Chapter III

Social Exile and Virtual *Hrig*¹: Computer-Mediated Interaction and Cybercafé Culture in Morocco

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“I have indeed – praise be to God – attained my desire in this world, which was to travel through the earth, and I have attained in this respect what no other person has attained to my knowledge.”²

*Ibn Battuta, a 14th century Moroccan traveler*

“Do you think that Ibn Battuta would’ve traveled the world if he’d had access to the Internet?!”

*A cybercafé user*

Abstract

This chapter explores ways in which computer-mediated interaction and cybercafé culture are appropriated by individuals and groups in Morocco.

It argues that computer-mediated communication mediates the construction of cybernetic identities and promotes the rehearsal of invented social and gender relations. This inventive accommodation of the Internet (known among young Moroccan Net communicants as “virtual hrig”) makes computer-mediated interaction, especially through the discursive forum of chatrooms and email discussion groups, act as a backtalk to dominant patriarchal and conservative power structures. By using a qualitative ethnographic approach while sounding the depth of the “cultural noises” and incrustations, which are accompanying the expansion of cyber culture, the author also hopes to foreground the prospective implications of New Media and Information Technologies in a non-Western environment. While it is too early to draw conclusions on the extent of the impact of new media technologies on individual subjectivities and group identities, the point is made that cyber interaction is contributing to the expansion of the public sphere in Morocco.

In a Friday sermon broadcast on Moroccan national television, the Imam (the Friday sermon preacher and prayer leader) focused on the contribution of the Internet and cybercafé culture to the expansion of spatial production in Morocco. He made the point that the cyberworld should be viewed as a workable alternative to sites of vice and moral deviance, which permeate the real world. Citing as a reference the mosque’s middle class neighborhood in Rabat, he deplored the absence of libraries, museums or other resource centers that could shield the youth from the risks of idleness and moral deviance. For the Imam, it is the emancipatory dimension of cyberspace that must be stressed. In a way, the Imam’s view is in tune with the perception of the important contribution of the Internet to the expansion of interaction and communication in the public sphere. The central argument on this side is that new information technologies are helping to dismantle traditional power structures by allowing previously disenfranchised groups to publicize their concerns.

Along with this view, there is a concern among the general public that highlights the risks of computer-mediated interaction on the affective and performative identities of Internet users. A therapist who runs a weekly section on sex education in a Moroccan daily newspaper reports the story of a woman who blames Internet chat for turning her 17 year old son into a homosexual: “I accidentally came across a letter in my son’s room [...] and that’s how I found out he was gay. I can’t believe that my only son is a homosexual and it’s Internet chat which has turned him into one” (Harakat, 2002, p. 9). The author also
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