

## Trust, Authenticity, and Discursive Power in Cyberspace

Immersed in a time warp, space is constantly being redefined.



Converging technologies such as those of the digital cell phone, handheld Web browsers, and ubiquitous Internet have opened up a world of information at a relatively low cost. As a result, the definition of the globe has been transformed. Space is constantly being redefined as we experience a process of “space shrink,” where distances become irrelevant. Clicking on a Web browser carries little implications about where a particular Web site is located in space. Distances matter little, and traditional boundaries and hurdles to information availability simply evaporate as we seamlessly click through Web sites and explore obscure news events that might have unfolded only hours ago at a distant location.

Simultaneously with space shrink, we are immersed in a “time warp” as global information becomes instantly available to us as bits and bytes on the Internet. Using a digital cell phone it is now possible to read and respond to an email message that originated minutes ago at a computer located thousands of miles away. In the emerging “right here, right now” culture we are always connected, literally “jacked into,” a discursive space where waiting for information has become an unacceptable phenomenon. In short, we have created a new globe where we want to be heard immediately and we expect an immediate response.

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As we begin to live in this new environment, we allow technology to reshape the very ethos of our existence. Indeed, the appropriateness of this deliberation lies precisely in the fact that in traditional Greek scholarship the notion of the “place we live in” is synonymous with the idea of ethos, and we have interpreted the Internet as a cyberspace where we live and speak [1].

The first question to consider as we explore the ethical implications of the creation of a cyberspace shrunk in space and time is: Whose voice can be trusted? This is a fundamental ethical question where the trustworthiness of the voices in our new cyber dwelling place (ethos) is called into question. This becomes a critical question because anyone with access to the Internet, and with little technological savvy, can have a voice in cyberspace by designing a home page. With the presence of numerous voices the question of trust is particularly urgent. In a space-shrunk environment the traditional parameters of trust related to “who we know” begin to disappear as the voices represent diverse histories and geographies.

The question of trusting the voices in cyberspace must also be linked to the issue of authenticity. The notion of authenticity deals with which voice in cyberspace can be considered the one that best speaks about an issue. In cyberspace, where many voices contend to be heard, some can claim to have a greater legitimacy to speak about something. In an emerging post-modern condition where many voices

speak together, and many images and representations come our way, it is important to be able to decide which image and representation is the most valid. Even if we can trust the voices, which voices would be considered the authentic representation of a phenomenon? This question is important because even trustworthy voices bring the ideological baggage that implicates the speaking positions. The audience in cyberspace must constantly weigh the genuineness of every utterance with respect to the worldview presented by a speaker. Particularly when the discourse is not about issues that are well documented, the judgment of authenticity becomes trickier.

Consider, for instance, the way in which a city such as Calcutta in India is presented in various dis-

unique space where the relations of power have become problematic. In cyberspace it is the discursive power of the speakers that becomes most important. Very often, in cyberspace how something is said and the fact that something can be said at all, could become more powerful than what is being said. Therefore the question: Who has the power to speak for whom? The transition to cyberspace has made it possible for the marginalized to speak for themselves as opposed to being spoken for by the powerful. However, this redistribution of power makes the questions of trust and legitimacy of representation more complicated as the ethos of cyberspace is produced by people who do not possess the traditional vestiges of power related to political and economic

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courses on the Web. Sites maintained by Western travel advisers describe Calcutta as a city of “old mansions, dripping with moss and spotted with mildew” ([www.fodors.com](http://www.fodors.com)). Yet, there are other sites, such as “Calcutta Online,” maintained by people living in Calcutta and focusing on places such as the Science City, described as “one of the few such facilities in the world, the Science City near the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass has a huge dome and bigger-than-life representation of dinosaurs and such. Hi-tech combines with impressive visuals to bring science closer to people” (see [www.calonline.com](http://www.calonline.com)). Having lived in Calcutta, and being intimately familiar with the place, I would claim that both these descriptions are two equally trustable pieces of information. For visitors going to Calcutta, however, judgments need to be made about which representation is more authentic, and why the different speakers have different perspectives.

Netizens also are forced to constantly make decisions about the trustworthiness and genuineness in a

clout. Indeed, these are the new kids on the block, where the “block” is a global discursive space, and as with all “new kids,” it is always difficult to know whether to trust them. Trust becomes particularly dubious when the new kids are the ones who might have been traditionally marginalized and powerless.

The connection between trust, authenticity, and power then results in a broad question: Which representation might be trusted as more authentic when the same phenomenon may be represented by the “spoken for” discourse, as well as represented by the speakers’ own discourse? This is the culmination of many of the ethical issues emerging as new technologies create the potential for the multiple discourses to occupy and produce the new dwelling place of the Net. On the one hand, if it was possible to assume an ethical stance for all speakers, it might appear that the representation produced by the speakers’ own voice should be trusted since it can be considered authentic, and the meaning of the representation produced by the other voices will necessarily be

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implicated by the others' ideological positions, even if they were not ethically unsound. Yet, as argued earlier, it could be that the speaker does not hold an ethical position and is necessarily interested in deception, and thus the speakers' own representation cannot be trusted. The ethical representation of the other is far more reliable. In such a situation, if the lies were obvious then the ethical question becomes easy to settle. However, in cyberspace, where our lived experience is increasingly dependent on digital representations without a clear indication of the undeniable truth, it becomes far more difficult to find the lies. Indeed, technological savvy and the slick presentation of the "facts" can make any representation appear to be the truth, particularly when the "facts" are presented with the use of conventional technological adornments related to a "good" Web site. In that situation, Netizens constantly face the dilemma of what they should trust.

This dilemma is particularly true in the case of international issues, in which most Netizens might not have a direct experience but instead depend on the mediated representation of the event. Consider for example the popularity of email and newsgroups during the conflict in Kosovo, when international troops moved into sovereign territory to ensure the safety of innocent human beings subjected to ethnic violence. While the conflict was being described and reported in the mainstream media, students and intellectuals from Belgrade using email and newsgroups questioned the international initiative. In such situations, where the atmosphere is charged with conflict and specific ideologies are at loggerheads, the answer to the question about trust on the Net becomes significant. How is the Netizen to judge the voices of the people in Belgrade? Should they be discounted as "digital propaganda" packaged to resemble "authentic" voices of individuals, or should these voices be trusted as the legitimate voices of people who can now use the Internet to be heard?

In the end, what Netizens decide about trust, authenticity, and discursive power shapes the ethos of cyberspace. From the pessimistic perspective, the shape of cyberspace is constructed as a new dwelling place where no one can be trusted, nothing can be

considered to be authentic, and Netizens become wary of acknowledging anyone. The optimistic perspective might suggest that voices can be trusted in cyberspace, the legitimate representation can be found in a dialectical process of examining the various voices, and ultimately the Netizens are able to confidently acknowledge the multitude of voices, thus giving them the power they seek and the attention they deserve.

In many ways some of the most visible and public debates about the ethics of cyberspace and the new communication technologies have over adopting one of the two possible perspectives. I would argue that the debates about the Communication Decency Act and the discussions around cyberspace privacy and encryption might appear different from each other. Fundamentally, however, they both deal with questions of trust in cyberspace, what must be acknowledged as authentic, and how Netizens must behave in the living space. Perhaps because both the optimistic and pessimistic positions are equally untenable, eventually a mix between the two will appear. We know cyberspace allows us to stay in touch globally while understanding that not all we encounter can be trusted; it is also understood that without cyberspace many alternative and marginal voices would remain unheard. ■

#### REFERENCE

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