an effort to overcome such a complex issue in which a person remains in a liminal space where the home country is not 'real' in its own terms, and yet is real enough to impede full integration into the Australian society. On the other hand, the 'present home' is materially real, but "not real enough to feel authentic" (Radhakrishnan 1996:204). Therefore, such a fluid personality in search of his or her identity feels a need for knowledge and close connections with the home country.

The imperative need of migrants, not only for communication with the homeland, but also for more immediate communication on a day-to-day basis, has brought about the creation of virtual communities. The emergence of Croatian virtual communities in Australia has partly been a result of dramatic transformations that took place in the homeland, but also the interplay of socio-political developments in Australia and the accessibility of new communication technologies. It is also a result of an increased awareness of the accessibility of diverse data related to the everyday social and political life 'back there'. One significant example is an ongoing process of post-war reconstruction in the country, as well as the simultaneous and complex processes of adjustments to the standards of the EU, with a view to potential unification with it, which is regarded by both the leading party and the opposition coalition as a climax of the long process of detachment from the remains of what was once the state of South Slavs. It can be argued that the core concern of cultural identity is reflected through the concept of community beyond globalisation, in which all things are (inter)connected and where physical distances become insignificant. Here, the concept of space is redefined under constantly changing social, political and cultural circumstances, both in Croatia and Australia.

So, what does being Croat in Australia (but also in the USA, Germany and/or Croatia) mean, and how does one construct a Croatian identity? Anderson (1983) has described the nation as an imagined community which is produced through the sharing of a range of myths and knowledge. This may turn into a transhistorical and mystic quest for origins. Bauman (2001) defines late modern community as being representative of a 'common understanding' which remains unachieved, and therefore virtual, because it "stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess" (Bauman 2001:3). He argues that, at the time of globalisation, we are all interdependent. There are tasks which "each individual confronts but which cannot be tackled and dealt with individually" (Bauman 2001:149). Therefore, we need other individuals for "sharing and mutual care." Bauman argues that "we miss community because we miss security" (Bauman 2001:144). In this sense, Croats in Australia have a high degree

of national coherence, whether visible through various interest groups and associations, or 'invisible', but maintaining elements of their cultural traditions on a private and personal level and only occasionally visible to their broader community.

5. Border crossings – interactive utopia

The aim of new media is to transform the traditional passive, receiving audience of mass media into an interactive audience of the Internet in its current form. However, the question is whether, when communicating in a disembodied form, we can construct a meaningful social community. This question also raises important concerns about the possibility of developing close social relationships with people that cannot be met in the physical world, and how the communities are formed and maintained where the other participants are not known.

There is, however, very solid evidence from everyday practice that people can discuss their individuality and collectivity in the context of new cultural and political geographies shaped by new communication technologies. Instead of sharing the same characteristics of their social position and other local issues, participants in virtual space have a greater tendency to base their relationships with other participants on the basis of shared interests. Croatian migrants regularly access web sites containing news and multiple news lists in their home country. They exchange information from politics, economics and sport to culture, local news and individual web pages of their family members and friends. They participate in chat groups linking their current experience with memories of their homeland. This gaze may be uncritical and nostalgic, and Croatia as a homeland may be cultivated in a diasporian ignorance of the realities of the home country, or it can be cultivated as an idealised, mythical space which serves as an antidote to the maladies of the 'here' and 'there'. Participants may pretend that the homeland has not changed since they left it, or that only certain changes have occurred, which only nurture such a mythical construction, such as a centuries-long dream of an independent state. Links between members of virtual communities are, therefore, based on the relative homogeneity of their interests. Operating via the net, virtual communities are glo-

calised. They are simultaneously global and local, where global interconnectivity intersects with domestic issues. All this indicates that it is possible to create non-physical communities where meaningful and important social contact occurs among and for the participants.

6. Conclusion: digital diasporas under construction

In the contemporary global information society millions of users interact in virtual info-spheres, expressing, as well as testing, their social, cultural and political ideas. The digital transformation is simultaneously unfolding in the intertwined processes of technological innovation, social reorganisation and cultural change. We are becoming the inhabitants of techno-cultural environments that are structured by new forms of technology, where digital communication remakes every aspect of traditional patterns of daily life.

It is therefore essential to understand how people inhabit and use virtual space in order to innovate and reinvent a sense of community. The question whether virtual migrant communities, these 'digital diasporas' created and supported in virtual space, will alter the fabric of our physical communities remains open to further investigation. These investigations can be especially useful as a way of questioning, rethinking and redefining issues of belonging and distance, identity as a construct and identity as natural, and the politics of its representation. Therefore, the future of Croatian communities in Australia, as well as the Croatian community in Croatia itself, and the related issues of identity and its representations due to the new technologies, should be a matter of complex negotiations. An analysis in this area will be crucial for understanding what these communities are, and which types of communities people can create under the changing social and cultural circumstances as a result of the rapid development of the new communication technologies.

[1] The term *cyberspace* was coined by William Gibson, and was first used in his novel *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984).

[2] The arguments presented in this article are based on my involvement in various formal and informal Internet discussion groups currently active in the Croatian community in Australia, as well as the observations of these groups and the web content lists, both in Australia and Croatia. These include the Croatian Information Centre of South Australia (www.croatiasa.com), the Croatian World Congress – Australian branch (www.crowc.org), small informal discussion groups (Down and Under), Crolinks (www.crolinks.com) and Culturenet (www.culturenet.hr), to name just a few.

Croatian communities have a long history of more than two hundred years of immigration to Australia. For more information on the history of Croatian immigration and Croatian communities in Australia, see Šutalo, I., *Croatians in Australia: Pioneers, Settlers and their Descendants* (2004) and Čolić-Peisker, V., *Croatians in Western Australia: Migration, Values and Identity* (Murdoch University: PhD thesis, 2000).

For more information on the impact of the media on the Croatian national identity in Australia, see Kolar-Panov, D., *Video, War and the Diasporic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1997).

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