Is this digital democracy, or a new tyranny of cyberspace?

The hype of freedom on the web masks both disparities of power and the dangers of blurring real and virtual identities

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Time magazine's 2006 "Person of the Year" award went not to Ahmadinejad, Chávez, Kim Jong-il, or any other of the usual suspects, but to "you", that is each and every one of us using or creating content on the world wide web. The cover showed a white keyboard with a mirror for a computer screen where readers can see their own reflection. To justify the choice, Time's editors cited the shift from institutions to individuals who are said to be emerging as the citizens of a new digital democracy.

If there ever was an ideological choice, this is it: the message - the new cyber-democracy in which millions can directly communicate and organise themselves, by-passing centralised state control - covers up a series of disturbing gaps and tensions. The first point of irony is that everyone who looks at the Time cover doesn't see others with whom they are supposed to be in direct exchange - what they see is a mirror-image of themselves.

And the "you" who recognises yourself in your online screen-image is divided: I am never simply my screen persona. First, there is the relationship of the real bodily person to my screen persona. Marxists and other critically-disposed thinkers like to point out how cyberspace equality is of course deceptive - it ignores the material disparities (wealth, social position, power or lack of it and so on).

Real-life inertia magically disappears in the frictionless surfing of cyberspace. In today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. Cyberspace's virtual reality simply generalises this procedure: it provides reality deprived of substance. In the same way that decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing, my online screen persona, the "you" that I see there, is a decaffeinated self.

At the same time, there is the much more unsettling opposite idea of the domination of my screen persona over my "real" self. Our social identity, the person we assume to be in our social intercourse, is already a "mask" that involves the repression of our inadmissible impulses. But it is precisely in the conditions of "just playing" - when the rules regulating our "real life" exchanges are temporarily suspended - that we can permit ourselves to display these repressed attitudes. Take the proverbial impotent shy person who, while participating in a cyberspace interactive game, adopts the identity of an irresistible seducer or sadistic murderer. It is all too simple to say that this identity is just an imaginary escape from real-life impotence. The point is rather that, since he knows that the cyberspace interactive game is "just a game," he can "show his true self" and do things he would never have done in real-life interactions. In the guise of a fiction, the truth

about himself is articulated. The fact that I perceive my virtual self-image as mere play thus allows me to suspend the usual hindrances which prevent me from realising my "dark half" in real life. My electronic id is given wing.

And the same goes for my partners in cyberspace communication. I can never be sure who they are: are they really the way they describe themselves, is there a "real" person at all behind a screen persona, is the screen persona a mask for a multiplicity of people, or am I simply dealing with a digitised entity which does not stand for any "real" person?

"Interface" means precisely that my relationship to the other is never face-to-face, that it is always mediated by digital machinery. I stumble around in this infinite space where messages circulate freely without fixed destination, while the whole of it remains forever beyond my comprehension. The other side of cyberspace direct democracy is this chaotic and impenetrable magnitude of messages which even the greatest effort of my imagination cannot grasp.

A decade or so ago, there was an outstanding British commercial for a beer. Its first part staged the well-known fairy-tale story: a girl walks along a stream, happens across a frog, kisses it, and the ugly frog is miraculously transformed into a beautiful young man. The young man then casts a covetous glance at the girl, kisses her and she turns into a bottle of beer. The girl fantasises about the frog who is really a young man, the man about the girl who is really a bottle of beer.

For the woman, her love can turn a frog into a beautiful man, while for the man love reduces the woman to what psychoanalysis calls a "partial object", that in you which makes me desire you. The actual couple of a man and woman is thus haunted by the bizarre figure of a frog embracing a bottle of beer. Modern art stages this underlying spectre: one can imagine a surrealist painting of a frog embracing a bottle of beer entitled "A man and a woman".

And therein lies the threat of cyberspace at its most elementary: when a man and a woman interact in it, they may be haunted by the spectre of a frog embracing a bottle of beer. Since neither of them is aware of it, these discrepancies between what "you" really are and what "you" appear to be in digital space can lead to murderous violence.

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