

GLOBAL CULTURE, LOCAL CULTURES, AND THE INTERNET

The Thai Example

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Abstract. This paper addresses the questions of whether, and if so, how and to what extent the Internet brings about homogenization of the local cultures in the world. It examines a particular case, that of Thai culture, through an investigation and interpretation of a Usenet newsgroup, soc.culture.thai. Two threads of discussion in the newsgroup are selected. One deals with criticisms of the Thai government and political leaders, and the other focuses on whether Thai language should be a medium, or perhaps the only medium, of communication in the newsgroup. It is found that, instead of erasing local cultural boundaries, creating a worldwide monolithic culture, the Internet reduplicates the existing cultural boundaries. What the Internet does, on the contrary, is to create an umbrella cosmopolitan culture which is necessary for communication among people from disparate cultures. That culture, however, is devoid of "thick" backgrounds, in Michael Walzer's sense.

1. Introduction

The growth of the Internet is a worldwide phenomenon. From a relatively obscure academic tool, the Internet has become a household fixture and nowadays it is hard to find anyone without an e-mail address or a personal home page. Cyberatlas (<http://www.cyberatlas.com/geographics.html>) reports by pinging 1% of all the Internet hosts that in January 1996 there were 9,472,000 distinct hosts, and 16,146,000 in January 1997, an increase of 170%. As more and more people are becoming wired, the Internet itself is fast becoming as pervasive as televisions and radios. However, its ability to generate many-to-many communication sets it apart from these traditional mass media. This gives the Internet a strong potential in forming communities, and where there are communities, there are cultures unique to each community. The potential of the Internet in forming "virtual" communities incurs a number of

problems, chief among which is the relation between the community formed by the Internet itself and the existing communities bound by locality and cultural tradition.

The Internet at the moment is still predominantly American, but it is increasingly global, with more and more countries adding more and more host machines, expanding the network at a breathtaking speed. Network Wizard (<http://www.nw.com/>) reports that the growth of Internet hosts in 1994 was 15% in Asia alone, and in Thailand the growth rate was as much as 53%. This expansion has created a problem of how local cultures adapt themselves to this novelty. As a quintessentially Western product, there is clearly bound to be a contrast, if not necessarily a conflict, between non-Western cultures and the Internet technologies. How, in particular, do local cultures take to the Internet and other forms of computer-mediated communication such as the Bulletin Board System (BBS)? Does the Internet represent an all unifying force, turning all cultures within its domain into one giant superculture where everything becomes the same? Does the idea of the Internet and other forms of computer-mediated communication carry with it cultural baggage of the West, such as democracy and individualism?

This paper attempts to provide some tentative answers to these vexing questions. It presents a case study of one local culture, that of Thailand, in computer-mediated communication. More specifically, it presents a case study of the Usenet newsgroup on Thailand and its culture, `soc.culture.thai`, in order to find out whether and, if so, how Thai cultural presuppositions affect the received underlying ideas of the CMC technologies. Then we shall see how these answers provide an insight into the theoretical problem of the extent to which global computer-mediated communication could be regarded as a means to realization of such Western ideals as liberalism, individualism, respect of human rights and democracy.

I would like to argue in this paper that Thai cultural attitudes do affect computer-mediated communication in a meaningful way. This means the idea that the Internet would automatically bring about social change in line with developments in the West needs to be critically examined. It appears from the study that important presuppositions of local cultures are very much alive, and exist alongside the imported Western ideas. Which type of cultural attitudes and presuppositions is present is more a matter of pragmatic concern, such as whether the participants in CMC happen to find any use for a set of ideas, than that of truth or falsity of the ideas in questions.

2. Internet in Thailand

Kanchit Malaivongs reports (<http://203.148.255.222/cpi/it4.htm>) that Internet connection in Thailand first took shape in 1988 when an e-mail only dial up

account was set up between Prince of Songkhla University in southern Thailand and the Australian Academic and Research Network (AARNET) through the help of the Australian government. A few years later Chulalongkorn University set up the first permanent leased line connection in July 1992, providing services to faculty and students of the university as well as those of some other participating universities. The cost of connection was shared among the universities, and faculties and students enjoyed free access. Another permanent connection to the Internet backbone was set up by the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC), a government agency responsible for computer and information technology issues, and more academic organizations joined in. Soon afterwards the government decided to open up access to the general public and dozens of commercial Internet Service Providers (ISP's) sprang up. Today it is estimated that around 131,000 Thais are enjoying access to the Internet (*Phuu Jad Kaan Raai Wan* 1997: 30).

3. soc.culture.thai -- Wild Frontier of Things Thai

For the majority of Thai net surfers, soc.culture.thai (SCT) is by far the most popular Usenet newsgroup. It is perhaps *the* place in cyberspace for discussion on all sorts of aspects on Thailand, and it deals with all aspects of Thai society and culture. Thais form the majority of the nationalities of discussants in the group.¹ The newsgroup derives its tremendous popularity among Thais and Thai watchers from its free wheeling threads of discussion in a culture where some topics may not be discussed publicly. Furthermore, the group also serves as a place where struggles for political freedom take place, a phenomenon also reported by Andreas Harsono (1997) in case of Indonesia. During the May 1992 incident, when soldiers opened fire to the Thai people fighting for constitutional reform, the newsgroup was one of the means of struggle. The whole world was kept informed of what actually happened, and many Thais who were locked out of reliable information due to government blackout of the national media relied on it to learn what was happening outside their homes. Nowadays, when the political climate is much freer, the newsgroup still remains politically active. Members of the newsgroup cherish the freedom to openly discuss forbidden topics with fellow members. Such topics include the personal characters of the members of the royal family, and criticisms, or in many cases, invectives against the politicians.

¹ According to the soc.culture.thai General FAQ (available online at <ftp://rtfm.mit.edu/pub/usenet/soc.culture.thai>), a survey in 1994 shows that soc.culture.thai has an estimated readers of 39,000 worldwide; 66% of all USENET sites carry this newsgroup; and total monthly traffic is 2035 messages or 4.4 MB. Thais form the majority of those who read and post in the newsgroup, comprising 64% of the total.

Since Thais can apparently talk and discuss freely on the Internet without fears of reprisal from the authorities, it is understandable that they would want the same amount of freedom outside of the newsgroup too. What is emerging from many discussion threads in the group is that the participants want to see a new Thailand which is more open and more in tune with the world community—a country that is less bound to the past while still retaining its own cultural identity. An example can be seen from a particular thread on “The king said new constitution is acceptable.” The thread started from an important event in recent Thai history, when the King signed the new constitution into law. Discussion then ensued in SCT concerning the new constitution. Naturally the discussants hoped that the new constitution would bring a new era in Thai politics, an era when the old dirty, vote buying, voters bullying, raw power politics would be over. There were some disagreements, however. One point in the new constitution, which is rather controversial, concerns the qualifications of those who are to enter politics. Candidates for parliamentary election are now required to possess a minimum of a bachelor’s degree. The rationale of the Constitution Drafting Assembly, the organization responsible for drafting the new charter, was clearly to react against the current situation where many powerful MP’s and hence cabinet members do not have the necessary knowledge and skills for running the country. As a result, they often act as if they represent their constituencies only and do not have a broader look at the country as a whole.

However, a significant number of SCT members voiced their disagreement with the clause. A member, Prapasri Rajatapiti, writes:

That the one issue I have been strongly opposing for the new constitution. I for one believe these articles to be very discriminatory. I believe that as long as one can read and write, one can serve as an MP. Education is only compulsory up to grade 6. How can we tell these people who did not have the chance to go to school, and was told that it was OK then (since it is not compulsory), that now they won't have a chance to be MP or senator unless they go back to school. Formal education is only 1 form of education, not all.²

As usual for threads of discussion, Prapasri’s argument did not go unopposed. Another contributor, giving only his personal name Tirachart, raised exactly the same point as the CDA on the ability of undereducated politicians to run the country:

Hello;

It's about time to change or else Mr. Cow and Mr. Kwai will be minister of something. Does it make you happy to see the government's way of serve the

²Prapasri Rajatapiti, post to soc.culture.thai, message-ID: <19971010230101.TAA17707@ladder02.news.aol.com>, October 10, 1997.

people nowadays? How much longer those jerk will be still in charge the of government?³

‘Cow’ is English, and ‘Kwai’ is a Thai word meaning ‘water buffalo.’ In Thai language, to call people a cow or a buffalo means they are stupid. This kind of venting of emotion is common in SCT. Here one can find that flaming the government and politicians is among the most favorite actions. The more virulent the attack, the higher ‘status’ the attacker seems to possess in the group. Tirachart’s post here is also interesting in that it presupposes some cultural background in order to understand it fully. Without the knowledge that Thais perceive bovines to be very stupid, non-Thais have to rely on contexts to guess the meaning, but sometimes this is quite difficult.

In fact, comparing the politicians with animals is rather common. Commenting on an earlier post by Sanpawat Kantabutra, one calling himself “Aitui” writes:

On 17 Oct 1997 01:18:35 GMT, sanpawat@c4.cs.tufts.edu (Sanpawat Kantabutra) wrote:

>I believe so. It will take about 25-30 years for younger generation
>like us will be in major positions in the government and other state
>organizations. I think the new generation is better than the old one
>in terms of ... Well, almost everything. Khun Anand also said that it
>is the time for younger generations to run Thailand. 25-30 years are
>worth-while.
>

We dun need 25-30 years...just kill those fucking heas then we will have a much better tomorrow !⁴

This is more of an expression of anger than a deliberation. However, the rationale behind it is clear. Sanpawat comments that the next generations of Thais would be more qualified and more responsible than the present one, presumably due to better education and more openness. ‘Hea’ means ‘monitor lizard,’ a much lower ranking animal in the Thai cosmos than bovines. While bovines are merely stupid, monitor lizards are treacherous and evil. Bovines are viewed by Thais as beneficial, as they help them with tilling the fields. Many Thais feel a certain sense of gratitude to them. Monitor lizards, on the other hand, are always keen to steal the farmers’ chickens and ducks. The word ‘hea’ is in Thai a strong invective used to describe those who are bad and depraved.

By mixing Thai words in the more or less English posts in SCT, the contributors do not as much aim at being fully understood by the global community than at talking and sharing feelings within his rather close knit

³ Tirachart, post to soc.culture.thai, message-ID: <61mk27\$6s5\$1@excalibur.flash.net>, October 10, 1997.

⁴ Aitui, post to soc.culture.thai, message-ID: <34474ee0.8970100@news>, October 17, 1997.

community. Here those who don't happen to understand these words and the presupposed background knowledge necessary for grasping the whole meaning, would feel left out. Thus, SCT takes on a double function. On the one hand, it acts as a channel of disseminating information about Thailand and its people, as stated in its charter. On the other, it serves as a means by which Thai people and non-Thais who are "in the know" strengthen their shared feelings and knowledge. It is as if the newsgroup is a coffeehouse where people who know one another very well come to discuss things in which they are interested. They don't quite care whether outsiders would be able to follow what is going on. That is not the point of the communication. Such a communication as happening here has its essential function within a community. It is the place where members of the community come to share views, thoughts and feelings, thus making the community itself possible.

This view of communication as the means of strengthening community ties is called by James Carey the 'ritual' view. In *Communication as Culture* (1989: 18-23) Carey states that there are two views on communication, namely the 'transmission' and the 'ritual' views. The former view communication as a one way traffic, where information, injunctions, news, and the like is 'transmitted' from the source of power to remote posts. One purpose of such transmission is to create political unity and to assert the power of the political center to areas within its jurisdiction. The ritual view, on the other hand, views communication, not primarily as a means of transmitting information, but as an integral part of community activity, which members of a community perform in order to reaffirm the identity of the community itself.

The invectives against the Thai political leaders in the SCT are parts of government bashing occurring after the great flowering of media freedom following the Black May Incident of 1992.⁵ Released from the fear of criticizing the authorities, Thais began to view the government not as somebody from far above, but as one of their own. Once they feel that criticizing the government incurs no real threat to their safety and freedom, Thais are enjoying this freedom a lot, and sometimes it may seem that the criticisms serve merely to release pent up emotions and frustrations rather than to offer constructive viewpoints toward solving the country's problems. What is rather surprising in this phenomenon is that, not only highly educated, middle class Thais are joining in this bashing frenzy, but the poor farmers in the countryside are joining the fray too. Traditionally these poor farmers, who form the majority bulk of the Thai population, have a very high respect and awe for their rulers, including political

⁵ Anek Laothammatas (1993) argues that the urban middle class were the key players in the demonstration, making it different from the previous ones which had been led by student activists. He points out that the middle class would like to see a transparent government which is free from corrupted practices and a more modern, more open political system. This wish of the middle class is clearly reflected in the tones of most discussions on Thailand on the Internet.

leaders and bureaucrats. But they are beginning to feel, in the more democratic and liberal climate, that the leaders are merely humans, and most importantly that they do have real power and leverage against them. Since these leaders do come to power only through their votes, the villagers are getting more involved in politics; they are trying to wrench power to take care of their own affairs from the bureaucrats. A new community is emerging that is bound by the sense of independence and increasing responsibility in dealing with one's own affairs.⁶

Another thread in the newsgroup from which we can see cultural implications concerns the use of language in postings. Kritchai Quanchairat, a regular contributor to the newsgroup, is a Thai computer scientist specializing in localizing certain Internet softwares. He is known for his campaign for more postings in Thai language. Naturally his campaign provoked a fair number of replies. In a post replying to Kritchai's, "Conrad" writes:

In article <199709122354.SAA27681@phil.digitaladvantage.net>, kritchai

Quanchairut <kritchai@usa.net> writes

>[You may use Thai or English as you prefer on SCT/TMG]

>

>I linked posts from TMG to Soc.culture.thai.

>I beleive posts in Thai will help most of soc.culture.thai

>readers (who are the majority behind the scence in Thailand)

>to be able to ACTUALLY MAKE USE OF THE INTERNET.

>

>Most Thais could not read English very well if not at all.

>These will most benefit those K12 kids who are getting on-line

>via SchoolNet projects. It's not too late to help the kids

>to get on-line today. Some of us may need to be a little

>patience about this. Let's think of it as "FOR THE KIDS".

>

>If you don't know how frustrating it is for not being able

>to read/understand posts in their own groups, check German

>or French groups.

>

>It's time and your open-mindedness counts!!

>

>Krit

>...

⁶ However, since the middle class have the economic and cultural power, their voices in the affairs of the country is very loud indeed, and cannot be fairly compared to that of the villagers. Moreover, since the number of Thai people connected to the Internet are currently very limited, and the fees for a connection is far from affordable, members of the Thai Internet community consist solely of the middle class. For them the Internet has become an important tool by which they create and maintain a community. One aspect of this community is that the members agree that old style politics needs to change, and that Thailand needs to open herself up more and become more an open, liberalized society.

>

I was under the impression that this n/g was created to discuss and disseminate aspects of the Thai culture, social and political scene. The vast majority of people using this n/g do not read/write Thai so posts in Thai will restrict the original purpose. By all means set up a Thai language n/g. It is a fact that the common language of the internet is English, being either the first or second language of the majority of users. Surely it is a desirable aim that the information on the internet should be accessible to the widest possible audience.

To progress academically, socially and economically in Thailand one **MUST** be competent in the English language. What better incentive could there be for kids who wish to join the on-line community?⁷

Kritchai's attempt to persuade SCT members to use Thai in their posts amounts to nothing less than changing the whole face of the group. However, he has a point. The level of English understanding in the country is generally poor, and the language is not in widespread use at all. Proficient users of the language are few compared to the whole population. Thus, Kritchai apparently believes that if Thai is used more in SCT, more Thais would be persuaded to join and the ensuing discussions would be good for them.

Another reason in favor of using Thai in SCT concerns power relation among different language speakers, as implicitly stated in Kritchai's post. Thais sometimes feel it unfair that they have to communicate in a foreign language instead of their own; they often feel inferior to native English speakers just because their English is not so good as enabling them to talk as fast or to argue as effectively as the natives. Using Thai in this context amounts to an empowering of non-English speakers so they feel confident enough and less self-conscious enough to participate actively in the newsgroup. Since English has never gained a foothold in the country except as a *foreign* language, many Thais feel resistant to the idea of having to talk in English on matters about themselves and their culture. They don't feel that SCT is a forum *about* Thailand and its culture, but they appear to feel that it is also *for* Thais and sometimes Thais only. In a tight, close knit culture as the Thai one, such feelings are not uncommon.

4. Internet as Globalizing Agent?

Let us return to our original questions. Does the Internet succeed in turning all cultures of the world into one monolithic culture where all the important beliefs and background assumptions are the same? In one sense, it would appear so.

⁷ Conrad, post to soc.culture.thai, message ID: <3pH6RKAMWmG0Ew8t@ceebees.demon.co.uk>, September 13, 1997.

When participants of widely disparate cultures come to interact, what happens is that there emerge a kind of culture which is devoid of historical backgrounds that give each local culture its separate identity; it is, for example, the culture of international conferences. The newly emerging culture is comparable to piped music one hears in airports or in modern supermarkets; that is, it is shorn of its value, its role in a people's scheme of things. It plays no part in the ritual of a traditional culture. In short, it has become sanitized and modernized. Let us call this kind of culture the 'cosmopolitan' one. One aspect of the Internet clearly points to that kind of culture. When people from all parts of the globe communicate with one another, it is difficult enough when they face each other to observe all the non verbal cues. (Those cues might be interpreted differently.) But since the Internet communication happens almost exclusively through texts, the task becomes much more difficult. Communication requires that participants share at least some sets of values and assumptions together. They have to accept that what others say are largely true, as Donald Davidson (1984: 200-01) argues. Thus when texts become the only means of communication, building a virtual community, this shared set of assumptions and values already exists. These values, however, do not belong to any local, traditional culture, but are whatever that make global computer-mediated communication possible.

It is well known that the shared set of values and assumptions prevalent on the Internet resembles that of liberalism and egalitarianism typical of modern Western liberal culture. The origin of the Internet as a repository for exchanges of discussion and information by computer scientists and other scholars point to the fact that the Internet bears the stamp of the culture of this group. Its birthplace in the United States explains why these assumptions and values are so well embedded. Nonetheless, the potential of the Internet as the global forum of international communication makes it almost necessary that this shared set of values and assumptions is held by the participants. The set is an outcome of an international, cosmopolitan culture where participants share little in common in terms of historical backgrounds. In order to make communication possible among those who come from disparate historical, traditional backgrounds, the values and assumptions germane to a particular local culture cannot do the job. What happens is that the participants either talk about their professional matters, the topic of international conferences, or they talk about superficial stuffs that guarantee to be shared already, like the weather. The Internet does not have to originate in the United States for it to acquire the cultural traits it already has. It could have come from Japan, but when it is truly globalized it has no choice but to be what it is now. It is in this sense, then, that the Internet could be regarded as a globalizing agent.

This shared set of values and assumptions typical of the Internet becomes apparent when it spreads its roots to states where the ideas of liberalism, egalitarianism, and democracy face violent resistance from the political

authorities. The newsgroup soc.culture.burma, for example, is used by Burmese dissidents living abroad to spread information which would not be known otherwise. It is no surprise that the Burmese government even requires its citizens to ask for official permission to own a modem. Failure to do so can make one a political prisoner. That is what happens when governments actively attempt to stop the wishes of its people, and it shows how potent the Internet can be as a political force.⁸ It also shows that, if we take the ideas of democracy and respect for human rights as universal, then the Internet could be seen as a harbinger of these ideals to the areas where the ideals are not appreciated by the authorities.

This aspect of the Internet as a harbinger of the liberal ideals could be taken to substantiate the claim that the Internet represents a global force spreading Western values to the world, as if it were the destiny of the world to subscribe fully to Western ideals. However, I think a distinction should have to be made between Western culture and cosmopolitan culture. Western culture is a product of more than two thousand years of continuously evolving civilization. It has its own traditions, customs, belief systems, religions, which put it on a par with the world's other great civilizations, such as Indian or Chinese. Cosmopolitan culture, on the other hand, is borne out of the need for people from different cultures to communicate or to do other things with one another. Thus it is by nature shorn of any resources that could be drawn from centuries of experiences. What is happening with the Internet is perhaps not a spread of the former, but the latter. But that is hardly surprising. It is true that cosmopolitan culture originated first in the West, because the need for finding common ground among people of disparate beliefs was first felt there; that, however, does not mean that the two cultures are one and the same.

Thus, when the Internet is used as a political tool, it does not necessarily mean that it acts as a Westernizing force. The majority of SCT contributors who criticize the Thai government are Thais, and here the newsgroup could have been a traditional Thai coffeehouse where people gather and talk and discuss politics. The participants in the newsgroup do not become less Thai when they surf in cyberspace. Instead as they become more active in the affairs of their country, they show that they are more attached to their locales. Moreover, as the Thai participants can use, and have indeed used, the Internet to spread information on various aspects of the traditional culture, such as traditional

⁸ The relation between Internet and democracy appears to be parochial. It depends on the situations where a particular communication/community takes place. For Thailand, the fight is for more open, more transparent and efficient government. For the US, the situation might be as described in Mark Poster in "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere" (1997: 201-217). That is, Poster calls for a kind of 'postmodern' or more participatory democracy, which is less encumbered by the traditional forms of American government. This seems to show that the Internet is more a tool for those who need it than a homogenizing force, making every culture the same.

recipes and digitized traditional music and paintings, the Internet can even be a tool for cultural preservation and propagation. In this sense it does not globalize, but localize, making people more attuned to their own cultural heritage. Nonetheless, as an embodiment of cosmopolitan culture, it is clear that the Internet globalizes in this way—as a means by which global communication and community building, if only “thinly” in Michael Walzer’s (1994) sense, becomes possible.

According to Walzer, moral arguments are “thin” when they are shorn of their particular histories and other cultural embodiments which make them integral parts of a cultural entity. These are the parts that make the arguments “thick.” To use Walzer’s own example, when Americans watched Czechs carry placards bearing words like ‘Truth’ and ‘Justice,’ they could relate immediately to the situation and sympathized with the marchers. However, when the arguments are at the local level, as to which version of distributive justice should be in place, there might well be disagreements, and Americans may find themselves disagreeing with the particular conception of justice which is eventually adopted. The sympathetic feeling one feels across the Ocean is part of the “thin” morality, but the localized and contextualized working of those moral concepts is part of the “thick” (Walzer 1994: 1-19).

The thread of discussion in SCT concerning the language to be used in the forum illustrates the tension between local and global cultures, or thick and thin conceptions, very well. As usually happens in international conferences, talking only about the weather to those with whom one does not share much is rather boring. Many non-Thai Internet surfers do not know much about Thailand and the variously subtle nuances of her culture; thus their contributions are generally limited to asking for information, and when they venture to provide information or ideas of their own, they often reveal that they are quite ignorant of the deeply rooted culture. In order to communicate with non-Thais on topics related to Thai culture, Thais have to supply an adequate amount of background information in order to make themselves understood. It is much easier for them just to talk to fellow Thais who already share such background knowledge. This way they can mix Thai words in the posts, refer to ‘kwais’ or ‘heas,’ or allude to characters in the classical literature without fear of not being understood. Consequently, participants in international gatherings sometimes drift off to form their own smaller groups, banding with those to whom they share background knowledge. The situation also happens on the Internet. The founding charter of SCT states that the newsgroup is created in order to exchange information and viewpoints *about* Thailand and its culture, and that English is to be the only medium of communication.⁹ But since most Thais do not use English very well, the campaign to post in Thai language is

⁹ Soc.culture.thai general FAQ, available online at <ftp://rtfm.mit.edu/pub/usenet/soc.culture.thai>.

understandable. There also has been an attempt to amend the SCT charter to make it officially recognized to post in Thai. The implication this debate has for the question whether the Internet is a globalizing force is clear.

The ongoing debate in SCT on what language is to be used, together with the *de facto* existence of a significant portion of SCT posts which are entirely in the Thai language, provide an evidence that, instead of looking at the Internet as a sign of the world becoming culturally monolithic, we may have to look at it just as a global forum where participants join one another so long as there is a felt need for it. And when they feel more comfortable talking to someone back home, so to speak, they don't feel any qualms in forming smaller groups within the big gathering, where they can forget the learned *lingua franca* and enjoy talking in the vernacular. To assume that the Internet would bring about a culturally monolithic world would mean that it would bring about a set of shared assumptions and values, including respect for human rights, individualism, egalitarianism, in other words the ideas of contemporary liberal democratic culture. But since it is conceivable that those liberal ideals could exist within cultures other than those of the West, to claim that the Internet would bring about the same "thick" culture in Walzer's sense would seem to be mistaken. If the set of ideals is viewed instead as a part of the cosmopolitan culture, then it appears that the set will be adopted by a local culture if it feels that it wants or needs to be a part of the global community. And if they don't feel the need, then they will just turn their back on it, in effect telling the world that they don't care to join. Very often in those cases the wish of the populace runs counter to that of the political leaders; political oppression and prohibition of freedom of expression result.

If the culture believed to be "exported" by the Internet is viewed as a cosmopolitan one, and not the traditional Western culture, then we are in a good position to assess the claim that the Internet is a homogenizing cultural force. Since cosmopolitan culture is neutral on most respects, the claim that the Internet will bring it about is rather trivial. On the other hand, if traditional, or Walzer's "thick," culture is at issue, then it seems the Internet fails to provide such a culture. But now the crucial question is: To which culture do the salient aspects of modern liberal culture, namely respect for human rights, democracy, egalitarianism, belong? Do they belong to the traditional Western culture, putting them on a par with Christianity, the Gothic cathedrals, Bach's chorales, Michelangelo's paintings, Franz Kafka's stories, in short with the aspects that give Western civilization its uniqueness? Or do they belong to secular, cosmopolitan culture, the culture arising out of the need of people from various cultures to get in touch with one another? To answer this question deeply enough and satisfactorily enough would itself require at least another paper. But at least a glimpse of the way toward an answer can here be given. We have seen from the examination above of what happens in SCT that it is certainly possible

for Thais to fight for democracy and human rights, while retaining their distinct cultural identities. The invectives against the government are just some indications of the concerns of the Thai people on their government and their own country; behind an invective lies a vision of how the country should be governed, a vision that does not include the current political leaders. On the other hand, the debate on the language to be used in the newsgroup shows that Thais are conscious of their identities and the need to form their own smaller communities within the globalized cyberspace. That the threads happen together in the same newsgroup show that Thais do not view the struggle for more openness, more efficient government, more participatory democracy and so on as something separated or incompatible from the desire to assert their cultural identity. There is no necessary conflict between these two spheres of culture, in the same way as there is no necessary conflict between Bach's chorales and the Gothic buildings on the one hand, and the democratic, libertarian, and egalitarian ideals on the other.

5. Conclusion

Thai attitudes toward the CMC technologies, especially the Internet, seem to show that the technologies only serve as a means that makes communication possible, communication which would take place anyway in some other form if not on the Internet. Most Thais welcome the new technologies, thinking that they enable them to surge forward with the world. However, this is a far cry from claiming that the Internet would bring about a culturally monolithic world where everybody shares the same "thick" backgrounds and values. What is there in the SCT newsgroup is that Thai people and non-Thais who want to join talk about matters that are interesting to them, be they politics, or culture, or whatever. Here the newsgroup act more like the traditional Thai coffeehouse where public matters, especially local and national politics, dominate the discussion. As the Internet is really a form of the media, and in Thailand it has been heavily promoted that way, it is an open to the world at large, where, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, one can extend one's senses far from what is normally possible. One can perceive what is going on in far corners of the world in an instant, and especially in the case of the Internet, one can feel as though one is bodily transported to the remote regions one is interacting with.

What comes naturally from such a scenario is that there are bound to be comparisons from what one perceives in the far corners and in the local areas around oneself. When one sees in the far corners what one believes to be good for one's own locality, it is natural to suppose that there are going to be changes in the latter. Richard Rorty argues that the process is what actually lies behind the universalist rhetoric claiming for a common morality and social norms for

all mankind. This process of changes in one's locality as a result of one's perception of other regions, according to Rorty, should not be taken to imply that there is a universal ethics at work. Rorty's naturalism would make such an ethics redundant. What is really the case is that some people just want to live like others. Thus instead of a universal consciousness that this is the right way to live, Rorty claims that there is "solidarity" for mankind (1989, 1991). Hence, when a Thai Internet surfer sees what is going on in another region of the globe which she sees should be good for her own country, be it the strict enforcement of the law, open democracy, human rights and so on, the feelings are those of wanting to be a part of the community that she finds acceptable. Deciding freely on her own, there is then no need that her own cultural identity needs to change. She can remain Thai while embracing all these political and social ideals. That is to say, she can enjoy Thai food and Thai music while struggling for a more open democracy in Thailand at the same time.

Thus the Internet and local cultures both determine each other. While the Internet is a window to the world where influences can be received, the content of the Internet is obviously determined by whatever posted or uploaded to interconnected computers. The information available shows that cultural groups are as separated from one another as they are in the outside world. The cultural fault lines, so to speak, stay roughly the same. An outsider would feel as much lost in the cyberspace of SCT as they could be when dropped in the midst of a Thai town. According to Carey's ritual view of communication, communication is part of the rituals of a culture that give it its uniqueness, its being. Hence communication in SCT could be seen as part of the rituals that make up the Thai identity. The identity, however, is not something static, but is constantly evolving so as to respond effectively to outside changes. Thus there is no contradiction in saying that the Thai identity, for example, evolves in such a way that the Thai people accepts ideals such as human rights, democracy, and the like as their own, as integral parts of their culture. Cyberspace mirrors real space, and vice versa.

Acknowledgements

Travel grant for the London Conference was supported in part by the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The author wishes to thank Dr. M. R. Kalaya Tingsabadh, Dean of the Faculty, and Assoc. Prof. Thanomnuan O-charoen, Deputy Dean for Academic and Research Affairs, for their generous help and support.

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