# THINK LOCALLY, ACT GLOBALLY:

# REFLECTIONS ON VIRTUAL NEIGHBOURHOODS

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The article proposes to explore extrapolations of ideas previously applied to ethnic groups in light of advancements in telecommunication technologies. It briefly examines several related topics including the transformation of identities in diasporas, the shifting boundaries between public and private realms, how certain kinds of diversity may be sustained in the face of cultural imperialism, and some issues in policing the Internet or WWW. It explores the idea that the introduction of new technologies may enable the creation and maintenance of "virtual neighbourhoods," which retain the sense of affinity among neighbours found in traditional small-scale, focused geographical neighbourhoods. This point emphasises the fact that affinity is based on focused interest rather than proximity. Telecommunication technologies used in the ways hypothesised here have effectively redefined the word "local" so that it now encompasses two senses; geographically focused (proximate) and focused (shared) interest. The resulting conclusion asserts that variations in exposure to media, entertainment, foreign languages, and cultural forces generally will occur within territorial states as much as between them, thereby to a certain extent supplanting proximate, geographical neighbourhoods with remarkably different virtual neighbourhoods. The voluntaristic nature of virtual neighbourhoods based on shared interests means that they will likely not become "virtual ghettos".

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*
(John 1:1)

Long before the Information Superhighway, Jews, Christians, and Muslims learned that diasporas could be knitted together and nurtured by the Word. Scholars exchanging manuscripts in the Middle Ages and e-mails in "invisible colleges" today have also demonstrated that proximity is not a necessary or sufficient condition for togetherness and fellow-feeling. Now that diasporas or communities can be "gathered in" by means of the Internet, World Wide Web (WWW), e-mail, satellite television, and virtual travel, the Word as bond and relationship should be even more obvious. These new technologies should sustain some existing groups and make possible new "virtual neighbourhoods." An older social science literature postulated that "reference groups" not limited to immediate face-to-face relations could underpin attitudes and beliefs. The concept may be expanded and clarified by re-labelling reference groups as "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993) and linking them to ethnicity, diasporas, and "in-gatherings" of several types.

In a previous article, I have applied these ideas about telecommunications to the diasporas of ethnic groups (Elkins 1997)[1]. I showed how "virtual ethnic communities" could be sustained by "the Word": dense communications normally only possible in core regions for the ethnic group might occur world-wide under plausible conditions in the near future. For example, over the next decade or so, one can reasonably expect satellite broadcasting to occur in all major urban areas of the Earth in at least the following languages: English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hindi, and perhaps Swahili. The reason one can be certain about such an extensive variety of languages in broadcasting concerns the incentives that many countries have to launch or purchase their own geosynchronous satellites. Of course, several countries — including China, France, Russia, and India — have already done so, in addition to several English-speaking countries.

By 2010 or so, one can also assume that the Internet and WWW will penetrate deeply into more countries as the cost of technologies drops even more. Unlike television, these personal telecommunications can occur in any language. The diasporas of ethnic groups will therefore have access to personal interaction among the individuals sharing ethnicity, language, and religion. They will also often have television programs targeted to their group, including music, drama, religious instruction, education, language training, news, sports, and entertainment. Thus, with existing technologies, one can demonstrate the potential for dense interactions, mutual recognition, supportive relationships, and a sense of identity among groups of people widely scattered across the globe, whereas this has hitherto occurred only where ethnic communities were geographically concentrated.

In the present article, I propose to explore extrapolations of the ideas previously applied to ethnic groups. This article will briefly examine several related topics including the transformation of identities in diasporas (and their in-gatherings), the shifting boundaries between public and private realms, how certain kinds of diversity may be sustained in the face of "cultural imperialism," and some issues in "policing" the Internet or WWW (Elkins 1995).

The effects of the new technologies may be attributed to their ability to create and sustain "virtual neighbourhoods." Until now, neighbourhoods were defined by their small-scale, focused geographical scope. The concept of "virtual neighbourhood" retains

the sense of affinity among neighbours, but emphasises that affinity is based on focused interest rather than proximity.

Telecommunications technologies used in the ways hypothesised here have effectively redefined the word "local" so that it now has two senses which share the core concept of "focused" or "targeted": geographically focused (proximate) and focused (shared) interest. Hence, the title of this article inverts the motto of the environmental movement. To "act locally" in their sense is to apply general ideas to a local geographic ecosystem. To "think locally" in this article is to straddle two concepts — shared space or shared interest — and shared interest will often constitute a global virtual neighbourhood. In this sense, to think locally is to act globally.

The contrast between the two understandings of neighbourhood may be characterised by a thought-experiment. In the near-future scenario previously sketched for virtual ethnic communities, satellites will ensure that most or all major population centres in the world receive similar (or even identical) pictures, words, and cultural forces. This will be further enhanced by the increasing use of e-mail, the Internet, WWW, and probably new aspects of the Information Superhighway. As a result, it is safe to assume that variations in exposure to media, entertainment, foreign languages, and cultural forces generally will occur within territorial states as much as between them. Furthermore, "proximate neighbours" in a geographical neighbourhood (or even in a single office tower or residential complex) may live a good part of their lives in radically different "virtual neighbourhoods" (or information universes) because they will choose (and will have to choose) a few channels or messages and to ignore scores or hundreds of others (Elkins, 1999). The voluntaristic nature of virtual neighbourhoods based on shared interests means that they will likely not become "virtual ghettos."

## Ascription, Affinity, and Attribution

If diasporas comprise "scatterings" or dispersions of populations, "in-gatherings" comprise the obverse effect of uniting populations currently or previously dispersed or separated by space. Sometimes, as when Jews born and raised elsewhere return to Israel, the in-gathering unites the same ascriptive category (or gene pool) previously dispersed. Equation of the criteria underlying the diaspora and in-gathering need not be the case, especially where the in-gathering derives from affinity rather than ascription.

Affinity has several meanings, and most have relevance to this analysis. They all share a core concept of voluntarism. For example, affinity can mean relations based on marriage rather than consanguinity (or "blood" relations). It also means relationship by inclination, attraction, companionship, or friendliness. In chemistry, affinity denotes the tendency of some chemicals to form new chemicals. A final example found in some dictionaries defines affinity as a spiritual attraction between persons.

All instances of affinity may be contrasted with ascription in the usual sense of some characteristic with which one is born. Of course, some ascriptive features can be changed (religious conversion, sex-change operations, plastic surgery on one's face), but for present purposes, we may safely note the sharp contrast between groups (and thus identities) based on ascriptive features rather than on affinity. The evolution of cultural norms in many parts of the world has witnessed the growing belief that salient personal identities should be, as much as possible, based on affinity where these identities are likely to be used to discriminate among people. Despite the fact that

some people still endeavour to utilise ascriptive criteria rather than follow this trend, the direction of evolution has been clear in all countries claiming to be "modern." Sometimes affinity is defined more narrowly as "merit" or "earned" attributes, but all such concepts contrast sharply with ascriptive criteria.

My analysis of virtual ethnic communities — like all analyses of ethnicity — rests on an assumption that the groups so constituted have an ascriptive basis. In some cases, one may be able to point to a common ancestor (Moses, Mohammed, or others) as the basis of the assumption, but these instances are rarely persuasive. Thus, even ethnicity may have a voluntaristic basis, or one derived from affinity. For example, while Jews rely on descent rather than proselytising their religion, Christians and Muslims have relied far more on conquest or conversion for their multitudes than on birth rates or descent.

Whatever the origins of particular ethnic groups, the "in-gathering" of diasporas implicit in the telecommunications scenario outlined above assumes a constant identity. That is, the "recipients" of television broadcasts, e-mails, website news, and other messages are presumed to have certain features which define them as part of the diaspora. In short, an identity is attributed to them, and in many cases that identity might stand up to standard tests of who "belongs" in that group. But in a world of electronic messaging, it should be fairly easy to "pass" as a member. This ability to "pass" poses threats to groups that wish to control the boundaries of their community, and it opens up several interesting avenues for research and speculation.

The *attribution* of identity will be addressed here in terms of what has often been called "Turing's test" (Bolter 1984). Alan Turing was a mathematician whose work proved crucial in designing the earliest electronic computers in the mid-20th century. His brilliant mathematics may be put aside in this context, however, because his "test" is easily understood in simple English. The test concerned how to tell whether a computer could think like a human. Turing's answer was apparently simple and strikingly similar in at least one respect to what I have suggested will be the basis of "virtual neighbourhoods."

Turing postulated a person at a teletype communicating with another teletype machine which was controlled by either a computer or a human. The person could ask (type) any question, and the computer or person hidden elsewhere would type a reply. The "test" consisted of using the replies to decide whether the dialogue was with a computer or another person. For example, if one asked about the sum of a long list of numbers and received a reply in one second, one would guess "computer." If, on the other hand, one asked that a poem be composed, the reply would more likely suggest "human" if the poem were beautiful. In either event, one has attributed an identity to one's interlocutor, and one may be wrong. That is, a computer might "pass" as human, or a human might "pass" as a computer. Indeed, the aim or goal of most researchers in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) could be summarised as designing a computer which will "pass" as human in Turing's test.

Although there are important differences between Turing's test and the communications among members of a virtual ethnic community, the similarity is what needs emphasis. How will (can) members of this community distinguish between valid or authentic members and interlopers who wish to "pass?" Does it actually matter whether one can tell the difference? Put in other terms, what are the distinctive features of *attributed* identities which might cause concern?

We know from research in North America, at least, that people who participate in "chat rooms" on the WWW can easily "pass" with attributed identities. For example, males can easily pretend to be females, or vice versa. A male can even pretend to be a female character who is actually pretending to be a male! Likewise, young people can pass as elderly, or vice versa. And significantly, people with low self-image or low self-esteem can pass as accomplished, gifted, and attractive people. Sherry Turkle has described, for example, a subject who relies on the WWW and Internet: "Stewart insists that he does not role-play, but that MUDs [Multi-User Domains] simply allow him to be a better version of himself" (Turkle 1995, 193).

Another of the subjects interviewed by Turkle pushed the idea of "passing" to its limit: "You are what you pretend to be ... You are what you play" (Turkle 1995, 192). While there are undoubtedly limits to the literal truth of this assertion, the limits consist of one's knowledge of the "culture" or community in which one wishes to "pass." Passing must be a lot easier in cyberspace than in face-to-face situations. As another of Turkle's interviewees stated: "They don't look at your body and make assumptions. They don't hear your accent and make assumptions. All they see is your words" (Turkle 1995, 184).

For recreational purposes in a "chat room" or MUD, interlopers are welcome. For some religious orders or other kinds of groups, security is a priority because members wish to restrict access. Hence, the technology which enables an ethnic group to gather-in its diaspora and nurture members of the diaspora may just as easily threaten the integrity or sanctity of the community. If members cannot tell by means of e-mail or a chat room whether the attributed identity is accurate or whether instead an infiltrator or voyeur has passed, where is the harm if it serves to strengthen the group or leads to conversions? That situation must be evaluated for each group.

The obverse situation seems even more likely to threaten an ethnic group or a religious community. Suppose a member uses the WWW, e-mail, television, and other such devices to participate in a virtual ethnic community, as postulated above. While doing so, the communicant may also log on to other types of websites or communicate with other types of groups. That is, the member may "pass outwards" as easily as non-members may "pass inwards."[2] Hence, the technology which strengthens and gathers-in the diaspora may just as effectively lure some members of the diaspora into other types of in-gathered communities. If the ready availability of information can serve to raise the profile of the ethnic identity within the "self" of a member, the ready availability of alternative communities and their support services may heighten awareness of other aspects of a person's self and thereby render each aspect relatively less salient even while making each more salient or vivid or intense than it might otherwise have been.

From the perspective of a group or community that wishes to in-gather its members while excluding others, both possibilities (of "passing in" and "passing out," as it were) pose real threats to its coherence. From the perspective of an individual, whether "passing in" or "passing out," the evaluation would mostly be positive; these offer opportunities to "try on" new identities and to play roles which stretch, reinforce, or clarify the person's core self. In effect, such a cyber-traveller would be cycling through a series of identities in order to discover first-hand (or close to it) what it feels like to be a certain type of person or to participate in a certain type of community.

Attributed identities might thereby become more common than they are now, or more precisely, each cyber-traveller would have a somewhat greater degree of control

over the nature of the attribution. Although this implies an "achieved" rather than an "ascribed" identity, an identity which has been attributed would still not be as fully consensual as in the cases of affinity among members of a long-standing community. An attributed identity will usually be "one-dimensional" or tied to "one context" rather than multifaceted and multi-contexted.

By presenting a certain "face," one activates certain expectations or presumptions (or prejudices) in one's responders or co-travellers. If one cannot carry off the deception or the pretence, then perhaps one needs more practice, or perhaps one will draw the lesson that the "face" is not really you. Try again!

## Is There Such a Thing as an Individual Self?

Of course, there are such creatures as individuals consisting of bone and tissue surrounded by skin. Of course, each individual is unique and each has some sense of self. The question posed here, in the context of the scenarios outlined above, could be reformulated in several ways:
- If you "try on" several identities, must you stop at some point and stick with the last identity?
- If you "try on" several identities (or at least "facets" such as male and female or more than one religion or ethnicity), is there any necessity to stick with only one of them, or can one "be several people?"
- If you often mean different referents when using "we," are you a different "I" in each case, and if so, is there a "core" or singular self behind them all?
- If you care about and identify with several communities, are you just an intersection among them, that is, a "community" (or communion) of communities?
- The "triangulation" among communities locates the individual at their intersection, but is that all that one means by "individual self?"

Some part of the significance of each version of the question derives from human nature as a mix of more than one set of genes and as a result of socialisation in a group (or several groups). Another part of the significance involves the fact that external storage of information, traditions, and culture plays an increasingly great role in an educated person's sense of self: "Identification with," "realise the echo of the past in oneself," and "reach out and touch someone" (even if long dead or in another culture) are more common experiences today than in most earlier times. They may become more so as cyber-travellers exploit their opportunities more often or more fully.

A deeper level of significance is revealed when one reflects that there is no longer a single community for any individual.[3] There are many communities, some over-lapping and non-competitive (political scientists and skiers, for example), some apparently incompatible (Christianity and Islam, perhaps), and some too protean to classify (such as nation, profession, disabled). Each type of community or network or group or category raises insidious questions about who one is: Who is like me? With whom do I share an interest? With whom am I "in the same boat?" There is no single, overarching, encompassing value, interest, or community, and hence, perhaps there is no single self. Instead, each individual chooses to emphasise or highlight or accept multiple relationships to multiple communities whose significance will be ascertainable only in particular contexts. In Canada, I am a British Columbian; when travelling, I am a Canadian; when at academic conferences, I am a political scientist; when writing, I am a writer; and through it all, I am Nicole's husband but that does not exhaust my identity.

Involvement in a community represents an affirmation of that aspect of an individual's identity. It can also be a way of strengthening an identity or a facet of an identity - a means of "finding oneself" or perhaps of "naming" oneself. Communities may generally be *added* to one's repertoire of identities rather than *substituted* for one another. That was the great insight social scientists gained with the concept of "reference groups," but the value of the insight extends to many "real" groups as well as to "virtual communities." The emphasis in earlier periods of history on mutually exclusive communities such as religion, race, gender, or family/tribe/nation has obscured the fact that more communities are complementary than are mutually exclusive. Therefore, more identities are "addable" than has often been assumed up to now.

Although the impetus for my reasoning about multiple selves grew out of non-territorial forms of governance in the Age of Information, the basic idea is at least a century old. William James, for example, reached a similar conclusion in 1890 in his book *The Principles of Psychology*:

> *Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him ... But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares ... From this there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves; and this may be a discordant splitting, as where one is afraid to let one set of acquaintances know him as he is elsewhere; or it may be a perfectly harmonious division of labour, as where one tender to his children is stern to the soldiers or prisoners under his command* (William James, quoted in Harris 1998, 56).

Many concepts have been constructed and have taken on meanings that they need not bear. Other terminologies, other conclusions. What looks like cross-pressures or stressful dilemmas may from another perspective look like extra options which can be explored sequentially or even simultaneously. The multiplication of identities implicit in the profusion of communities may prove threatening to leaders of ethnic groups who prefer a more complete or total commitment. To the post-modern individual, however, total commitment is impossible, and even more important, the demand for commitment is seldom made.

The constructedness or historically situated nature of so many concepts and so many socially conventional habits can be easily overlooked when one lives in one place or context. Moving into new contexts, whether congenial or offensive, forces one to confront the contextually specific nature of most concepts. For some, travel forces the confrontation with new contexts; for other people, it happens through reading or learning a new language or marriage or clicking onto websites or MUDs or chat rooms beyond one's normal imagination: "Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices" (Turkle 1995, 263).

But can one be anything but an individual? Especially if locked in one's room, typing a persona into one's computer and networking with "virtual friends," can one be more than a singular self, if even that?

> *Those who live alone [or in dispersed communities] need not be pitied, however, for from the present view, we are never alone, even if isolated from others physical presence. So long as our actions are intelligible, they are intelligible within a*

*system of meaning. And meaning, as we have seen, is not the product of individual minds but of relationships. To act before witnesses does not render such actions more social* (Gergen 1991, 242-243).

The number of "systems of meaning" and the number of personae put forward in "virtual neighbourhoods" seem to determine the number of "selves," so one can question whether there is some common core to all the personae. I doubt there can be a simple "yes" or "no" that covers all cases.

Relationships are about affinity, even where affinity may be founded on the affirmation or acceptance of ascribed characteristics such as ethnicity or gender or a disability. Perhaps the affirmation of affinity, of an individual's (partial) integration into a community can overcome the "essentialism" that many people find distasteful about ascriptive features. Changing linguistic usage helps to see the possibilities: Instead of a "disabled person" (implying the disability is the essence of that person), many people now refer to a "person with a disability" (one of many facets of that person). Furthermore, although the disability may be an ascribed characteristic (because it is permanent or congenital), to affirm it and "connect" with those in similar situations will lead to an identity based on affinity.

If a person can "reach out" actually or virtually, if one can "connect" actually or virtually with many strands, the strands or themes will highlight what that person wants to affirm. The many strands or themes or facets might be thought of as the diaspora of that person. The in-gathering of that diaspora should help us to see how this person, this individual, may be thought of as a community of communities, a cross-roads of many highways, or a confluence of affinities. To focus on an apparently narrow or specific feature is to think locally; to search widely for those who share that precise facet is to act globally: "You thought that it could never happen to all the people that you became."[4]

## The Boundary Between Public and Private

Several themes in this analysis lend themselves to fresh thinking about "public" or "private." They suggest that the boundary between public and private may be shifting or becoming even more blurred. If one accepts the conclusion in the previous section, then nearly everyone has several selves, or at least several "social selves." Since these selves derive from, or find support in, networks and communities which usually do not overlap fully, they may be sustained for relatively long periods of time. The identities or selves have both private and public aspects. What gets emphasised in which contexts will determine the shifting boundary between public and private life. Although each situation may be unique, some generalisations or hypotheses can be put forward.

The first generalisation or hypothesis asserts that identity has become a focus of public attention. For example, public commentary on the nature of ethnicity or sexual preference or transsexuality or religious ecumenism may have fostered a greater introspection about identity. Likewise, television programs and books about "finding oneself" or retrieving the "inner child" have undoubtedly heightened interest in the social dimensions of identities. In addition, daily news coverage of "ethnic cleansing" or genocide or civil wars may have made more people aware that very personal aspects of one's private self can have profound political repercussions and even put one in mortal danger. Furthermore, the debate about the authenticity of the Holocaust may keep alive for Jews and many other people that the assumptions political leaders make about other peoples' identities can determine one's fate.

The feminist movement has made famous the slogan that the personal is political. This slogan cuts both ways: what was personal can be drawn outward and become significant politically (that is, relevant to a public space where incompatible goals or values are contested) and political debate can reach into one's heart and soul and family life. If this makes it more difficult to withdraw within oneself, it also makes it more necessary to protect some inner space.

The use of telecommunications for gathering-in the diasporas underlines a similar phenomenon, since public and unsecured communications may become more central to sacred, private, and personal commitments. The creation and use of virtual neighbourhoods raises, as we have seen, large issues about "passing" and thus about valid membership in a community.

The psychological space of citizens in some — but not all — countries has expanded and contracted. In both respects, it has become more conditional or contextualised. This space has expanded by legitimising some identities once considered wholly private or even secret — adoption or other aspects of family history, sexual preference, and physical or mental disability, to name a few. These are now, for many individuals, public identities fostered by the rhetoric of rights and freedoms and by changing social norms of toleration and acceptance of difference. Psychological space has, however, contracted to the extent that people acknowledge these once-private identities as more central to their social reality. Fewer people are willing to stay in the closet, and so what is left "in the closet" shrinks or constricts, and some people may therefore wonder if their identity consists solely of the outward expression of their personae.

The privatisation of identities may now more fully parallel or mirror their public display. Each person's identity comes to be conditioned by circumstances and contexts; identities are activated or threatened by public events in which one affirms a relationship or affinity and refuses to deny a side of oneself, even at the cost of embarrassment or disapproval by others. The events which "trigger" affirmations of identity are no longer confined to one geographic place, whether a neighbourhood or a country. Instead, news reports from around the world and virtual neighbourhoods in cyberspace vie with face-to-face social relations in eliciting new meanings or combinations of self. No one is an island, whether for good or ill, because one cannot easily be fully alone and because one need never be fully alone.

## Sustainable Diversity

This analysis of virtual neighbourhoods also suggests how diversity may be sustained during the process of globalisation[5]. Either ethnic groups (or other communities) can strengthen and sustain themselves by means of the Information Superhighway, or the technology will allow individuals to "infiltrate" from other virtual communities who can thereby prosper at their expense. Of course, both sorts of groups might be enhanced, but at the very least one group will gain or retain its vitality. Whether ascriptive groups or affinity groups gain the most, some virtual neighbourhoods should flourish. If so, the gradual convergence among the cultures of territorial states — which so many observers have predicted — may be offset (if it occurs) by divergence or sustained diversity among non-territorial groups and communities and virtual neighbourhoods.

The argument for non-territorial diversity follows closely the general logic of the analysis of virtual ethnic communities, but involves all virtual neighbourhoods and

not just those based on ethnicity (Elkins 1995). In any given territorial state, there are pressures on residents to converge on one or a few models or ideal types of citizens, although uniformity has never been fully achieved. These pressures come from mass media, public schools, public symbols, common language (in countries with a dominant or prestige language), social interaction, and the general tone of public opinion (Anderson 1991). Of course, these pressures have varying degrees of success because of countervailing pressures or processes, including isolation (due to lack of education or voluntary lack of media and social exposure), ethnic and religious communities with strong traditions and sufficient numbers to be "institutionally complete," regional variations, urban-rural differences in lifestyle and values, travel to other cultures, and the size of immigrant populations.

Reasons for expecting a world-wide convergence among the "public face" of countries usually fall under the heading of "cultural imperialism," always attributed either to the United States or, more broadly, to "westernisation." The logic is similar to that just mentioned in regard to convergence within any one country. Pressures from literacy, media such as CNN, entertainment (Disney, Hollywood, etc.), television coverage of stories and events, films (even if dubbed in local languages), popular fashions such as blue jeans, and so on and so on, are presumed to find willing recipients. They, in turn, provide a sympathetic context and social milieu in which more participants receive the Word. Since the rich and famous lead the way, others follow out of fantasy realisation or envy, among many motives. Of course, there are countervailing pressures globally, as there are in each country: Isolation, self-imposed abstinence from foreign influences, religious or ethnic support for local customs, ignorance, level of affluence, and of course, the technological empowerment of virtual ethnic communities.

One can debate endlessly which of these pressures — for convergence or for divergence or sustained diversity — will prevail. The evidence lies all in the future, so no definitive proof seems plausible. Different eyes, different views. Although I do not subscribe to this position, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that there may be more cumulative pressure for convergence than for divergence among most countries (or even potential countries such as Quebec or Kurdistan or Catalonia). I will argue that, nevertheless, there are additional aspects of globalisation and of technological empowerment which auger well for divergence, or at least for sustaining the existing types of diversity of a *non-territorial* sort, either within countries or transnationally. Given the ethnically relatively homogeneous nature of some countries such as Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Iceland, the arguments about virtual ethnic communities and virtual neighbourhoods undoubtedly can be extended to them, thus ensuring some cases of substantial diversity even at the territorial level.

In outlining the case for telecommunications technology to sustain and nurture virtual ethnic communities, I showed why most major areas of the world will eventually receive pretty much the same television broadcasts in many languages. Likewise, as more areas of the world become "wired" (as they must if they wish to participate at all in trade and commerce), the opportunities for virtual neighbourhoods will grow rapidly. Furthermore, radio and television will more frequently be available through the Internet, as radio already is for those millions who listen to Real Audio.

For all these reasons, we can be quite sure that each of the many non-territorial communities and networks — or virtual neighbourhoods, in my terminology — will be fairly homogeneous internally, and that there will be many such "neighbourhoods." The cost of technology — and its usefulness - will guarantee their proliferation, and

the interest-based, targeted nature of the affinity in each "neighbourhood" will guarantee a high degree of internal homogeneity. Because their bases involve different interests and identities, the proliferation of virtual neighbourhoods creates and sustains diversity in any one location and throughout the world.

Therefore, the kinds of diversity which will be visible, obvious, noteworthy, and taken for granted will, in effect, double: In addition to national, territorial state, country-based differences, variations of a non-territorial sort (both within a country and transnationally) will attract more attention. Even if diversity among officially recognised territorial states declines precipitously, which is not certain, non-territorial diversity will remain, may even become more pronounced, and will certainly achieve greater visibility and receive more attention.

Notice an important principle explicitly included in my analysis of virtual neighbourhoods which must also be accorded a place in the analysis of country-based diversity. Territorial states with sovereignty and resources — that is, most countries today — play a role in creating the conditions for sustaining the non-territorial forms of diversity I have labelled as virtual neighbourhoods. By launching satellites and sponsoring cultural transmissions, countries foster the conditions for virtual communities, neighbourhoods, or networks. By serving as a spokesperson or "beacon" for a particular culture, language, religion, or ethnic group, a country such as China, Japan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Morocco, Nigeria, or France inevitably also fosters conditions that aid the use of technology to sustain the diversity built into virtual neighbourhoods. By resisting American or western "cultural imperialism" (if that is a fair description), countries representing alternative "civilisations" (in Huntington's sense (1996) or more narrowly) make it more likely that globalisation will not lead to homogeneity, uniformity, McCulture, or bland sameness. In other words, even if countries come less and less to be the main "carriers" of diversity, they create and sustain the conditions that allow other social formations to be "carriers" of cultural diversity.

Some facets of visible culture have already converged, and others may ensue. For example, most countries now have some form of legislature, all have armies, most have some type of judicial system, and all (to my knowledge) have educational systems. Yet the laws debated and passed in legislatures reveal colossal variation; armies vary in size and purpose (internal war vs. external aggression vs. defence, etc.); judiciaries vary in independence from the state, in reliance on religious edicts, in activism, and in influence; and educational systems differ profoundly in curriculum, language of instruction, penetration of population, and efforts to instill passive knowledge or critical thinking.

The existence of similarities and of institutions which may foster them should not blind us to remaining differences or to the unanticipated consequences of similar institutions operating in different (cultural) contexts. Even more important, one wonders whether wearing blue jeans, Doc Martens shoes, or for that matter any particular clothing is as significant an indicator of world trends as growth rates of different religions or levels of affluence in different countries or regions. Even if all parts of the world develop economically, equality of affluence is a distant goal and would not in any event guarantee homogeneity of spiritual experience or of cultural expression.

So both non-territorial and territorial diversities must continue into the foreseeable future. Thus, different role models will exist, so in the event of imitation or cultural imperialism, homogeneity is extremely unlikely. It is conceivable that the "fault lines" of diversity may be fewer, but a few wide gulfs among cultures seems to me to be as firm a basis for diversity as a crazy-quilt of small and multiple diversities.

Globalisation as commonly defined involves the ability to be in touch with events, people, cultures, fashions, products, and resources in every part of the globe (Elkins 1995, 26-27, 263-266). What most commentators overlook in this very real connectedness is that people do not automatically embrace whatever is exotic. Indeed, many people recoil in horror at what other people eat, what they wear, how they worship, and how they treat each other. Indeed, many groups have gone to war precisely because of outrage at other cultural or religious practices. Although negative evaluations should be obvious, this reaction has often been overlooked in the rhetoric of cultural imperialism, free enterprise, the bottom line, and so on.

Globalisation has so far resulted in a greater variety of products targeted to local tastes. There are, of course, important counter-examples, but after McDonald's and blue jeans, of how many others can you think? Instead, consider how automobiles, housing, appliances, running shoes, computer configurations, and other products have been customised to the tastes or situations of different countries or types of consumers. Henry Ford reportedly said his customers could have any colour of car they wanted, so long as it was black. Not only has the range of colours expanded — along with types of accessories - but more significantly, the view represented by his attitude has changed. Successful businesses more and more require considerable sensitivity to local tastes and cultures, but also to *individual* desires, family situations, and income levels.

Let me be clear. This is not some panegyric to capitalism, nor does it apply equally to all countries or classes at present. Instead, I am trying to point out several directions in which globalisation seems to be going, like them or not. They include changes in the nature of capitalism, greater awareness of differences, acceptance that some differences (tastes or fashions) can be accommodated while others (religions and fundamental beliefs) may be resisted. All of this is happening at different rates in different places, and all of these trends are emerging from initially different conditions. All in all, I do not see the sum of these trends leading to significant world-wide, pan-cultural convergence in any imaginable future. But if convergence occurs, it will be at different rates for different facets in different places, and so it becomes relatively ephemeral as a single end-point.

## Patrolling the Information Superhighway

Fear of impending homogeneity has led some commentators to suggest ways to manage or restrict the forces of globalisation. These sentiments often come from cultures or countries that fear absorption by dominant or ascendant cultures or countries. Fear of increased diversity (usually but not always internal to a country) has stimulated similar suggestions for control of the technologies which underpin virtual neighbourhoods. Although examples of both kinds of fear are common, I do not propose to explore types of fear. Instead, I want to lay out some reasons why the forces of globalisation, virtualisation, and technical penetration will be difficult or impossible to control, stop, or seriously restrict.

Let me begin by pointing out that this general topic has an even more ethereal quality than the previous topics. All involve predictions or visions of the future or hypotheses awaiting additional information, so all are speculative. The issue of control of globalisation or any of its many facets seems to me an especially precarious area for prediction because it seems likely to involve technological advances of which we can know nothing until they happen. The Internet exists, hundreds of millions of people have used it, and no force on this planet can at present stop it from being used in the

ways I have described in this article. Thus, these extrapolations and predictions will remain plausible until technological (hardware and software) changes undermine the very concept of the Internet. Recall that it was designed by the American military to be a form of communication able to withstand any level of nuclear holocaust. Their success explains why control or even censorship is impossible, as all governments that have tried have discovered.

Any conclusion that control of the Internet and other aspects of globalisation can be achieved soon seems implausible on the evidence, but 20 to 30 years ago few people would have believed anything else. They argued by analogy to regulation of radio or television broadcasting or of air traffic or of banking. It behooves everyone, therefore, to be humble about the next technological step, which may already have been taken but not be visible yet; and so I will offer a few observations premised on the belief that the technological breakthrough (if it ever happens) will occur after virtual ethnic communities and virtual neighbourhoods have had some further chance to spread and deepen. That might mean a few years or decades or eternity.

Let me first offer some suggestions about attempted regulation of globalisation. Although none of these suggestions have much chance of success, they should be considered. Then I will turn to a somewhat different approach which might allay some fears about "machines out of control" or at least accomplish a few things relevant to the politics of globalisation and the "new world order."

It is easier to control, regulate, supervise, or monitor individuals than to directly control the Internet[6]. For example, one must purchase equipment (or the materials to make it) so "controlling" computers might be thought of as analogous to registering firearms. You will never get all guns — or computers — registered, but it might be sufficient to do so for some percentage of people to achieve at least some objectives such as reducing the threat of terrorism or civil war in China or India. Once you have enough societies such as the United States, Canada, and much of Europe in which computer software and hardware (to say nothing of television and mobile phones) are so widespread that retroactive registration is impossible, nothing may serve the purpose.

Suppose some country on the brink of entering the Information Superhighway puts in place restrictions on and/or registration of all such devices (as television is already registered in some places). My understanding of the situations involving virtual neighbourhoods, television and radio reception, and networking of computers — as outlined in this article — demonstrates that even minimal regulation may be ineffectual. The reasons may be listed and need little commentary:

- How do you know who is using what equipment when software can be exchanged electronically and computers are networked?
- How do you identify individuals when almost any person can "pass" as many others, or several can appear to be one?
- How would a government or police force even know where transmissions originate if they cannot currently pinpoint the origins of many websites?
- How does one usefully regulate an entity which does not exist in one place (or even one continent)? Is cyberspace a place, and if so, in what sense does that answer the question about place?

So we cannot manage people well at all in cyberspace or on the Information Superhighway. What about focusing on locations such as switching stations or servers? Some of this approach — as with people — might have some effect if regulators get in on

the ground floor and have the authority to control the services. For example, where many companies (large, small, national, regional, local) provide access to the Internet, the game has passed the regulators by, but perhaps a managed authoritarian political economy installing the fibre optic cables or launching the satellites might achieve some degree of centralised control[7].

The most insidious — or wonderful — feature of the Internet and related aspects of telecommunications is its "distributed" nature. It is not just that there are many computers, networks, and servers; *each message* sent is divided up into many parts, and *each part* is transmitted over a different combination of lines or routes. A very large segment of each message can fail to arrive or can be interdicted, and the whole message will still arrive. That was the task put to the Internet designers, after all: assuming most lines and nodes have been obliterated, how can one guarantee the message will get through?

Therefore, in the absence of the hypothesised technological counter-move, there is no way to interdict a message once any given country or set of countries has put the system in place. Of course, Burma and a few other places might still be able to pull the plug, but so what? How long would any major country be willing to cut its economy off from the rest of the world?

Can one monitor, censor, or regulate the content? Could one, for instance, prosecute people (or places) for content contrary to law? Apparently not, judging by the failures of such efforts in many countries. Since the major targets so far have been things such as child pornography, stolen military secrets, and hate literature about minorities (which are not difficult to get people to agree are deplorable), how could one get agreement on and enforce legislation to outlaw erotica, information about sexual indiscretions of politicians, or discussions of radical political ideas?

Turning away from apparent impossibilities, let us examine a few possibilities. None of the possibilities I mention are easy to accomplish, nor if accomplished will they "solve the problem." Part of the reason for the limitations on what can be done derive from the fact that they are versions of hard things governments have tried in other guises or in regard to other media of communication. For example, it became obvious that controlling or eradicating child pornography had been impossible even before the Internet, so why expect to solve the problem in that more elusive and flexible medium?

The first avenue to pursue will be among the hardest: get international consensus on what to do. By definition, no territorial government (or even quite a few together) can regulate geosynchronous satellite transmissions, the Internet, or computer networks. The United Nations often lacks the authority to do something even if its delegates agree on that something. Of course, if the biggest countries with the biggest stakes achieved a consensus, they might cajole and bully enough others to join them, and then something might get done. But the issue remains — what should be done? Very little *can* be done, according to my analysis, but consider a couple of possibilities.

For one thing, one might try to utilise social norms. The dramatic changes in how smoking has been *legally* regulated in some jurisdictions have been made possible because of "education" campaigns which have resulted in a tectonic change in social attitudes and norms. Of course, this has not occurred in many countries, but perhaps it is a hint of what can be done. Furthermore, many observers are concerned that those societies successful in this evolution have stigmatised and scape-goated a

significant minority of their own population. The greatest limitation with this approach stems from the diversity of things one might wish to accomplish in different countries: getting a consensus about child pornography just might be possible (in a decade? a century?) but surely not about freedom of speech (when countries such as China or Iran want more limitations on speech but others want fewer limitations), nor on the banning of American films or soap operas on the grounds that they are imperialistic.

Another possibility would operate on an analogy with the arguments about "decriminalising" marijuana or other "recreational" drugs. Note first that the suggestion about decriminalising drugs implicitly rests on the fact that social norms will have already changed. Although the vast and lucrative drug trade might be less lucrative if governments decriminalised and marketed street drugs, there is no comparable illicitness about most aspects of the Information Superhighway. The few illicit practices that exist might include child pornography, but would any government dare to decriminalise that trade just so that it can "regulate" and market the legal trade in pornography?

These possibilities seem far-fetched and indeed are very unlikely to achieve any serious level of regulation. Thus, one must await technological breakthroughs that allow regulation or at least systematic monitoring of the Information Superhighway.

But just a moment — what will happen when the breakthrough occurs allowing "Highway Patrols" to enforce rules on the Internet, WWW, and other media? For one thing, there will be storms of protest by civil libertarians about this new and even more pervasive form of censorship. The second (and simultaneous) consequence of patrols on the Net will be a frantic search for Son of Internet, that is, for the next generation of technology which can outwit the breakthrough technology. And so it goes.

## Conclusion

One of my favourite sayings (appropriately coined by Marcel Proust) is that the greatest voyages of discovery are not about finding new lands but about seeing with new eyes. At several points, I have presented historical perspectives in order to forestall the view that concepts, groups, communities, or ideas are fixed, "given," or come to be taken for granted. In part, I do so to shake readers out of complacent acceptance, to make them "see with new eyes." But historical explanations force one to come to grips with an unsettling thought: if institutions, practices, groups, identities, or cultures can be situated in specific times and places, then they cannot be timeless or universal. They arise, they change, perhaps they disappear. Knowing about the possibility of transience, one may more easily distance them from one's cherished beliefs and accept that new eyes will see new things, or that how one sees them may be part of what they are.

This article — like its predecessor — has presented a vision of a world that some day may become fully available to most people, but which already exists in many peoples daily lives. People who have never experienced "virtual reality" must learn to see with new eyes. Even some people who have experienced it, may not know what they have seen or done because they lack the words to express their experience.

In a previous section, I quoted Kenneth Gergen about the importance of communities of meaning. To have an experience by oneself without a community of meaning is unsatisfactory because one cannot convey to others the idea or experience or

significance of the event. The voyage of discovery therefore ends only when others understand the event in similar terms. In that sense, we do not know our own experiences until we can find an appropriate vocabulary to share them with others. At first, metaphor or allusion may have to serve as the means of communication, but as new concepts evolve into shared meanings, people will see with new eyes. Only then will each understand the experience and be able to understand the possibilities:

> *"Oh, destiny of Borges*
> *to have sailed across the diverse seas of the world*
> *or across that single and solitary sea of diverse names."*
> (Borges, 1964, 251)[8]

Think locally, act globally.

## Notes:

1. Although the earlier article focused on diasporas, it said little about their opposite, which I refer to here as "in-gatherings" and which will be a major focus of the present analysis.

2. The permeability of group boundaries and the fear of "passing" probably explain why cults emphasize group living and why Mormon missionaries always travel in pairs.

3. Elkins, *Beyond Sovereignty*, Chapter 6, explains in detail why multiple communities are common and why that should not lead to nostalgia for a lost era of community.

4. Leonard Cohen, "Love Calls You By Your Name," original song recorded on *Songs of Love and Hate,* Columbia Records, n.d., and on many other CDs and records.

5. I am currently developing these ideas in a book with the working title *Sustainable Diversities: Cultural Niches in the Global Political Order* (expected in 2000 or 2001).

6. Although a single anecdote, the speedy identification and capture of the alleged author of the e-mail virus called "Melissa" (in March/April 1999) may prove the point, since the virus could not be stopped even though its author was tracked down fairly quickly.

7. Douglas Jehl, "Internet Revolution Hits Islamic World," *The Globe and Mail* [Toronto], March 19, 1999, p. A 9 A, describes preventive actions undertaken in several countries. The degree of success of these actions can be evaluated only after a lapse of time.

8. The quotation is from a poem entitled "Elegy," translated by Donald A. Yates.

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