Foreword

"The world is getting smaller." This common metaphor is at work in the term "global village," which derives its oxymoronic appeal from the typically small size of a "village" in contrast to the vastness of the "globe." Compared to one hundred years ago, we now have more information about other peoples and cultures, and easier and faster access to that information. Moreover, increased contact has led to the spread—sometimes through imposition, sometimes through voluntary adoption—of Western (especially US) cultural practices. Traditional dress has been replaced by suits in business settings in every country in the world; young people in urban areas everywhere watch films made in Hollywood, listen to rock and roll, play video games, talk on cell phones, wear jeans, drink Coke, eat pizza (or McDonald's hamburgers), speak English, and increasingly, frequent cybercafes. Part of what makes the world seem "smaller" today is that one is more likely to encounter familiar symbols and practices in geographically distant places than was the case one hundred or even fifty years ago.

This trend is facilitated by communication technologies. In the past, highways and railroads enabled information carried by human messengers or in letters to be transported physically from place to place. Later, the invention of the telegraph and the telephone made possible more rapid transmission of messages without people or objects having to be displaced, and radio and television enabled the simultaneous broadcasting of messages to large, geographically dispersed audiences. Most recently, the Internet has introduced interactive, many-to-many communication that transcends both space and time. Today it is possible to disseminate a message widely, inexpensively, almost effortlessly across the globe to anyone who has the technology to receive it, and for others to respond at their convenience using the same technology. Message traffic has proliferated in response to these technological advances, a tribute to human beings' insatiable desire to communicate with one another.

Some people believe that the increased cross-cultural contact facilitated by computer networks will reduce cultural distances, transforming the world into an "electronic global village." Others, noting

computer networking's origin in the US, and the continuing predominance of English-language, US-based content on the Internet today, fear that the technology will accelerate cultural homogenization and further consolidate US cultural hegemony on a global scale. As yet, however, there has been little scholarship that evaluates critically the effects of computer networking on the world's cultures. The present volume contributes towards filling this gap.

The volume takes as its point of departure the assumption that the globalization of computer networking is inevitable, and indeed, is already well underway. Undeniably, Internet use is spreading around the world at a rapid rate. As recently as 1996, only 10% of Internet and World Wide Web traffic was in a language other that English. As of this writing, non-English content has risen to 46%, and it is projected to reach 67% by 2005 (Global Reach, 2000). Among the fastest growing languages on-line are Chinese and Spanish, the two languages with the largest numbers of speakers in the world (English has the third largest number of speakers). Internet access is now available even in poor, struggling nations such as Somalia, and to indigenous ethnic minorities in Latin America. In nations which are already "wired," Internet use continues to spread to ethnic minorities, low income groups, and late adopters. For better or for worse, the world appears to be headed for universal Internet access, or something close to it, reminiscent of the spread of television in previous decades.

At the same time, universal access does not guarantee equal power to shape the technology or choose what content it purveys. That power is still overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of an English-speaking, Western elite, and is not likely to be shaken loose in the near future. Mother-tongue English speakers comprise 5.4% of the earth's population, yet they are overrepresented by a factor of 10 at 54% of Internet users, and will still be overrepresented (by a factor of six) at 33% of Internet users in 2005. Not coincidentally, most Internet and Web content is permeated by Western values of individual freedom (including freedom of expression), religious agnosticism, open sexuality, and free-market capitalism. For cultures that do not share these values—for example, cultures valuing group harmony, religious faith, sexual modesty, and/or economic restraint—the Internet may be perceived as a vehicle of foreign ideology, and resisted to a greater or lesser extent. Moreover, the technology itself—its codes, software, protocols, and interface designs—incorporates an English-language/Western cultural bias that may limit the ability of users from other cultures to maximize its potentials if not translated or redesigned, often at the cost of making it slower or more prone to error. As Yates (1996: 114) puts it, "English-speaking countries may thus always maintain a competitive edge: they have more advanced and more reliable computer software." How effectively individual cultures and subcultures are able to adapt computer network technology to their own values and uses constitutes a major theme of this book.

The book's perspective is both interdisciplinary and cross-cultural. It is interdisciplinary in that the authors bring diverse disciplinary perspectives to bear on the relationship of CMC technology to culture, ranging from philosophy to cultural studies to communication to systems design. It is cross-cultural in that the authors themselves are based in nine countries in North America, Europe, and Asia. The first three articles introduce theoretical concepts and models pertaining to CMC and culture, followed by nine contributions based on ethnographic praxis which describe the current status and use of CMC in Germany, Switzerland, the US, Kuwait, Japan, Korea, India, and Thailand. Most of these are countries about which little scholarly research on Internet use has previously been published; I found these chapters especially informative and thought-provoking.

Among the many timely topics that the essays in this book address, three seem to me to be especially important:

1. *The nature of CMC*. What are the social and psychological effects of computer-mediated communication, and how do they contribute to (or detract from) the potential for an "electronic global village"? Does CMC promote community? Does it support democratic processes?
2. *Technology diffusion*. What factors determine the speed and manner in which CMC technology spreads to and is adopted by (or resisted by) different cultural groups?
3. *System design*. What components of CMC systems are subject to cultural bias? How can culturally-appropriate systems be designed and implemented? Here, "cultural groups" includes gender and ethnic groups within a single nation, as well as the citizens of different nations states.

The answers to these questions are important regardless of whether one considers the globalization of CMC to be desirable or problematic, since in order to bring about positive outcomes from the use of

communication technologies in each of these domains, we must first understand how they work in the broadest possible spectrum of cultural contexts.

Still, the question remains: positive outcomes for whom? This book is written in English, by scholars trained in Western academic practices, who by-and-large are optimistic regarding the new technologies and the ultimate effects of their spread. The voices of the poor, the uneducated, the conservative Muslim or Hindu, the nationalistic Frenchman, the Luddite, or even the "average user" are not represented, and thus the overall picture that emerges is neither complete nor culturally unbiased. Nonetheless, much credit is due the editors for broaching this vital and sensitive topic, thereby opening the door to further discussion and debate.

In short, the globalization of the Internet raises intellectual and social challenges concerning cultural bias in CMC, mechanisms of technology diffusion, and barriers to equitable access. As such, it has practical implications for e-commerce, distance education, law, language policy and planning, cultural preservation efforts, politics, and international security, as well as for computer system and software design. Indeed, as the Internet and the World Wide Web continue to spread to ever more remote corners of the world and to diverse subgroups within individual nations, globalization is arguably the single most important issue confronting scholars and users of computer-mediated communication today. The present volume invites us to consider the effects of computer networking from a global perspective, and to evaluate for ourselves whether they are likely to lead to desirable or undesirable outcomes for humankind.

Susan C. Herring

References

Global Reach. 2000. Global Internet statistics. <http://glreach.com/globstats.html>

Yates, Simeon. 1996. "English in Cyberspace." In *Redesigning English: New Texts, New Identities*, eds. S. Goodman and D. Graddol, 106–140. London: Routledge.

Acknowledgments

With the help of an international team of scholars in diverse disciplines, we co-chaired the first international conference on Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communication (CATaC'98), with the goal of bringing together scholars and researchers whose theoretical reflection and research reports "from the field" would shed greater light on how culture shapes distinctive ways of appropriating and using new communication technologies. Some sixty presenters and participants attended, representing eighteen countries. As we had hoped, the conference brought together both highly theoretical reflections and numerous fine-grained reports on diverse cultural attitudes towards communication as well as reports on what happens in the sometime violent, often productive collisions between the new technologies and distinctive cultures.

This volume is one of the outcomes of CATaC'98. Many of the papers collected in this volume were presented at the conference and appeared in the conference proceedings (Ess and Sudweeks, 1998), but have since been reworked, taking into account the discussions and dialogue that were a significant feature of the conference. It is difficult to do justice to the richness of the conference, with regard to individual presentations and especially to the discussions fostered by an unusually collaborative atmosphere. Respected "old hands" and energetic newcomers minimized matters of academic status while maximizing often passionate dialogue among one another as partners in a shared enterprise. Among other things, we hope this volume not only presents some of the best contributions, but also conveys something of the remarkable spirit of dialogue we enjoyed at CATaC'98.

We were fortunate to receive the support of the Science Museum, London, which served as the venue for the conference. The Science Museum was ideal for several reasons. To begin with, it provided us with a conference venue outside the United States, thus helping us offset the tendency for US-based scholarship to dominate the presentations and discussion. In addition, the Science Museum houses a superb exhibit on Charles Babbage's "Difference Engines" and Lady Ada Lovelace's development of programming for these machines, arguably