

ONLINE/OFFLINE: CAN YOU TELL THE DIFFERENCE? PORTUGUESE VIEWS ON INTERNET MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT:

At the same time Internet Mediated Communication (IMC) offers new relational spaces based on the concept of network – decentred, flexible, mutable and bi-directional – and also seem to suggest a dichotomy between being online or offline. This paper intends to deconstruct this dichotomy and thus contribute towards the debate on the connexions between these two worlds, presenting data gathered through a national survey conducted in Portugal on Internet users in the ccTLD.pt¹, and a qualitative study addressing Internet Relay Chat (IRC) Portuguese users.

The paper argues that the online and offline world aren't separate realms of experience due to the distinct and mutable individuals' motivations and representations whenever they interact in both spaces. In that way, forms of human communication in the Internet are not jeopardising those of the spaces not mediated by Internet, as they seem to complement each other, overlapping 'material' and 'digital' sociability networks.

KEYWORDS:

Internet Mediated Communication; Technology; Network; Individualization; Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, Communication represents a new Utopia, coupled with information technologies. It stands for renewed forms of interpersonal and mass interaction through computer networks, operating in a global, national or local scale. In fact, this “technological sublime” centres its attention mainly in the possibilities for communication between individuals or groups, turning the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) into one of its essential trends. Particularly, what distinguishes it from other forms of communication is that, as a system of synchronic or asynchronous communication, CMC aggregates relational spaces founded in the concept of network – decentred, multiple, flexible, simultaneous and bi-directional.

By transforming the ways we interact, information and communication technologies assert themselves as powerful vehicles of socialisation and construction of individual and collective identities. Furthermore, due to its specific technological traits,

they tend to introduce in the social imaginary a dichotomy between being online or offline. This present paper pursues a deconstruction of these simplistic and ideological perspectives by emphasizing how the online and offline world complement each other, due to the diverse individual and collective appropriations of these conversational spaces.

Based on the ISCTE Ciberfaces Project focused on Internet users (Paquete de Oliveira & Barreiros, 2000), and on a qualitative case study addressing Internet Relay Chat (IRC) users (Nascimento, 2001ab), we thus introduce a discussion about the social dimensions of appropriation of CMC, empirically grounded in academic studies in Portugal. Sharing Manuel Castells's views, the CMC is not to be translated into isolation or distance from the world; but, on the contrary, into stimulation of interpersonal encounters in the Internet, and extension of these relationships built on the space of flows towards the space of places.

According to Mark Poster (1995), the frequent reference to the opposition between real and unreal, as a starting point to the analysis of the relations established in the Internet, tend to hinder our capacity to question what is in the genesis of its use. In other words, we should not let the possibilities given by technology drive us away from the questioning the in-depth reasons, which make people use the Internet as a form of communication, substituting or complementing others.

BEING 'MATERIAL' AND 'DIGITAL' IN INTERACTION NETWORKS

Analysing media representations around the use of Internet in Portugal (Cardoso, 1998) shows that human forms of association present themselves as one of the Internet's spheres which raises the greatest perplexity in public opinion. The Internet as 'information technology' is understood by the majority of the public to be a step forward in the evolution of the services socially performed by television – the communication and information technology more disseminated worldwide – but the fact that groups of individuals use Internet as 'social technology' to communicate amongst themselves is still the object of some apprehension.

Thus, according to Garcia (2001), the nexus communication, technology and civilization is inherently present in most discussions about the 'technological ecosystem' surrounding the current hype over the 'new infocomputational environment', which brings along significant modifications not only on economical,

cultural and social processes, but also on individual's world views. These modifications cause some ambiguities regarding the status of online and offline communication, specifically the character of 'Cyberspace'.

Although, in this article, we do not intend to discuss it thoroughly, the common definition of 'Cyberspace' has played quite a striking part on the current paradoxes over the online world. William Gibson, the first author to use the expression, defines it as "(...) *the point at which media [flow] together and surround us. It's the ultimate extension of the exclusion of daily life. With cyberspace as I describe it you can literally wrap yourself in media and not have to see what's really going on around you.*" (apud Barnes, 1996: 197). Clearly, this description envisions an 'online ambience' separated from the 'real world' that is deeply engraved in public opinion expressed in media and in some 'technological fetishist' communities.

Criticizing these perspectives, marked by technological determinism means starting from different assumptions, that is: the intercommunities between online and offline spaces structured around interaction networks.

According to Castells, the network constitutes the central form of organized interaction that is enabled "(...) *by the choices and strategies of social actors, be it individuals, families, or social groups.*" (2001: 127). This centring on the individual reminds the metaphoric image of the '*bricoleur*' (Lévi-Strauss, 1976), actively committed in the appropriation of 'materials' to define/redefine his own practices, without a concrete project or final objectives, confusing himself with his creations and productions.

In fact, some social scientists (Castells, 2000; Slevin, 1999) criticize a debate mainly focused on symptoms and not on the practices and representations of Internet users. That is, we have been giving attention and studying the forms of human interaction and association online, but we still know little about what motivates individuals to participate in new forms of social relations through the Internet, or what kind of relations are to be established between what occurs through the online mediation and the contexts of daily life.

Within this analytical framework, the Project Ciberfaces² developed an analytical and empirical data analysis, focusing on the Internet Mediated Communication (IMC)³ users and their specific uses of the Internet as a communication medium. This study was complemented by the qualitative study of IRC users (Nascimento, 2001) focused on the construction and presentation of personal identities,

enquiring about interpersonal interactions established in these conversation spaces⁴. By using a quantitative and a qualitative study, we tried to lessen their disadvantages and attempted to stress their potentialities, in order to draw a more complete characterization of the uses of IMC and its traits as an interaction space in permanent connexion with offline spaces.

Therefore, presenting both studies, the present article sketches a brief characterization of IMC users regarding the different types of communication, followed by an analysis of the specific spaces they attend in IMC: public or private meeting points. Next, as spaces relate to the reasons people attend them, we look at personal interests and motivations of IMC users. Also essential to our analysis is a characterization of sociability networks online, attempting to assess whether they are more continuous or more volatile. Another dimension is whether users perceive differences between the 'online' and the 'offline world', not only relating to their own behaviour, but also to others' attitudes and practices. Finally, we analyse the connexions between sociability networks online and offline.

First of all, the Project Ciberfaces showed that amongst the users of the domain .pt, circa 80% had already used a certain type of IMC. The most frequent modalities of IMC being the Internet Relay Chat (81% of the users), followed by Newsgroups (75%), Mailing-Lists (69%) and the services of Moo/Mud/Talkers (37%).

Additionally, our analysis demonstrated a relation between the conversational thematic in IMC and their respective publics; that is to say, different kinds of IMC attract different publics with different objectives. The IRC especially attracts young users, whose primordial focus is built around getting to know new people or proceeding in the deepening of previous personal relations, while the Newsgroups and Mailing-Lists are more oriented towards information search of specific themes.

These diverse logics of IMC appropriation raise, on the other hand, a central question concerning the objectives of its use: is it a public space, inheritance of the perspectives defended by Jurgen Habermas in his theory of the Communicative Action (Habermas, 1995), or a meeting place for people who establish private relations without other objectives than their sphere of individual interest, or those shared by a small group on the fringe of that space of flows? The analysis of the quantitative data from the Project Ciberfaces does not allow direct conclusions, although it deepens the reflection. Here, a participation that emphasises a mixed dimension (52,3%), with both private and

public relations established according to personal interests, is predominant, together with the thematic context of the groups in question.

Regarding the specific context of the IRC, the conducted interviews show the simultaneous participation in both public channels and private ones (pvt's) - as communication goes on in distinct windows, of which only the individual has direct knowledge about how many people he is in contact with. Curiously, older users tend to prefer conversations via public channels concerning debates about current affairs or personal interests, and as a result they only engage in a few pvt's, characterized negatively as attempts for flirting. In contrast, younger users restrict their participation to more familiar channels with close friends, and they tend to have more simultaneous pvt's.

Therefore, we can say that participating in channels or pvt's depends largely upon personal motivations in using IRC, ranging from debates on 'public spaces' considered by its users as less rigid and less constrained by personal traits (such as age, sex, profession, etc), to more personal conversations with friends.

Additionally, the analysis of personal motivations of IMC users also contributes for the perception of its role within the framework of socialisation promoted by the new media. Indeed, the channels and debate lists are understood by users as being, essentially, spaces that promote meetings with friends and to start friendships, conversations about daily life, and to access useful information. Furthermore, when questioned about with whom they interact within the conversation spaces, the users answered mainly people of their friendship/family circle (17,5%) or people with the same habits or tastes (11,2%) or the same age (11,5%). The lists and channels seem to be spaces where communicating with those who already share previous proximity relations or those who share similar interests is privileged.

Looking closely at IRC users' present motivations, they also limit themselves to contact with former acquaintances or friends, in contrast with initial motivations regarding mainly meeting new people. Except for this initial period of experimentation, the IRC users that were interviewed, have consolidated, for the most part, networks of interactions in specific channels that they visit regularly in order to 'chat' with their friends, whether they have met them in IRC or not. In the majority of the analysed cases, users prefer a continuity and fidelity to certain settled socialization groups with common stories and practices related to a frequent use of IRC. Consequently, the

durability of these ‘strong ties’ contradicts partially some pessimistic perspectives picturing IRC relationships as inherently unstable and ephemeral.

Indeed, in an earlier analysis of the forms of Portuguese online associations (Cardoso, 1998) we emphasized that online forms of human association do have a factual existence. People interact from a distance through computer networks; those interactions foster ties among their participants; and their users identify themselves as belonging to that space of shared values and identity.

In addition to these lasting relationships, but in a minor scale, IRC users also look for new interactions, mostly unexpected and unplanned, based on volatile meeting points, appearing and disappearing ‘personae’. Any IRC user comes encounters strangers in discontinuous contacts, which may last only a few minutes or evolve towards lasting conversations.

The differentiation in IRC sociability groups characterizes, according to Pais (2000), communities built in online groups that stand as mutable and fluid intersections of distinct social integration forces – community (*Gemeinschaft*) and association (*Gesellschaft*). Simultaneously, “(...) if it exists, amongst some cibernauts, a feeling of unity, of neotribal characteristics, which reinforces itself alongside the deepening of sociabilities, it is also true that, sometimes, those tribalisms are frail, fluid, inconstant, which is understandable: in cyberspace one looks for the new, the unknown, the excitement.” (Pais, 2000: 15, our translation).

Within the framework of the Project Ciberfaces, what are, then, the representations about the appurtenance, the regulation, the share of values and the aim of the conversational groups? In most cases, these groups operate in spaces where an open culture is promoted, that is, users are aware of the importance of group participation in order to maintain the space in motion, and to secure its future evolution.

In fact, the analysis of the practices and representations of IMC users seems to indicate that, in spite of the feeble barriers at the entry and exit, the existence of the group is valued. Moreover, the users perceive the rules of the groups they participate in that, as far as they are concerned, secure the viability of those interaction spaces.

Nonetheless, the spaces are not valued only by their characteristics or themes, but also by the people involved in the interaction, that is, these are spaces where the appurtenance links depend upon who or what one wishes to find. Therefore, motivations centred on maintaining existent networks of friends lead to their refusal of more extreme role-playing or identity experimentation, that is, distinct logics in the

appropriation of conversational spaces are possible even in these contexts where anonymity is a central trait.

Taking advantage of the anonymity permitted by IRC, individuals confront themselves with 'stages' where they can take on and act distinct roles, simultaneously and without some face-to-face limitations. These new possibilities indicate, according to Sherry Turkle (1995), a 'culture of simulation', which operates a distinction between the 'real' and the 'virtual', acknowledged by most of the interviewed users relating to the modifications in social relationships and identity expressions brought due to IRC textual communication.

Nevertheless, partially contradicting Elizabeth Reid (1991) and Sherry Turkle (1995) studies', in which individuals performed new 'personae' in IRC and in Mud's, this qualitative study shows that IRC users' prefer maintaining the same 'nicknames'/'nicks'. Moreover, even when taking on a different 'nick', they don't perceive any discrepancy in their behaviour, stressing the importance of the coherence of their online conducts. As Castells says, "(...) *roleplaying is a telling social experience, but one that does not represent a significant proportion of social interaction on the Internet nowadays.*" (2001: 119) Confirming some of the conclusions from other studies (Bechar-Israeli), a significant part of IRC users maintains the same 'nick' for a considerable period of time, due to their wishes of recognition amongst their friends, or their own reputation within IRC or some channels, that is, "*most people prefer the option of making new friends via a stable nick to that of exploiting the medium for identity games*".

However, the results of the IRC users' interviews show that, even though they tend not to act different 'personae', they experience some modification of their behaviour when participating in conversations in IRC. In fact, they admit being less shy, more expressive, and more open to others, due to the anonymity inherent in IRC interactions. Thus, we would suggest that, confirming Reid (1991), "*IRC encourages desinhibition. The lack of social context cues in computer-mediated communication obscures the boundaries that would generally separate acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour. Furthermore, the essential physical impression of each user that he is alone releases him from the social expectations incurred in group interaction*".

In the same way, the other IRC users are also perceived as presenting themselves differently, but along a contrast between 'authenticity' – more open, affectionate and available – or 'simulation' – concealment and manipulation of personal

traits according to their own 'agendas'. So individuals perceive their own behaviour modifications' as positive, and on the other hand, perceive negatively different 'characters' performed by other users whenever they show a discrepancy between their 'virtual social identities' (personal traits presented) and their 'real social identities' (real traits).

This permanent game between the 'virtual' and the 'real' reflects on how the individuals value meeting the other users personally, proving their sincerity, 'real' characteristics and intentions. The interviewed IRC users even expressed their incredulity towards relationships without personal meetings, which confirms findings from Byrne (1994) when she synthesizes "*many participants of the survey stated that they did not have a genuine relationship with another until they had met FTF.*" (Face to Face).

Similarly, the Project Ciberfaces demonstrates that the majority of the IMC users, when questioned about the maintenance of contact with other participants in conversation spaces outside the Internet, answered affirmatively (59%). The use of the IMC could then be interpreted not only as an extension of the relations previous to the interaction within the Internet, but also as a meeting point of people whose personal relations suffered a certain evolution throughout the meetings and interaction in both spaces. The IMC can be seen as a complementary space that does not exhaust itself, as even the interviewed individuals perceive directly common junctures between online spaces and everyday life. In fact, they emphasize the ways by which they construct their own interaction spaces with specific significations and intentions derived not from the technological characteristics of IRC, but from the established relationships. As a user states: "*IRC, what is IRC? The IRC are the people who attended it.*"

Consequently, perspectives that conceive technology as a-social and a-cultural, creating environments of complete autonomy and freedom, lose their arguments when confronted with the intercommunities of online and offline worlds. In contrast, the present analysis points out two central dimensions: the individuals' interpretative capacity and their constant physical interaction with technological systems, and the 'pre-virtual' social relations that inform the construction of personal and social identities.

On the one hand, the interpretative capacity is based on the current worldview and ethical and political code that stress the importance of choice substantiated in individuals' reflexivity, the latter being a major 'buzzword' nowadays. However,

contrasting with this all-powerful individual, we come to a perspective that takes into account not only the actual value of preference/choice, but also the flexibility and volatility of personal trajectories. Therefore, personal motivations in using IMC, which mould the appropriations of these spaces, must also be conceived as mutable and sometimes unintended, that is, not totally submitted to the command of individual's rational choices.

On the other hand, the ways and codes by which individuals interact with each other pre-exist digital networks, although they change through those same networks. The links between online and offline worlds are not difficult to grasp in face of the mentioned results of Portuguese studies; moreover, our everyday life is increasingly mediated by technological environments as “*‘Being digital’ is not an unfamiliar embodied state at the end of the twentieth century. Before individuals encounter virtual reality systems, either through media or by connecting with computer artefacts, their bodies are already produced and mediated as digital in other, now mundane spheres of social life.*” (Green in Holmes, 1997: 73)

CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALIZATION

Online/offline. Our interactions seem to move around these two spaces with new possibilities for expression and relationships, structured by networks characterized by anonymity, flexibility, simultaneity, intermittence and inter-changeability. The digital places surround us as pure flows of information, which become visible and palpable mainly through our computer screens and keyboards. By centring its focus on the individual's point of view, this paper intended to make visible the connexions between the online and offline world, beyond the simple physical interfaces, and into the complex forms of interpersonal interactions that take place in both spaces.

Spaces that intertwine each other when analysed according to distinct motivations and logics of appropriation, related not only to their technological traits, but also to individual actions and representations. Thus, rather than being separate realms of experience, ‘material’ and ‘digital’ correspond to the overlapping of personal and digital sociability networks, based at least on certain common qualities of the individual: being online is also being offline most of the times.

In general terms, information and communication technologies transform our interaction models, as pre-eminent social thinkers like Manuel Castells and Hermínio

Martins (1996) acknowledge the role of technology in modifying crucial domains of our contemporary experience; moreover, for both authors,

“(...) in order to understand the new situation it’s fundamental to dislocate the debate about technology from the simplistic prism of its assumed neutrality or the dependence of its consequences on its evil or good use. For both, communication technologies are forms which accommodate the context, they are independent means from any allegedly ends, they are the opening of directions for social, cultural and historic demodulations.” (Garcia, 2001, our translation)

Recognising change raises the next analytical step concerning the ways of this change: will Computer-Mediated Communication alter our relationships’ with time and space? After numerous studies and surveys over the past decade, we can’t yet define exactly the definite character of these changes, whether they mean an increasingly sociable individual, or a more isolated and detached one.

Nevertheless, the discussion is certainly centred on the individual and his reflexive abilities, as shown in the perspectives of Manuel Castells, Barry Wellman, Zygmunt Bauman or Ulrich Beck.

For Castells, Internet is not the cause of interaction changes, but provides the ‘material support’ for them, reflecting vaster modifications on the sociability patterns that nowadays tend to concentrate around the individual. The individual constructs his privatised or “personalized communities” (Wellman, 1998) of few intimate relationships, dispersed over time and space, not continuous and maintained through networks that operate face-to-face or digitally mediated. The new sociability pattern is the “networked individualism” where *“(...) individuals build their networks, on-line and off-line, on the basis of their interests, values, affinities, and projects. Because of the flexibility and communicating power of the Internet, on-line social interaction plays an increasing role in social organization as a whole.”* (Castells, 2001: 131)

In fact, this author looks for an equilibrium, trying to escape from the technological and social extremes of determinism, as he states that Internet is not the cause of “networked individualism” but helps to promote it and plays a crucial part on its definition and development. A communication hybrid emerges, with online and

offline interactions, where the individual asserts his capacities to rebuild the decaying of traditional sociability structures.

Nevertheless, authors like Bauman (2000, 2001) and Beck (1992) are not so optimistic like the former perspectives, questioning if technology enhances individual capacities, and if the latter partially commands the uses of technology. This image of an empowered individual entails a concept of 'project' which, in Bauman's and Beck's perspectives, ignores a temporal axis without a linear line of events, characterized mainly by its mutability and flexibility. According to Bauman, individual actions are framed in an undetermined, chaotic and volatile reality, without a central command entity, which makes it impossible for a complete control over the individuals' projects. Once more, the individual actor is on the central stage, as he has to go through a process of "self-constitution" in a time of "individualization", which "(...) *consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance.*" (Bauman, 2000: 31-32)

For Beck as well, given the decay of social classes, status groups and family as reference models and the raise of the importance of the labour and consumer market, individuals have to cope with the risks inherent in their actions, and to assume the ultimate responsibility for them. Since 'traditional institutions' fade away their constraints and their powers to relieve individuals from life's burdens, the latter need to act according to "*a vigorous model of action in everyday life*", and thus present an "*ego-centered world view*" (Beck, 1992: 136). These individual conditions of existence raise, for Bauman and Beck, a problem concerning a growing gap between individuality as fate and individuality as the real capacity for self-assertion. That is, frustrations tend to rise, as there is no escape from individualization: you have to make your own decisions and assume the possible negative consequences. At the extreme, strong and devastating feelings of impotence may occur in view of the postulated possibilities of freedom that are restrained since individuals have no real control over social settings.

This individual, alone most of the time in his decisions and consequences, faces a 'digital' and 'material' reality characterised by uncertainty and mutability, in a growing intercommunion between the space of flows and the space of places. However, we shouldn't immerse ourselves totally in a techno-scientific discourse that only praises the potentialities of information and communication technologies. That is,

“The rhetoric of the technologic sublime is a present and particularly luxuriant variation about a vaster theme, and can be, without doubt, partially attributed as a journalistic hyperbolism due to the growth of telematics (the intercommunion between computerized systems and telecommunications). It allows the fleeting glimpse of computopias, in which the material world and the correspondent world of sensorial experience are increasingly substituted by information processing (...).” (Martins, 1996:172-73, our translation)

The online/offline worlds complement each other in various ways, as individuals act on their interests and motivations in both spaces, crossing ‘real’ and ‘digital’ friends and, sometimes, taking to their advantage the possible anonymity of IMC. The illusion of ‘computopias’ challenges us to question if present and future ‘technology worlds’ empower the individual in a ‘network society’, confronting more optimistic (Castells) or more sceptical perspectives (Bauman and Beck). In our analysis, these views may not be antagonistic: nowadays and increasingly in the future, individuals move around in different networks, enabled by his own initiative but, nevertheless, constrained by the limits of the scope of his actions and of his networks. Defining these limits and its points of tension has always been and still is a central analytical problem, further complicated by the growing connexions between ‘real’ and ‘digital’ worlds.

Finally, as another analytical enigma, this mutual synergy doesn’t imply a relation of subordination between both worlds, as some technophile enthusiasts may argue for pure and untouched ‘ambiences’ where we all can live in. Nor, on the other hand, the ‘real world’ is the only place of significant interactions where only the ‘real’ events take place and the others ‘virtual events’ are merely manifestations of fantasies and disillusion. Nevertheless, if we take the connexion between online/offline too far, and continue to pursue the creation of spaces of flows that replicate or mimic the spaces of places, are we beginning to undervalue the “world of sensorial experience”, as Martins warns us? More generally, what will be the ontological status of the ‘material world’ in face of an increasing number of ‘information worlds’ that emulate our natural senses?

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¹ ccTLD (Country Code Top Level Domain). The ccTLD for Portugal is .pt.

² The Project Ciberfaces applied the first national survey in Portugal on Internet users in the ccTLD.pt (Country Code Top Level Domain – Portugal), through a questionnaire available in the Project website. This study was coordinated by Prof. Dr. Paquete de Oliveira and Dr. José Jorge Barreiros, working at the *Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa* (ISCTE) in Lisbon, Portugal. The online questionnaire was accessed by 3013 Internet portuguese users.

³ By Internet Mediated Communication (IMC) is understood, within the context of the Project Ciberfaces, the synchronic or assynchrone ways of communicating in a fairly large group pf users of communication programmes or protocols more publicised amongst the Internet users. Thus, this project focuses on the analysis of a synchronic use, the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and also of two assynchrone ones, the use of the e-mail in Mailing-Lists and the use of Newsgroups.

⁴ This qualitative study was part of a Sociology graduate thesis at ISCTE, which analysed 18 personal interviews and 9 online interviews (via IRC) of IRC users.