



Chapter XIV

Cafematics: The Cybercafe and the Community

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Introduction

While mainstream industry and government focus on individual, home and business ownership and use of new ICTs, there is a quiet revolution going on as computers, and all their applications from games to the Internet, move into public spaces. There are commercial kiosk systems in the streets and malls, and many government projects to empower communities and stimulate the local economy, but perhaps the most important, overlooked and oft-derided development is the cybercafe.

The cybercafe is a cafe or shop open to the public, where a computer can be hired for periods of a half hour to access the Internet, write a CV or play a game. With the explosion in the use and profile of the Internet and personal use of new information and communications technology—‘multimedia’—cybercafes have become part of contemporary culture, established among the public places of modern cities, towns and villages around the world. In December 1999 an on-line cybercafe guide listed 4,397 cafes around the world.¹

There is very little research on what these cybercafes are used for, who uses them and why.² This study, conducted in 1998 (Stewart, 1998), addressed the use and users of three cybercafes in the same city, the reasons and manner they were set up and developed, and the role cybercafes play in the general development of use and knowledge about multimedia. What emerged was that cybercafes are not only sites for technical access and consumption and use of multimedia content and services, but also public, physical, community and cultural spaces. In this context I challenge the view that computers either undermine the community, or are only relevant to the formation and activities of ‘virtual’ communities.

The cybercafe is not a transitory phenomenon, but the evolution and extension of a very old and traditional institution, the cafe. Cybercafes may service and reflect the communication and information needs of people living in a global society, but they place this in a local context, providing a social space and a convenient and hospitable location for technology access: the ‘human face’ of the information

society. If the city is our home, then the cybercafe is becoming an important part of our domestic life. Cybercafes bring IT into real communities, allowing people to use and learn about them in their own way. The managers and customers of the cafes are finding new ways to incorporate this global phenomena into the everyday life of the city.

The study looks at three different cybercafes in the same city: how and why they have developed and are being used, the business, the technology, the customers, and the staff. In this chapter I look at who uses the cafes, and why, highlighting the *triggers* that brought them in in the first place, and the reasons why they come back. The convenience, sociability, learning opportunities and games stand out as principal factors. I follow with a discussion of the importance of the cafe as a focus point and gateway for local, virtual and distant communities. Finally I argue that rather than becoming irrelevant, the cybercafe has a strong future, in ever more diverse forms as increasing numbers of people come to use and rely on the Internet, electronic entertainment, commerce, communication and information services as they go about their everyday life. People like to do things in public spaces and in social spaces, and if those things involve multimedia, then cybercafes are in a position to satisfy a growing market.

Cybercafes, Cafes and ICTs in City Life

Multimedia in the City

There is a growing body of work examining the way that the use of network technology affects or might affect contemporary city life. It includes ideas such as electronic commerce and government, exclusion and inclusion, virtual communities, and city life moving into virtual spaces, with the 'digital city' (Graham and Aurigi, 1997). Much of the literature focuses on on-line communities that are no longer geographically bound (Reingold 1994). It conceives of individual users locked away in their own rooms, offices or homes accessing these communities. However there is little interest in the points where IT use becomes public. This is reinforced by a dominant paradigm, supported by industry, of individual ownership, and individual use of multimedia and the Internet. However recent surveys show that many people access the Internet in public spaces (16% in the U.S., Spring 1998; 24% in a UK survey, *The Guardian*, Summer, 1998). The huge uptake of free Web based e-mail accounts also indicates that many people do not have their own Internet access, or frequently access their e-mail away from their own computer.

New media and communications technologies tend to go through a sequence of public and then personal ownership as they are simplified and become cheaper, and uses and knowledge develop among users. This has occurred for the television and telephone, photography, video games, and increasingly for the computer. It occurs in organisations as well, e.g., reprographics and computers. There are some technologies where the skills and costs make it very difficult for people to actually own and maintain the technology, but it is cheap enough to install in a very convenient local community location. In these cases we have seen the development of local provision of video hire, photocopying, DTP, pay-TV and film processing.³

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