Being in the Net: a gradual habituation to the Chatroom

In the debate about the influence of the new electronic media on people and social relationships Internet is repeatedly stamped as a narcissistic withdrawal into a virtual reality. The feasibility to consume „intimacy" in virtual communities without risk and without taking upon oneself any responsibility amounts to a a loss of authenticity and, in the long run, to an isolation of the net-user, who gets deprived of the capability entering into real human relations. Human society breaks to pieces of tribal communities without having any connections with each other. This is at least the conclusion which Habermas (1995) is drawing.

Lost in the computer matrix of cyberspace we run the risk—literally—of losing our grounding in the earthly world. Having sex on the Internet and by-passing physical contact is an illuminating example. How this development could escalate in the near future is shown by William Gibson in his impressive book, *Neuromance*r. It was Gibson who coined the word cyberspace. In the course of using the new electronic media—this is an extreme viewpoint, of course—the distinction will be blurred between the natural and the artificial, between truth and illusion, between the formal and the material. Because of the interchangeability of the protagonists in interactions via the Internet, the role of the autonomous subject vanishes and may be replaced by an anonymous agent.

Now it turns out, however, that those people who are criticizing the net are only in rare cases identical with those who are using the net from the outset. What really happens in course of the communication via computers – in Chatrooms, for example – has another meaning for those who have already jumped into the new media as for the very beginners. At the beginning the tools like keyboard, mouse, monitor and the Chat-software are in the foreground of attention. But in the course of the time those tools vanish and the people participating to the chat come to the fore. Chatting results in a "real" pattern of social interactions. This shift from the tools of the chatroom to the social interactions in the chatroom, however, happens unconsciously. It is the aim of our lecture to describe this complicated adaptation to the community in the chatroom. But before going into further details, one preliminary remark may be in order.: We have picked out Chatrooms instead of muds, for example, because of our special interests. Wheras MUDs are above all used to enact virtual affairs which have nothing to do with our real life, in Chatrooms the desire becoming acquainted with each other plays a more important part. Chatrooms are therefore the ideal candidate to explore the social interactions in computer aided communication.

Now after all that I have said we must take a closer look how this gradual habituation to the application 'chat' occurs.

An interesting example of the adaptation to the instruments we use to extend our coping with the world is a performance of Steve Mann, an artist of the MIT, which he has presented 1997 at the Ars Electronica Center in Linz. It was the aim of this festival to show the computer´s suitablity to transcend the boundaries of our imagination and its integration into our everyday life. Mann spends his life wearing over a long period of time video goggles. By this means he is coping with parts of his daily world only in a digital mediated way.

Steve Mann impersonates in this way a modern symbiosis of man and computer, his performance is the practical realization of a cyborg. Mann represents a great number of

different performances – I will mention here as an example only one of them - the *electric feel sensing.* : This is a radar system built into the clothing by the means of which Mann can "feel" if someone sneaks up behind him. If somebody is approaching to Mann from behind, he has the impression that this person produces a pressure on his backside. Mann has this feeling although the person who aprroaches from the back is located in a greater distance. Systems like the one described provide Mann with additional senses. The crucial point of this story is that Mann experiences after a while tools like that as though the rays of light from behind directly pass to the optical center of the eye. An addition tool would be an instrument which provides a communication channel to friends and relatives via the Internet. By this way Mann can tell his friends when he runs into a dangerous situation.

For all those experiments it is crucial to understand that the various technical artificial limbs are melto into the other normal five senses. Limbs like those become after a gradual period of adaptation a sort of extended forefinger which in turn becomes transparent and invisible.

 Now the question arises, however, for what reasons such an adaptation to the equipment in use amounts in an extension of our five senses and becomes to something like a second skin.

Mark Weiser, chief technologist at the Xerox Palo Alto Center and the initiator of the so-called ubiquitous computing, gives us an interesting instruction to interpret this phenomenon. The invisibility of equipment can be made clear by elaborating the distinction of the *periphery* and the *center* - as psychology of perception has pointed out. Weiser mentions an interesting example in the psychology and philosophy of perception, namely the blind mans cane.

If we blindfold a person and give him a cane to fumble for the sorroundings it is the cane itself – this unfamiliar bouncing curved stick – which is in the center of attention. But after a while of getting used to the stick it will disappear from the focus of our attention and become part of the man´s peripheral perception – like his eyes or his finger tips. From this moment of habituation to the stick the world revealed by it comes to the fore. It is this disclosed world *to* which we attend and the mentioned peripheral system is the place *from* which we attend. It was Michael Polany who has worked out this distinction in detail in his well known book "Personal Knowledge" (London, 1958). We also have to take into account that the medium *must* be invisible and inconspicuous in order to fulfil its functional role: in order to reveal the objects which are touched by the cane it ceases to be the center of attention. A second rather old example of the psychology of perception may illustrate that shift of a medium from the center of attention to the periphery of perception: Erismann and Kohler´s example of reversed eyeglasses from some decades ago.[1] If we wear such glasses for several days the perceived surroundings flip into their original position. So after a period of habituation these lenses themselves become part of the inconspicuous periphery. One further and perhaps more familiar example may illuminate this circumstance. When we learn to drive a car we initially focus our attention to the medium by which we drive, e.g. the gearshift (if there is any). But as soon as we become familiar with the medium we will no longer take notice of it, instead we will pay attention to the road, the traffic, the next exit and so on.

All those different example may illuminate the basic idea that attendig to one thing presupposes peripheral systems and that through the new symbiosis of man and computer completely different peripheral systems may spring up. This change of our peripheral systems, however, happens in most cases in an unnoticed way. We have furthermore to take

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[1] Kohler 1951.

into consideration that human being from the beginng used tools in order to expand his five senses. From this point of view we can say that human being has been a cyborg from the outset.

Now after all that I have said we have to ask what consequences this shift of the medium from the center of attention to its periphery means in the case of Chatrooms.. As I have mentioned above it is the equipment itself which is at the beginning in the center of attention, but after a while when it is in use the equipment vanishes and the people participating to the chat come to the fore. One possible explanation for this phenomenon among others is the quick velocity of the messenges in chatrooms compared with Face-to-Face communication. This fact sounds on the first glimpse strange because speaking is normally faster than writing. But we have to take into account that in a chatroom there are a lot of people talking to each other and whereas in oral talk only one person can speak in the chatroom all people can write their messenges simultaneuosly. This entails that the written messenges flit over the monitor with a very high speed. This speed increases the more people are participating to the chat (footnote!). This high speed of the messenges enforces the reader to formulate his own answers without any further reflection about what he wants to say. This circumstance promotes the user to fall into a situation of flow in which the time passes unnoticedly and all reflection about the own activity will be stopped and amounts in a kind of unconscious "mindless" coping with the chat-community. It was Ulli above all who has worked out that phenomenom in her thesis.

Now what is most interesting from a psychological point of view is that the tilting point (Kippunkt) when the medium in use ceases to be in the focus of attention and becomes part of the inconspiscuous context happens without being noticed by the user.

If we take a closer look at this change of the users behavior, in many cases the following development can be observed: At the beginning the messenges on the monitor are experienced as symbols created by an animated cartoon. Chatten is seen as a kind of an interactive videogame. During this first stage the user is entirely willing to take a risk. Very easily a loose contact with another chatter will be established and thoughtless messenges like 'I love you' or something else are bandied into the chatroom. This behavior results from the simple reason that during this initial stage no real social relationships with other chatters are established. The novice has the impression that like in a videogame the aftermath of his behavior in the worst case will be 'game over'. But in the course of time the chatter changes his attitude towards to the chat-community as a whole and also to individual chatters. On condition of the high speed of the conversation and other reasons it comes to a phenomenon which I metaphorically will call 'to jump into the group'. From now on messenges are not further seen as mere plays on words without further consequences, they become on the contrary a meaning which affect the chatter personally. The big problem now, however, is that the user is in most cases not aware of this change in his behavior towards the chat-community. So he remains caught into the trap of his own precarious behavior which he initially exhibited. A thoughtless contact which has been established in the first stage will in the course of the time deepened in such a way that the chatter cannot stop this contact of one's own free will any more. So the very moment in which the user melts into the medium in use turns out to be a point of no return.

What specific situations may emerge during this gradual habituation to the chat will be worked out now from Ulli in the light of some narratives which she has got in the course of various interviews with chatters.

[-> Ulli!]

In my part I am going to point out three striking chat stories that I had acquired by informal face-to-face-interviews.

1. seagull Jonathan[2]

   Seagull Jonathan is a 45 year old man, married and a self-employed bookseller. He has been chatting since the beginning of 1999. Originally searching for chatsoftware for his company-owned homepage he encountered a chatroom at random and - as he verbalised it - he got stuck in it.

   Reflecting on the very first time participating in the chatroom, his first impression was that all of these chatters are behaving quite childish and infantile, they're all totally crazy due to the language use. He felt forced to read a scrolling text, all of them "spoke" in a confusing way, one conversation seemed to be parallel to a lot of other ones and incoherently, and all of a sudden somebody reacts on a keyword and commences a new dialogue. At the beginning chatting itself was uninteresting for him, he was rather "lurking" than actively getting involved in the event.

   The first few times he logged in the chatroom he used a simple combination of numbers in order to remain anonymous. But then he tried to find a proper nick name to get his own identity. The way how he created his nickname was easy - the book "Seagull Jonathan" was lying right next to his computer and above all it is one of his favourite books. At the time of commencement several times he turned up with another nickname to appear incognito and sometimes he even experimented with nicknames that reveal the opposite gender. For he was not successful with "gender switching" he abandonned his attempts.

   Replying to the question if he had been concentrating mainly on the manipulation of the keyboard, the mouse as well as the various possibilities the window on the monitor - in this case the chatroom - provides, he mentioned that in 1999, when he begun chatting, the technical possibilities were still rather primitive comparing to nowadays. So it didn't take him much effort handling the tools for chatting in a satisfying way. He as a newbie preferred just reading the textflow, so he had time to get familiar with the tools and the procedure of the chatroom.

   Although he was not interested in chatting initially he returned to the same chatroom again just one day after the very first session. Then he met a girl there who was his only communication partner. By and by he met people in the chat with high intellect, what fascinated him. He emphasizes that flirting was not in the foreground of entering the chatroom.

   At the beginning he didn't reply to the group that was writing publicly on the surface (many-to-many communication) at all. Predominantly female chatters respont to him, mostly in the so called whisper mode (hidden one-to-one communication). They basicly talked about relatively serious subjects and just after a while, after some sessions spent in the chatroom, "when the quality of the communication" had changed, he begun making jokes within the group. This happened parallel to the acquaintance with a caberet artiste and a writer he got very well on with. They snapped up a scrolling message and took this very chatter for a ride or fooled around. In the course of time he also kicked off a flaming neonazi.

   After a period of time various chatters consulted him with their private problems. The reason for this phenomenon might be that this chat he used to log in consisted of a

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[2] The three interviewees will be called by fictitious nick names.

pretty small, homogenous group of chatters - between 5 and 40 people were in the chatroom at the same time - and because of his age. He describes this community as a kind of sect, because the chatters were very suspicious against newbies. Concerning himself he points out that he always remained authentical, he is a very open-minded person without hiding any secrets and that he didn't assume a new "virtual" identity.

After a few months of chatting he focussed his attention on one single person. She came across him, they started talking about their common hobbies like literature and movies and somehow he played the role of an elderly wise man towards her. First of all "her head with the content" teased him, not primary her external appearance. The more they met in the chatroom, the more they revealed themselves and the more she fascinated him. They discussed about every-day-life, about their hobbies, about their attitudes and at least also about erotical things. They also exchanged intimate thoughts and the more they opened theirselves the more they felt attracted to each other. Besides that they wrote emails, they were also chatting via ICQ, exchanged several photos and their telephone numbers. He created a picture of her in his head that became sharper and sharper.

After about 5 months chatting intensively the desire to meet each other in real life arised. At a weekend, when his wife - he was married - was not at home, they took the opportunity to meet each other. The moment he saw in her eyes he knew "This is it!" He was thunderstruck and realized that her appearance was congruent with the picture he formed in his head. She matched into his imagination of a woman and would have also felt attracted to her if he had met her in a conventional bar.

After their first rendez-vous they shifted their conversations from the chatroom to the telephone and finally they became a couple in real life. Their happy romance lasted about 2 years, by now they are split up for various reasons, they are still in touch just as friends. Retrospective he says, that there is nothing to regret.

2. moonlight
    Moonlight is a 30 year old woman, single and a student. She has been chatting since 1994. The first time she got in touch with a chatroom was on her first day when she got her private internet connection. On this day a friend of her visited her and was eager to have a look in his chatroom. At the same night she logged in this chatroom and found herself in a virtual bar atmosphere. There were only four other chatters in this room, so she could overlook the procedure easily. For the first session moonlight chose the nickname "joy" that expressed her feelings on this very day. She never experimented with a male nickname.

    She experienced a simple handling with the keyboard, the mouse and the functions provided by the chatroom. In 1994 the technical functions in the internet were not that sophisticated like in 2002.

    At the first time being in the chatroom she thought "What shall I say next?" But actually she got involved immediately in the scenery as they were only five of them in the room. Somehow she had the impression of reading a hilarious book and at the same time she found out that she has the might to influence the procedure in an interactive way. Firstly she had been concentrating on the textflow and secondarily on the chat functions. The only speciality in the chatroom was the whisper mode at this period of time in 1994.

    She remembers not having felt as a sort of invader in the chatroom, but more likely sitting in the same boat. Besides that she realized these chatters as very open-minded and pleasing people instead of a conspired community. From the beginning on she tried to talk with everyone on the surface, the whisper-mode she only used when she

already knew this person. Later the public respectively the whisper conversation depended on the situation - if the chatroom was crowded she preferred whispering. Moonlight talked about god and the world, she discussed about serious as well as humourous topics, but also about so called philosophical subjects.

The reason for returning to the same chat room again and again was the convenient atmosphere, she wanted to find out if it is always that funny like it was at the first time and she fixed the next appointment with the four other chatters before she left the room. The second session she had exactly on the next day.

In her opinion she never felt herself being a part of the community although she became something like an insider, an oldbie. The reason for that might be the high fluctuation of chatters within the same room whereas the chatroom seems to be an open, inconsistant platform.

Two and a half years ago a male chatter started talking to her. He appeared sympathetic, they discovered common hobbies and interests, so they had unexhaustible topics of conversation. She tells about her anticipation before entering the chatroom, specific welcome rituals when they met. Soon they found a basis of confidence, but the relationship itself developped very slowly. They talked about what happened in their every-day-life, about private affairs, she watched him how he behaved towards the other chatters. Their sympathy increased more and more and she became even more fond of him.

At the beginning the external appearance was not relevant at all, she was only concentrated on the content of the conversations. From the moment on when both of them felt the desire to meet each other in real life the question arised what he might look like. Nevertheless she didn't create a concrete picture of him, for her he was a kind of dream-figure - he is full of life and actions and thoughts, but doesn't have a face. She mentions, the more you know about the other person the inconsiderably the external appearance becomes, because one has other priorities.

After about half a year acquaintance, when they trusted each other, they exchanged photos and the telephone numbers, the email-addresses had been exchanged immediately after their first sessions. They also used internet-telephoning via special microphones. This had also economic reasons, because he lived in northern Germany and she in Vienna. When they went to bed they placed the microphone right next to their pillows - once in Germany, once in Vienna. Mostly she could only fall asleep when she heared him snoring through the microphone! To her this was also an important extension to her sensation.

After about one and a half year acquaintance they had their first in-real-life-meeting in Vienna. She was not that nervous anymore because they sent each other SMS all night through while he was approaching by train. When she first saw him she knew "Aha, now the picture is complete!" His appearance matched with the picture in her head and within split second the strange components of him disappeared. "The puzzle had been solved!" she thought. His voice, his agitation and his physical presence had completed her picture.

At the first IR-meeting they spent three weeks together, in the meanwhile they had been living together since one year. This summer they intend to marry each other. But before that they celebrated a virtual engagement with their friends in the chatroom. When she introduced him to her mother, her mother realized that he is very similar to her first big love when she was a teenager - he just looks like him, has a similar voice and the same stature.

Looking back to the beginning she thinks that it was a risky approach because of the geographical distance, but nevertheless a run of good luck accompanied their entire path. And finally she says that finding themselves in a chatroom is definitely

comparable with a conventional initiation via pen pal like in former days - it can also last a whole life!

3. Louis Cypher

Louis Cypher is a 28 year old man, has a girl friend, is a social worker and started chatting in 1999. In the course of surfing in the internet he hit upon an english chatroom and tried it out immediately. He found out that it was too boring and complicated therefore he kept his fingers off. By accident after some time a friend of him gave him the address of a german chatroom. He logged in hoping to meet a nice person just for fun and who he can talk with without having any consequences. At this time he didn't have television at home and not much money to go out.

The first time in this german chat he felt very stressed, because it seemed that every one sends messages at the same time. He didn't believe to get stucked in this chatroom. It didn't take him much time to cope with the various technical functions.

Finding a proper nickname was easy, he permanently swapped between three different nicknames depending on his intention how to act in the chatroom. Several times he appeared with a female nickname what was pretty exhausting because he felt disturbed by flirting men and he couldn't handle his female role.

He experienced an ease of handling the keyboard, the mouse and the facilities of the software for he learnt in school how to type fast and he used a touch pad.

When first entering the chatroom he thought "only idiots here", they talked a lot of nonsense. So he reacted with public flaming, he initially insulted the others with a view to provoke discussions and he critically scrutinized the others commentaries. Actually all his conversations commenced with flaming. Flaming means postings, emails or statement that operate with swear words; if you insult, offend or devaluate other people or participants in the chat room. This flaming episode mostly generated a "normal" discussion which was to be continued in the whisper-mode and this normal conversation mostly turned into an erotic, hot talk, but only if the women liked it and in most cases they did.

Louis Cypher never felt part of the community, it didn't make any difference to him. Once he started talking with a woman in the whisper-mode, she replied immediately and he got stuck with her. Again it was about erotic things, but also about her private problems. Only her frankness, her interest towards him and the willingness at all to chat with him were attractive for him. Finally he found someone who entertained him. He wanted to test her reliability in asking her for the next date. She appeared and therefore they met again and again. Just because of these dates he cancelled several meetings with his friends in real life.

For him the external appearance was very important so he checked very soon her key data like size, weight, age, hair colour, profession a.s.o. The age was very important for him, she must not be younger than him. In a little while they exchanged their email address, nothing else.

After one week chatting with her the wish of a real life date rised up from his side, but after all they made an appointment four weeks later. They intent to meet in front of a café. Just to make sure not tapping into a disappointment he turned up with his brother passing this café by car. When he caught a glimpse of her his brother had to drive on. She was not the type of girl Louis Cypher had imagined. Her habit was sad, uptight and bleak. He would have had expected a vivid and cheerful girl, but not such a creature.

This failed meeting was the point to break up the relationship. Nevertheless he continued chatting, but with another nickname. His conclusion of this story is that it also could have been successful but at least one has to take a risk!

After the reports Ulli has given I will bring our lecture to a close. Basically we have to keep in custody that Chatten should not be seen as an experimental withdrawal in a virtuel dummy world, on the contrary it paves the way to new posssiblities to become acquainted with each other in real life. Meetings in the chatroom are only dismissed as „virtual" insofar as to long as we persist in the primacy of the physical contact. Considering the persistency in time spent in the chatroom the culture which springs up there establishes new identities which are in the same way experienced „authentical" as friends in the real life. This statement does not even entangle real dates and real meetings of chatters. We should for this reason doubt about studies which conclude from the often mentioned fact that devoting to the people in the chatroom results in turning away from real familiarities a withdrawal in a virtual dummy world. Langdon Winner, for example, reports in a lecture given to the Einstein Forum[3] from a study by Norman Nie of Stanford University, according to which the use of the Internet „is causing many Americans to spend less time with friends and family, less time shopping in stores and more time working at home after hours." What now really makes up the diffence of meetings in the Chatrroom to Face-to-Face contacts is the way how this process of becoming acquainted with each other happens. The experience to find oneself in an intimate relationship with a person, which one never would take notice of in real life changes necessarily our attititude towards the origin of social relationships in general. Assumptions about our own preferences, needs and desires will be called in question.

After the above mentioned tilting into the chat-community it is only a small step to a real date or to a meeting with the whole community of the chatters. Meetings like that are held several times in the year and they evoke the feeling of being settled in a real community.

Let me sum up: The question whether our coping with the Internet changes radically the process coming to know each other is not an all or nothing question. This process is the result of an extremely complex binding event which starts with the first anonymous establishing of contact in the chatroom and will be carried on in a personal meeting and finally will be resumed in the chatroom again.

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[3] Langdon Winner: The Lonely Cyborg. The Collapse of Community in Cyberspace. Ms. Talk to the Einstein Forum, Mai 10, 2000