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DIGITAL ANTHROPOLOGY: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES REGARDING ELECTRONIC TRIBES

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Abstract: *In this article I approach several theoretical perspectives regarding electronic tribes. Throughout this article, I reveal several arguments about how the flexibility and speed of electronic media has determined new ways of defining human interaction. I also emphasize some of the cultural implications entailed by the emergence of electronic tribes. In the end, I discuss about the relation between e-tribes, 'cyberscapes' and cyberspace. I argue that, just as the real cultures include complex systems of significance that are developed in order to address the various issues of everyday life, in cyberspace, the members of e-tribes have developed 'virtual cultures'. I conclude by comparing cyberspace with Plato's World of Ideas.*

Key words: *tribe, electronic-tribe, cyberspace, electronic media, virtual culture.*

1. Introduction

The past two decades witnessed the gradual transformation of online communication into something that is nowadays labelled as 'online life' [6]. Connotations of this expression challenge the traditional anthropological assumptions regarding place and time in ethnographic research. It also entails the need for redefining the anthropological subject. It is also important to stress that various anthropological approaches to digital life have emphasized the need to reconstruct identity, ethnicity, gender and the human body in the last decade.

The concept of 'electronic tribe' (i.e. e-tribe) was developed at the middle of the past decade. Essentially, it was built upon the sociological and anthropological concept of 'tribe'. In anthropology, tribe is a fundamental concept, which has many contested meanings. In the past, it denoted "an aggregation of people who are bonded together by ties of consanguinity, territorial contiguity, and cultural singularities" [1]. While presenting the various debates regarding this concept far exceeds the objectives of my article, it is important to emphasize the definition on which the concept of 'electronic tribe' is predicated. Thus, I consider the concept of 'tribe' to designate a socio-political organization, which consists of a variable number of families, gentes and/or clans, who share their ancestry, spatial and temporal context and cultural specificity. This definition was

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more or less implicit in the work of many anthropologists as the fundamental meaning attributed to the 'tribal' human organization [1]. However, according to the argument of Tyrone L. Adams and Stephen A. Smith, I also consider that a tribe is ultimately a confederacy of individuals interested in a shared occupation, objective or habit [1]. This concept has a somewhat smaller sphere of meanings than a community. Unlike a community, a tribe is not necessarily bound to a geographical area. Also, while communities often instigate utopian idealism, tribes include both utopian and dystopian formations.

Building upon these meanings attributed to the concept of 'tribe', I use a definition of 'electronic tribe' that is based on four dimensions: people, purposes, protocols, and technology [3]. Electronic tribes include members that have common objectives. They interact with each other according to clearly defined protocols and roles using Internet technologies that support online sociability [25]. In the past decade, the technologies required for creating an electronic tribe has become increasingly 'user friendly'. Thus, an electronic tribe can be formed either as an e-mail or Facebook group or as a MMORPG (i.e. 'Massively multiplayer online role-playing game') clan or guild. In other cases, it can be created using chats, instant messengers, blogs, chats, bulletin boards, forum threading etc. All these technologies entail: (a) rapid interactions between users; (b) immunity to spatial and temporal limitations; (c) accessibility; (d) the use of various types of information through multimedia; (e) large volumes of information for multi-stage processing; (f) simultaneous dissemination of messages; (g) compatible operating standards etc. Thus, these technologies enable the sharing of information and experiences on common concerns and problems between users. This represents the defining characteristic of electronic tribes, as it ensures the unity and preservation of the tribe.

Common interests and the continuous flow of information lead to the appearance of a common affinity, which was characterized by Joseph Gusfield as a 'consciousness of kind' [13]. Gusfield's concept designates a tendency exhibited by the members of a close-knit group to develop a consciousness of emotional attachment toward one another. The consciousness of kind also entails a sense of difference from those who are located outside the perceived limits or boundaries of the tribe. Gusfield equates the consciousness of kind with the collective consciousness: the external manifestation of establishing a common identity vis-à-vis the various hypostases of otherness [13]. Drawing upon Gusfield's concept, Adams and Smith define an electronic tribe as "an exclusive, narrowly focused, network-supported aggregate of human beings in cyberspace who are bound together by a common purpose and employ a common protocol and procedure for the consensual exchange of information and opinions" [1].

This definition can be somewhat equated with the statement of Albert Muniz and Thomas O'Guinn about 'neo-tribes'. They stated that 'neo-tribes are unique in that they are fluid, ephemeral, and nebulous; they form, gather occasionally, disperse, and form again" [20]. Since all identities in cyberspace are temporary and contextually defined, the electronic tribe and the neo-tribe can be considered synonyms [17].

It is important to stress the fact that I am aware of the ample debates between anthropologists who support different perspectives regarding the concept of 'tribe'. However, I consider the two conceptions cited here to be the most useful for my objectives.

2. Objectives

The evolution of online communication in the past two decades transformed the way people identify themselves and define otherness. Most strikingly is the fact that the limits of time and space are much easier to overcome than ever before. Throughout this article, I will reveal several arguments about how the flexibility and speed of electronic media has determined new ways of defining human interaction.

After reviewing some of the most relevant perspectives regarding electronic tribes, I will emphasize some of the cultural implications entailed by the emergence of electronic tribes. In the end, I will discuss about the relation between e-tribes, 'cyberscapes' and cyberspace. I argue that, just as the real cultures include complex systems of significance that are developed in order to address the various issues of everyday life, in cyberspace, the members of e-tribes have developed 'virtual cultures'. These 'cultures' have many similarities with the 'real ones'. In a sense, these 'virtual cultures' seem more 'real', because they epitomize the symbolic dimension of human existence. In the end, I conclude that, from a certain standpoint, cyberspace can be compared with Plato's World of Ideas [24].

3. Theoretical Perspectives Regarding Electronic Tribes

Romanians are no strangers to the advantages offered by communicating, collaborating and socializing via electronic media. In the last two decades, numerous groups have appeared in Romania, which could be considered electronic-tribes, according to the definition of Adams and Smith [2]. However, as digital anthropology is a discipline still rarely approached in Romania, the emergence of electronic-tribes has been mostly neglected by the social scientists. As several relevant theoretical perspectives regarding this particular type of social and cultural aggregate have appeared abroad, their review can prove particularly useful for further endeavours on this subject.

3.1. The Critical Mass Theory

This theory entails a distinction between the diffusion of innovation for individual use, on the one hand, versus the diffusion of innovation for group use. This distinction is made by emphasizing that diffusion of a new communication medium necessitates the participation of at least two people. This is obviously a different type of diffusion in comparison to the diffusion of material objects, such as toothbrushes, which are used separately by every individual. Conversely, a person will benefit from the use of a new communication medium if and only if other people in the network choose to use the same medium. Consequently, the advocates of this theory predict that the probabilities of an individual using a new medium are determined by the benefits generated by a critical mass of users.

When reviewing the critical mass theory, it became evident that it is important to consider the degree of influence that certain members of an electronic-tribe have over the other members. In a nutshell, this theory explains how members of an e-tribe are influencing each other regarding the decision of adopting a certain communication medium. While focusing on the decision of adopting a new medium, the advocates of this theory neglect the activities that occur after its adoption.

3.2. The Social Influence Theory

The social influence theory focuses on the way e-tribe members, who have

already adopted a communication medium, may affect the perceptions of the other members. From their point of view, it could be argued that the members of e-tribes are already dedicated to using a particular type of communication medium, which is chosen collectively.

This theory opposes 'the media richness theory', by rejecting the thesis that the individuals' uses of a medium are determined by its objective characteristics. Consequently, the advocates of social influence theory argue against choosing a medium according to its appropriateness for a particular task or assignment.

The media richness theorists argue that a task with a 'high degree of equivocality" is best accomplished by using a form of 'rich' media. Conversely, the social influence theorists claim that the different types of media are not intrinsically 'rich' or 'lean'. Instead, individuals influence each other's perception of a medium's richness [11]. They can influence each other's perceptions in several ways: (a) they may state a personal assessment of a certain medium; (b) they can offer feedback to the others regarding their use of the medium; (c) they can be role models with their own use of the medium.

Several theorists, such as Noshir s. Contractor, David R. Seibold and Mark A. Heller have stressed the fact that the social influence theory doesn't contain any judgement about the 'innate richness of a particular medium' [5]. Essentially, the social influence theory entails an emphasis on the methods used by the members of an e-tribe to influence the perception of their peers.

3.3. The Adaptive Structuration Theory

This theory was developed by Geraldine DeSanctis and Scott Poole [9], [10]. It is based on the hypothesis that all the interactions between individuals are: (a) social in nature; (b) task-related. The adaptive structuration theorists claim that both resources and rules are basically tools. These tools are used by individuals in order to generate, develop and sustain interactions and practices in a certain medium. Certain resources are determined by: (a) the ease with which e-tribe members exchange ideas among themselves; (b) how members are influenced by others' contributions in the same e-tribe; (c) the extent to which members feel free to submit their ideas to the e-tribe.

The fundamental component of the adaptive structuration theory is its emphasis on the communication interaction. Thus, both the rules and the resources cannot exist outside the interactions they constitute and in which they are formed [9], [10].

In electronic media, rules and resources are formed from related social institutions, traditions and technological constructs. The adaptive structuration theorists consider that both rules and resources are included in structures. The structures of electronic media are usually based on social institutions which are familiar to most users. In a similar manner, e-tribe members focus their attention on communication theory in order to approach various tasks, like selecting procedures for managing interactions through features that support decision-making processes. Hence, e-tribe members choose, either consciously or unconsciously, to use or to reject certain features of a new technology [5].

The adaptive structuration theorists reject the notion of media effects on individuals' perceptions of communication media. This resembles the theses found in social influence theory and critical mass theory. The adaptive structuration theory entails the idea that people's perceptions of media use are socially constructed. However, in contrast to the social influence theory, the

adaptive structuration theory doesn't consider media richness as a factor that determines people's perception of media use. The advocates of adaptive structuration theory argue that individuals' 'perceptions of media use' are shaped by the media structures used by e-tribes' members [5].

3.4. The Social Identification/ Deindividuation Theory

This theory is developed from the cognitive social identity theory [19]. It adds the concept of 'deindividuation'. This designates a process which takes place when people interact electronically. The fundamental thesis of this theory states that in the 'absence of physical presence', the individuals that interact online assume their identity and assign otherness based on group similarity or difference. The anonymity provided by online communication allows users to build 'stereotypical impressions' about their interlocutors based on various types of cues: typographic, contextual, lexical, grammatical etc. Internet users tend to overemphasize some of their interlocutors traits, without attempting to diminish impressions that are derived from insufficient social cues [19], [21-23], [27]. These two phenomena are determined by the lack of nonverbal cues within the electronic medium.

This theory addresses the expectations that are grounded both on individual and group identity. It entails a 'weak' approach, from a logical standpoint. Thus, the advocates of this theory argue that both types of identity are not manifestly affecting the perceptions made by various group members. However, group identity is considered to exaggerate the conclusions articulated about group members. Individual identity is assumed to mediate the extent of the effect of group norms on members' perceptions and behaviours. If a group identity is prominent in cyberspace interactions, then its members are prone to accept any rules elaborated in that group. Conversely, if individual identity is prominent, then the individuals involved in the interaction are assumed to interpret the individuating information in a less differentiated way. Overall, this theory is very useful for describing online interactions. It is particularly helpful for explaining the multiple ways both identity and otherness are defined and attributed at individual and/or group level. The main drawback of the social identification/ deindividuation theory consists in the fact that it doesn't satisfactorily explain how guidelines and rules are enforced by group identification [26]. It also doesn't satisfactorily explain how the norms developed in a given group impact the process of differentiating from the non-members (i.e. the 'others').

4. Conclusions: Cultural Implications of Electronic-Tribes' Emergence

The aforementioned theories must be considered in various cultural contexts. As 'participants' in different cultures – and sometimes of 'multiple' cultures – the e-tribe members have a cultural impact that shouldn't be ignored. The acceleration of knowledge acquisition and propagation has determined an increased awareness of the cultural diversity. Moreover, it has contributed to the creation of new 'cyberscapes' that branch out in cyberspace. I use the term 'cyberscape' in order to address the increased level of 'disembodied-extended integration", which intensifies the already existent cultural contradictions. I also use the term with a different meaning. Thus, the 'real world' natural environments consist, among other things, out of landscapes that are continuously defined, (re)imagined and

created via cultural mechanisms. I consider 'cyberscapes' to be the online equivalent of landscapes. They are also continuously (re)imagined and, in the case of MMORPG franchises like *World of Warcraft*, they often determine changes in the guilds' 'cultures' (i.e. 'tribes by any other name') [1], [4].

As cultural and national borders become irrelevant, the members of e-tribes become increasingly agents of change. Interestingly, the members of e-tribes enculturate themselves in 'virtual cultures', that exist solely in cyberspace. In a sense, these 'cultures' have come to 'epitomize' the symbolic dimension of the human existence.

Online communication has altered the meaning of many symbols in various cultures, just as Glen Hiemstra predicted more than thirty years ago, when he generally made assertions regarding the impact of communication mediated by technology [14]. More importantly, the online interactions have accelerated the change of symbols' meanings.

Another relevant field for approaching e-tribes entails the way online communication influences power. From a cultural point of view, power can be addressed with Geert Hofstede and Michael Bond's concept of 'power distance'. It entails the extent to which less powerful members of various organizations accept that power is unevenly distributed [16]. Thus, individuals belonging to low-power-distance cultures accept the use of power only when it is legitimate [18]. Individuals belonging to high-power-distance cultures consider one another differently, in ways that are consistent with their status. In this type of cultures, the coercive use of power is regularly emphasized. When considering the degree to which participants to different cultures recognize power distance, it appears that those belonging to certain cultures are more inclined to accept authority than to become involved in democratic processes. Generally speaking, people belonging to low-context cultures are less interested in consensus and harmony than those belonging to high-context cultures [15].

As individuals gradually come to grasp the power of online communication in safeguarding various group interests, it is quite possible that e-tribes will become the standard. Their members will likely become increasingly passionate about some of their e-tribes purposes. Ultimately, as Bolanle Olaniran states, the propagation of online communication across cultures "would result in increased normative violations for high-context cultures that emphasize consensus or group harmony".

The 'virtual cultures' of e-tribes transform the way its members perceive reality, identity and otherness. As space and time become relative, paradoxically, cyberspace may come to be considered a 'higher kind of reality', in a similar manner to Plato's World of Ideas [24]. While the real ebbs and flows of information are almost impossible to truly comprehend, e-tribe members are watching the reflections and shades projected by the ever changing 'flame of symbols'. In the case of 'Massively multiplayer online role-playing games' (MMORPGs), the e-tribe members apparently come to know beauty, courage, temperance, perseverance, skill, wisdom, dexterity, through their in-game representations [4], [7]. However, the degree of knowledge varies by person.

While having little meaning outside their respective 'virtual worlds', the signs and sign systems are understood by e-tribes' members by engaging in various activities that entail the simulation of real world tasks [2]. In other words, "the sign or simulation acts as a stand-in for the original", like *Avatar* [2], [8], [12], [26]. Simulations are no longer considered to

imitate the original. Instead, they are 'the substitution of the signs of the real for the real". Gilles Deleuze stresses that not all simulacra are copies of an original [8]. They often become entities that create new spaces for their own propagation, "undermining the distinction between copy and model". Thus, similar to Plato's description of our world of mimes, it appears that 'reality' is no longer on this side of the screen.

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