The Internet
An Ethnographic Approach

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CHAPTER ONE – CONCLUSIONS

Why should we do an ethnography of the Internet in Trinidad, or of Trinidad on the Internet? Because – contrary to the first generation of Internet literature – the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace'; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations. Hence, there is everything to be gained by an ethnographic approach, by investigating how Internet technologies are being understood and assimilated somewhere in particular (though a very complex 'somewhere', because Trinidad stretches diasporically over much of the world). A detailed focus on what Trinidadians find in the Internet, what they make of it, how they can relate its possibilities to themselves and their futures will tell us a great deal about both the Internet and about Trinidad. Indeed, the premise of an ethnographic approach is not only that each sheds light on the other, but that one cannot understand the one without the other: our presentation should convince you that 'being Trini' is integral to understanding what the Internet is in this particular place; and that using the Internet is becoming integral to 'being Trini', with due sensitivity to the complexity and difference contained in both terms. In this sense, we are not simply asking about the 'use' or the 'effects' of a new medium: rather, we are looking at how a specific culture attempts to make itself a(t) home in a transforming communicative environment, how they can find themselves in this environment and at the same time try to mould it in their own image.

This ethnographic particularity – this focus on Trinidad, on the specifics of one 'place' – is very far from a limitation, either for us as researchers, or you as readers. It is not only necessary – the Internet as a meaningful phenomenon only exists in particular places – but it is also the only firm basis for building up the bigger generalisations and abstractions: quite simply, one can use this particularism as a solid grounding for *comparative* ethnography. Social thought has gained little by attempting to generalise about 'cyberspace', 'the Internet', 'virtuality'. It can gain hugely by producing material that will allow us to understand the very different universes of social and technical possibility that have developed around the Internet in, say, Trinidad versus Indonesia, or Britain versus India. We escape the straight jacket of relativism by recognising that each of these places is constantly being redefined through engagements with forces such as the Internet. Our presentation should therefore also convince you that there is an analytically rigorous basis for going beyond the particular case, that – paradoxically, perhaps – this is not just a study of Trinidad but that it really is an ethnographic approach to 'the Internet'.

What We Need To Account For

Let us start with a research finding that is both outlandish and yet inescapable in terms of our ethnographic engagement: Trinidadians have a 'natural affinity' for the Internet. They apparently take to it 'naturally', fitting it effortlessly into family, friendship, work and leisure; and in some respects they seemed to

experience the Internet as itself 'naturally Trinidadian'. The scale and speed of diffusion was remarkable and regarded as inevitable. It was a 'hot item', fashionable, and it fitted in with a central preoccupation with being amongst the first to know what's happening and where. It provided a natural platform for enacting, on a global stage, core values and components of Trinidadian identity such as national pride, cosmopolitanism, freedom, entrepreneurialism. This was as evident amongst business people who felt that the Internet simply suited their natural right and ability to compete at the highest global levels; as it was amongst teenagers who felt they were the match for any music culture they might encounter in the Internet-accelerated global 'culturescape'. The Internet naturally fitted their intensely diasporic personal relations: being a Trinidadian family has long meant integrating over distances through any means of communication. They also saw various Internet media in terms of conventionally Trini forms of sociality such as styles of chat and hanging around.

We found very little negativity or technophobia. The Internet has reached a level where people can focus on content and ignore the technology, and furthermore there was very little anxiety about either the content or its impact. This is not a book about resistance. Nevertheless we recognise that the effects of this natural affinity need not necessarily be positive. Throughout this book one will find raised expectations and a confidence in the future. We do not deal with the future political economy that may quash many of these expectations, leaving people still more frustrated when their information skills become yet one more unrewarded and unvalourised facet of their lives. We do not discuss this because at the time of our study the consequences of Trinidadians' rapid involvement with the Internet – for good or for bad – are still speculative and we cannot project our fearfulness upon those we studied. All we can say is that this was rarely the perspective we encountered.

At one level, it is of course absurd to argue that Trinidadians have a special affinity to the Internet, that they 'naturally' take to it, are somehow more at home there than other people, as absurd as the converse argument that media technologies have intrinsic cultural qualities. Nonetheless if we start from our ethnographic experience of Trinidad online in Spring/Summer 1999, the picture that emerges is of an extraordinarily tight fit: Trinidadians took to the new media in ways that connected to core dimensions, and contradictions, of their history and society. In fact, this is the constant conundrum of studying material culture: that what we observe ethnographically is the ostensibly 'natural' fit of objects within a social order which we are intellectually committed to revealing as constructed and historical. As outsiders we were astonished by the speed with which the Internet has become part of lives. Yet the narratives we encountered in Trinidad were mainly complaints about the unbearable slowness of its development and the forces that were preventing things from changing as fast as they 'naturally' should.

But we are pointing to something that includes but extends beyond studying 'naturalization', the process by which something new becomes mundane, taken for granted, 'second nature'. Rather, we are concerned with a series of 'alignments' or 'elective affinities' between Internet use and particular facets of what being Trinidadian was supposed to mean. These affinities are not just about the idea of the Internet as symbol of modernity, but are more concerned with the practices of Internet use on a regular, everyday basis. This implies that we need to examine not only the specificity of Trinidadian self-conceptions but also the specificity of the technology such as email, surfing and chat.

Indeed, 'Trinidad' and 'Trini-ness' are complex and diverse phenomena; not least there are huge differences between Trinidadians at home and those many who live 'away'. And Trinidadians do not consciously spend all their time on-line

as Trini's (though this was far more prevalent than we had expected): they also participate as members of youth cultures, music scenes, career structures, shoppers for consumer goods, etc. In turn, the Internet itself involves many different technologies, practices, contexts: it is no one thing, and our study encompassed a wide range of contexts from ways of doing business to socialising in cybercafes.

Therefore, we do not propose any one general explanation for this 'natural affinity'. We need to look at both the specific and multiple traits of active agents in creating this overall relationship and at the technology itself as an active component in our account. In the tradition of material culture analysis we are as much concerned with how subjects are constituted within material worlds as with how they understand and employ objects (Miller 1987), a perspective analogous to the writings of Latour (eg, 1993, 1996) on science studies and technology. Our account has therefore to be multifaceted and not reduced to one dominant or homogenous notion of either 'Trinidadian culture' or 'Internet culture'. Nonetheless, the complexity and multiplicity of these affinities are precisely what strongly impel us to take as our point of departure the way in which a communicative technology is encountered from, and rooted in, a particular place.

Let's not start from there

If the Internet appears so bound up with features of Trinidadian society as to appear 'naturally Trini', then we are certainly not dealing with a case of cyberspace as an experience of extreme 'disembedding' from an off-line reality. Nor can we understand or explain this situation – 'denaturalise' it – by treating the Internet as a kind of placeless place, a 'cyberspace', or by taking as our point of departure those features of it which *dis*connect it from particular places, such as its 'virtuality'. In this regard, we find ourselves quite alienated from that earlier generation of Internet writing that was concerned with the Internet primarily through such notions as 'cyberspace' or 'virtuality'. These terms focused on the way in which the new media seemed able to constitute spaces or places *apart from* the rest of social life ('real life' or off-line life), spaces in which new forms of sociality were emerging, as well as bases for new identities, such as new relations to gender, 'race', or ontology.

The notion of 'virtuality' has played a key role here: the term suggests that media can provide both means of interaction and modes of representation that add up to 'spaces' or 'places' that participants can treat as if they were real. A virtual reality game should provide a sensory environment, as well as ways of interacting with it, that is 'realistic' enough to immerse participants in the experience and to elicit engaged and 'realistic' responses from them. Similarly, relationships in a 'chat room' can be treated 'as if' they were real. Like the term 'simulation', 'virtuality' points to a representational 'as if' that is separate from but can substitute for the 'really is'. But by focusing on 'virtuality' as the defining feature of the many Internet media and then moving on to notions such as 'cyberspace', we start from an *assumption* that it is opposed to and disembedded from the real.

The kinds of questions that have therefore preoccupied the more high profile literature, as well as much public discussion and common sense about the net, have therefore assumed an opposition between the virtual and the real: 'All this stuff going on in cyberspace, is it real or not?' 'What *kind* of reality is virtuality?' 'Is it as real or more real than reality, is it mistaken for reality, or is it a new reality that shows up the constructed, performed, artificial nature of our old off-line reality?' 'Is it a good thing or a bad thing, does it spell out doom or liberation for off-line life, utopia or dystopia?' On the one hand, a range of authors, sometimes assimilating 'virtuality' to a dystopic reading of the postmodern notion of 'simulation', see the Internet in terms of increasing

'depthlessness' and superficiality, as a poor substitute for the socially essential features of co-presence and face to face interaction. On the other hand, often in relation to poststructuralist projects, virtuality provides a kind of social laboratory or even liberation in which the performative character of all social realities and identities can be brought to light, deconstructed and transcended.

In fact this focus on virtuality or separateness as the defining feature of the Internet may well have less to do with the characteristics of the Internet and more to do with the needs of these various intellectual projects. The Internet appeared at precisely the right moment to substantiate postmodern claims about the increasing abstraction and depthlessness of contemporary mediated reality (Baudrillard 1988, Jameson 1991); and poststructuralists could point to this new space in which identity could be detached from embodiment and other essentialist anchors, and indeed in which (some) people were apparently already enacting a practical, everyday deconstruction of older notions of identity (Butler 1993; Haraway 1996). That is to say, intellectuals, like Trinidadians, have discovered their own 'natural affinity' to the Internet, in which their core values and issues correlate quite well with possibilities glimpsed in these new media (for useful surveys of the literature see Crang Crang and May 1999; Kitchen 1998). The point is not that they are wrong in their critiques of simulation or identity, or in using concepts of 'virtuality' or 'cyberspace' in pursuing these critiques. The point is simply that, even if these approaches are valuable in certain instances (e.g. Turkle 1995, Slater 1998, in press a) they are not a good point of departure for studying Trinidadians and many other people. Indeed in most of what follows in this volume, they simply do not apply.

That is to say, if you want to get to the Internet, don't start from there. The present study obviously starts from the opposite assumption, that we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness. Indeed, to the extent that some people may actually treat various Internet relations as 'a world apart' from the rest of their lives this is something that needs to be socially explained as a practical accomplishment rather than as the assumed point of departure for investigation. How, why and when do they set 'cyberspace' apart? Where and when do they *not* do this? In what ways do they make use of 'virtuality' as a feature of new media? What do *they* (businesspeople, Carnival bands, schoolkids or government agencies) regard as real or virtual or consequential?

Rather than starting from 'virtuality', then, we are concerned to start our investigation of the Internet from within the complex ethnographic experience. If we treat virtuality as a social accomplishment rather than as an assumed feature of the Internet, then there would be nothing odd in saying that the Internet is not a particularly virtual phenomenon when studied in relation to Trinidad but that it might well be when studied in other contexts. By way of comparison, Slater's earlier project on 'sexpics traders on IRC', which was indeed largely confined to on-line interviews and observation of on-line settings, could investigate the ways in which participants socially sustained their setting as 'a place apart' and gave it a virtual reality, for example through their use of certain textual practices. 'Virtuality' really was a central feature of this setting, but this itself had to be accounted for: to a great extent, 'virtuality' was useful to participants in order to accomplish their business of trading, and in order to ward off various dangers. On the other hand, participants only accorded serious value to these on-line realities to the extent that they could be made less virtual and more 'embodied'.

By contrast, we encountered relatively little Internet use in Trinidad that could usefully be construed as 'virtual'. There are few places in this volume where a

differentiation between say e-commerce and other commerce, playground chat and ICQ chat, religious instruction face to face or by email is treated by participants in terms of any clear division between the 'real' and the 'virtual'. Far more evident is the attempt to assimilate yet another medium into various practices (email complements telephone for family contact, websites supplement TV for religious evangelism). Most people were concerned with whether Internet media provided effective or appropriate means to pursue practical projects; and they were concerned to discover what was new or specific about this new set of technologies and practices given that the Internet appeared to have a huge and inevitable place in their future. New mediations, indeed, but not a new reality.

We can go further here: virtuality – as the capacity of communicative technologies to constitute rather than mediate realities and to constitute relatively bounded spheres of interaction – is neither new nor specific to the Internet. Indeed, it is probably intrinsic to the process of mediation as such. For example, Poster (1995) usefully refers us back to Anderson's (1986) argument that modern nations might be thought of as 'imagined' or virtual communities, dependent on the capacity of newspapers to reflect a singular imaginary back to a dispersed or divided people. This is particularly apt in the case of Trinidad, which has had to imagine national and cultural identity across a complex ethnic mix and a geographical dispersion across the globe. In much of our research, email communications or websites were experienced as comparatively concrete and mundane enactments of belonging, rather than as virtual.

The relative irrelevance of 'virtuality' in this book, and the fruitlessness of defining the Internet in terms of its separation from off-line life, in no way diminishes the Internet's importance or seriousness. Quite the contrary. Trinidadians, like others, may invest heavily in relationships and practices that only exist on-line: it is as breath-taking here as anywhere to find that the fiancée that has featured in several conversations with someone actually lives in the middle of Australia, and their relationship is based on hours of chatting on ICQ. That is to say, these spaces are important as *part of* everyday life, not apart from it.

The notion of cyberspace as a place apart from off-line life would lead us to expect to observe a process in which participants are abstracted and distanced from local and embodied social relations, eg becoming less explicitly Trinidadian. We found utterly the opposite. Trinidadians – particularly those living away – invest much energy in trying to make on-line life as Trinidadian as they can make it, to see the Internet as a place to perform Trini-ness. Of course, they do not go on-line solely as Trinidadians. They go on-line as youth, as religious believers, as business people, as family members. Nonetheless, it was remarkable the extent to which the Trinidadians we interviewed or observed entered into the transcultural networks of the Internet *from somewhere*, as people who felt themselves encountering it from a place, as Trinidadians. A youth living in Trinidad inhabits and enjoys a world of MTV, Entertainment Today, soaps and Nike, and the websites they commonly visited reflected this off-line culture and were much the same as that visited by any 'global youth'. Nonetheless, they spoke of themselves as Trinidadians encountering these cultural forms, whether on or off line: for example, as discussed in Chapter 4, music oriented Trini youths talking about on-line cultural resources said that although they respected rap and hip hop, they were concerned to encounter all forms of music in terms of their long-term tradition in which Trinidadian 'soca' music has been able to incorporate varied musical forms from soul through rap and techno.

This book is not a case-study of localisation or the appropriation of a global form by local cultural concerns. It is not about domesticating a technology. On the contrary it is largely about how Trinidadians put themselves into this global arena

and become part of the force that constitutes it, but do so quite specifically as Trinidadians. Indeed the significance of studying the Internet is the degree to which it transcends dualisms such as local against global. It forces us to acknowledge a more complex dialectic through which specificity is a product of generality and vice-versa. Local Trinidadians do not meet a global Internet. The object we call the Internet actually consists of groups such as the Trindadians you will meet in this volume.

The relationship of our conclusions to Castell's (1996, 1997, 1998) work is necessarily more complex given the extent of his coverage. Much of his work on political economy is not touched upon here. Of the most relevant discussions to our work some certainly ring true. For example Castells concludes (1998: 340–353) with some ideas on the emergence of 'informational capitalism' and on the importance of rethinking the relationship of skills to education, which finds resonance in many places within this volume, though some predictions made about the implications for future social divisions and power seem premature. However, Castell's primary distinction between 'the Net' and 'the Self' appears to replicate the classical sociological distinction between structure and agency. The result is to separate out the net as a monolithic and reified structure (or 'morphology') whose impact on identity is then investigated. It also seems to run too close to a technological determinism (1996: 1–23). This clearly runs against our refusal to treat the Internet independently of its embeddedness. The problems come out most clearly in his concept of the 'culture of real virtuality' (e.g. 1996: 358–375). Every chapter in this book demonstrates why the assumptions made there about the separation between the real and the virtual are misguided and why this way of writing about the impact of the Internet seems to us quite wrong for the case of Trinidad.

What is so lacking in Castells is by contrast superbly drawn the writings of Latour on mediation, in particular, his exemplary studies demonstrating how one can avoid what he calls the two pitfalls of sociologism and technologism (1991:110) or more generally science and society (1993). Everything that is important is what happens in the mediations which dissolve these dualisms. We would also affirm the Internet as an actant (Latour 1999: 116–127, 303) in the story that is told here. This is not a book about the Internet as a technology which is then appropriated by another thing called society. It is a book about material culture which can never be reduced to some prior subject or object. We do not start from two premises that is the Internet on the one hand and Trinidad on the other. As will become clear in the body of this work it is more fair to say that both the Internet and an understanding of what it means to feel Trinidadian (e.g. Chapter 4) are seen as the conclusion of the processes we study. In the section (below) on the dynamics of mediation we note examples of new genres such as ecommerce and the norms of Trinidadian Internet chat that cannot be understood except as examples of what Latour terms a hybrid that is irreducible to either its human or material agents. We trace other dualisms that the embedded Internet renders increasingly anachronistic especially that of production and consumption. Furthermore Latour's work seems supportive of a comparative anthropology/sociology that eschews simple relativism but maintains a sceptical attitude in the face of glib assumptions about what the Internet 'must' mean or do. We would also wish to see our work building upon prior scholarly studies of the introduction and effects of previous technical developments (e.g. in MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985). Latour also accounts for our sense of ourselves in the production of this work. It is neither some simple expression of our agency nor a simple test of hypotheses. This book is itself a hybrid in which the agency of Trinidadians, of the Internet and of ourselves are we hope combined, transcended and thereby liberated for the purposes of academic understanding.

Comparative Ethnography: An Open Invitation

How does one move between the details of the case study and the generalities of the Internet at a global level and across contexts? In advocating comparative ethnography, we are suggesting that there are lines of enquiry, linked to dimensions of new media use, that can be usefully pursued across a wide range of settings; and that there are issues about social transformations in new media contexts that generally concern social science and other communities. In this volume we rarely address the question of whether our ethnographic findings are specific to Trinidad or common to many areas. We simply don't have grounds for answering such questions. In the absence of much ethnographic, let alone comparative, material we are offering a limited number of analytical dimensions and issues that have emerged from our own work, along with an open invitation that these either be used in other ethnographic settings to develop comparative understanding; or that they be criticised and modified on the basis that they are either too peculiar to our own setting, or that they insufficiently capture the issues that need to be investigated.

In what follows we will try to clarify both what each category means as a comparative dimension and what it means in terms of the Trinidadian context. This will also allow us effectively to present the conclusions of our research at the outset and indicate the kinds of claims which the rest of the book must substantiate. In the final part of this chapter we will be even more specific, summarising the particular findings that concern each chapter.

We are offering four such dimensions. They are not meant to be exhaustive. We will characterise them in terms of 'dynamics', a term which directs us to look for both the driving forces as well as emergent patterns of change. In investigating the embedding of Internet in a particular place, and vice versa, we are concerned with:

Dynamics of objectification: how do people engage with the Internet as an instance of material culture through which they are caught up in processes of identification?

Dynamics of mediation: how do people engage with new media *as media*: how do people come to understand, frame and make use of features, potentialities, dangers and metaphors that they perceive in these new media?

Dynamics of normative freedom: how do people engage with the dialectics of freedom and its normative forms as they are opened up by Internet media?

Dynamics of positioning: how do people engage with the ways in which Internet media position them within networks that transcend their immediate location, and that comprise the mingled flows of cultural, political, financial and economic resources?

1. Dynamics of objectification

This dynamic most closely addresses the question from which we started – the seeming affinity between Trinidadians and the Internet – and accounts for the most prevalent results and themes thrown up by the research. People recognised themselves in the Internet in various ways and found that it provided the space for enacting core values, practices and identities. That is to say, there were aspects of these new media environments that allowed them to objectify themselves as Trinidadian, amongst other things (youth, mas players, computer nerds, whatever) and given the diversity of Trinidadians (Indian, Black, female, elder, etc). At the same time they were able to mould these spaces to culturally

specific shapes and purposes. We are concerned with the ways in which a particular people can recognise or 'realise' themselves through a particular domain of material culture. By 'realising themselves' we obviously do not mean that people have a natural or essential identity that is then represented or expressed in and through a material culture (though people themselves frequently believe this, and it may be a central feature in their understanding and use of things). But people engage with material culture through versions of themselves that are both articulated and transformed through that encounter.

This dynamic of objectification between identity and the Internet can be thought of in two interrelated ways: In one case, which we have dubbed *'expansive realisation'*, the Internet is viewed as a means through which one can enact – often in highly idealised form – a version of oneself or culture that is regarded as old or even originary but can finally be realised: through these new means, one can become what one thinks one really is (even if one never was). What might be characteristic of the Internet is that this 'realisation' is indeed 'expansive': through the global interconnections offered by the Internet, a Trinidadian may feel able to act as the Hindu he or she 'really is' (but could not be within the confines of Trinidad) by participating in worldwide Hindu networks that can be integrated into their everyday local reality.

In the second case, which we might call *'expansive potential'*, the encounter with the expansive connections and possibilities of the Internet may allow one to envisage a quite novel vision of what one could be, a vision that is often projected as a feature of the Internet itself (eg, transcendence of mundane identities).

Expansive realisation

Here, identity in relation to the Internet is not best understood as novel or unprecedented but rather as helping people to deliver on pledges that they have already made to themselves about themselves. In some cases this was a state that had been realised but then lost, in other cases it was projected but never yet attained. In either case it is imperative to take the two terms – expansive and realisation – fairly literally: contradictions concerning one's ability, in practical life, to be who one thinks one is seem capable of being resolved on the expanded scale and terrain of the Internet. This dynamic permeates the entire book and seems to us fundamental in the Trinidadian context.

For example, as described in Chapter 3, Trinidadians have seen two quite opposed changes to the family as a result of their attempts to embody their sense of modernity. On the one hand, family structures that were previously quite distinctive have tended to move closer to the dominant Western model of the nuclear family. At the same time, migration to metropolitan regions has been so extensive that the majority of Trinidadians live in families that are international even at the nuclear level. In this context, the Internet – specifically email – allows the kind of mundane, constant and taken-for-granted daily contact that enables Trinidadians once again to live in families of the kind they see as natural, to be involved in active parenting and mutual support, despite the diasporic conditions which were making this impossible.

A second example concerns freedom, markets and entrepreneurship. As noted in Miller (1997), pure competition and entrepeneurship already exist as ideals of social action and personhood in Trinidad quite apart from any involvement in the market or in commerce. Moreover, they exist as ideals that intersect with but go far beyond simple ideological commitments such as neoliberalism. Trinidadian businesspeople are able to see themselves as naturally highly modern actors within pure market conditions at a global level. But this ideal is very far from the realities that emerged in that earlier book. As described in Chapters 5 and 6, the

flow of information and resources developing with the Internet on a global scale allows some Trinidadians to feel much closer to the kind of business practice that they assumed they already followed.

The finest example comes not from this volume but from the brilliant portrayal of this condition by the Trinidadian novelist V.S. Naipaul (1987) in his book *The Enigma of Arrival*. Saturated by British colonial education, Naipaul can only find himself as a Trinidadian by coming to England and identifying himself with a reified image of unchanging Englishness which he finds objectified in the prehistoric monument of Stonehenge and the people who live around it.

A frequent and paradoxical theme is that you could only become really Trini by going abroad: Trinidad itself did not offer the kinds of resources, freedoms and world position that would allow one to 'be Trini' in the sense of cosmopolitan, entrepreneurial, world-class, etc. The Internet may have helped bring the potential for being Trini back to Trinidad, indeed it worked both for Trinis at home (who could have direct access to global cultural flows, global markets, world class skills and technologies) and for Trinis 'away' (who could 'repair' other aspects of Trini-ness such as national identity, 'liming', 'ole talk', family and friendships). A parallel may be drawn with the effects of recession in the late 1980s. As a result of the oil boom some Trinidadians came to assume that a real Trinidadian had a natural affinity with goods of a certain quality. When recession meant these goods were no longer available locally, some Trinidadians declared in the local press that they had to migrate abroad to what in one infamous case was described as the land of 'real cornflakes' in order to remain fully Trinidadian (Miller 1994: 272-3)

The Internet is by no means the first example of new technologies and materials being used by Trinidadians as an idiom for enacting their values and identities. Miller's (1994) previous book on *Modernity* was an attempt to understand the massive impact of consumer culture on Trinidad during the oil boom of the 1970s and early 1980s. That volume concluded that consumer goods were not primarily used to construct new values and ideals but rather constituted a new idiom through which Trinidadians worked through core values concerned with freedom (transience) and continuity (transcendence) that had arisen from their particular history, and from their particular relationship to the condition of modernity. Previously, it was kinship that had been used as the primary idiom for expressing the contradiction between these two ideals. In the context of the oil boom, consumer goods took on this role and could be effectively used to express and sometimes to resolve these contradictions of values. The Internet should be seen through a similar dynamic (or even as a successor idiom for dealing with the same tensions), in which tensions intrinsic to the Trinidadian relation to modernity are worked through using the expansive material culture offered by that same modernity.

Finally, we have stressed a very positive view of both Trinidadian identity and of its projection, through Internet or other means, into global spaces. We do this partly, and paradoxically, in response to Trinidadians' own often very negative sense of themselves, their capacities and their global position. This negativity is often projected onto and through the Internet itself. In countless interviews and chats, Trinidadians would point to their sluggish response to the Internet or to ecommerce. Similarly, the local telecommunications monopoly (Chapter 5) is seen as symbolically archaic bottleneck on both Internet access and access to the world economic and cultural stage, a kind of symptomatic own goal in which they deny themselves the opportunity to capitalise on their own massive potentials.

Expansive potential

In expansive realisation, the excitement is of the order of 'finding oneself' or 'taking up one's rightful place'. In the other dynamic, of expansive potential, people glimpse quite new things to be (or even an escape from what they were). It is about the Internet as a mode of imagining the future, and it incorporates those issues of the Internet as utopia or dystopia that preoccupies so much of the literature but also some of the people we study. The shape of the future may even be thought to be visible in the Internet's own features, as when a Catholic charismatic sees in the infinite interconnectedness of the Internet a vision of the divine and of a new spirituality.

In Chapter 7 an Apostolic church is striving to discern the latest signs as to the nature of God's purpose for humanity. As a result they assume the Internet was itself created in order that they should come to understand that purpose. It is then appropriated as the medium for accomplishing this purpose and therefore also as the ideal metaphor for the role of the church and its adherents. They become the vanguard of the 'World Breakthrough Network' that will establish Christianity anew in the image of the Internet which in turn is the truest image and instrument of God's purpose for humanity.

Rather more mundane and unselfconscious examples were constantly thrown up by young people. As described in Chapter 3, they seemed to take naturally to a life of MP3s, MTV and chat room gossip, often merging them seamlessly with playground chat (there was a notable case of fourth formers calling each other by their ICQ nicks in face–to–face encounters at school). They can constitute new places of sociality in cybercafes and take on new identities as hackers and chatters, with little or no sense that this is something novel and distinct from school culture of a previous generation. Similarly in Chapter 6 a company called Radical senses that it is now only the Internet that can provide the most contemporary sense of fashion and being 'hot' that is essential for its claims to be in the vanguard of style, and the implication is not so much a change in its clothing range as that it must be seen to be operating in the fullest sense of ecommerce. Jones (1997) provides a general case of such profound assimilation where he notes that our impatience while waiting around for the latest developments in the Internet and computers more generally is based on our constant experience of extremely rapid improvement and change, such that this becomes a kind of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977) in which living with the Internet is swiftly naturalised as second nature and our 'common sense' shifts accordingly.

Obviously the line between expansive realization and potential is a fine one: it partly depends on how we and they understand novelty. This in turn involves issues of *time*: it may well be that it is right now at the moment of its inception that the Internet will peak as the prime mode of utopian, dystopian and other images of the future. It may be its very novelty that makes it an ideal idiom for imagining the future. After a while it is quite possible that it will become more mundane and taken for granted.

2. Dynamics of mediation

Here we are concerned with how people engage with new media *as media*: how do people come to understand, frame and make use of features, potentialities and dangers that they perceive in these new media. Should email be offered by the postal service, like snail mail? Do advertising agencies see websites merely as a new medium for advertisements or in terms of a fully integrated ecommerce ? What kind of relationships is chat good for, and which not? How should one properly present one's self or one's community on a website, in email, in chat respectively?

For both researchers and participants, a central aspect of understanding the

dynamics of mediation is to 'disaggregate' the Internet: not to look at a monolithic medium called 'Internet', but rather at a range of practices, software and hardware technologies, modes of representation and interaction which may or may not be interrelated by participants, machines or programs (indeed they may not all take place at a computer). What we were observing was not so much people's use of 'the Internet' but rather how they assembled various technical possibilities which added up to *their* Internet. Moreover, all the components that comprise 'the Internet' are changing at a frantic pace. After all, not very long ago this book would have focused on bulletin boards and flaming; it is in fact a book largely about email, chat and websites, and is trying to keep up with its 'subjects' in their understanding of ecommerce. In a year or two's time, when much of the web will be transfigured by high bandwidth facilities, as well as by completed telecommunications deregulation, the common sense view of what 'the Internet' is and what one should write about will have again been transformed.

There is not necessarily a lot in common between websites and email. In Chapter 7 it is apparent that the Catholic Church finds one piece of technology analogous to the confessional while the other acts to represent the community. Again, some businesses are mainly concerned with corporate integration using intranets, while others mainly want to have websites as an adjunct to conventional advertising. This point is particularly clear in Chapter 4, in which chat as a medium has been used to re-create a very particular mode of interaction and socialisation full of banter and innuendoes that for many people is the quintessence of being Trinidadian, yet this hardly played any role in email communications. Websites on the other hand go beyond chat as a medium for enacting Trini-ness to become an overt expression of nationalism, but through entirely different means. Very few websites try to evoke the style of chat, instead they use quite different genres such as those of tour guides and Internet portals. While for some people email, surfing and chat are an integral whole for others their relationship is merely fortuitous and incidental since only one of these technologies is of interest to that particular user.

Therefore the various Internet media have to be understood in terms of their particular manifestations as material culture. This is precisely the point of Chapter 6 where commerce is faced by the potential of various new information technologies. Many of the problems of ecommerce development result from difficulties in linking technology and context conceptually. Either commerce fails to respond to the particular potential of the Internet by merely reproducing flyers and adverts on websites, or we find website designers with great technical knowledge of the Internet which they are unable to marshal to commercial ends. What the vanguard users believe is that the future lies in an ecommerce which is neither merely a use of the Internet as technology, nor merely a continuation of prior commercial practice. It has to be understood as a form of material culture that transcends and thereby transforms both the use of the Internet and the workings of commerce. Furthermore, ecommerce as a concept does not take as its point of departure the unity of the technology but rather the drive to integrate all aspects of a business operation. 'Advanced' thought in this area is concerned with how to use various potentialities in the medium to create 'frictionless' business, in which the firm's relations with its suppliers, customers and own departments can take place in a single electronic space. This requires a huge intellectual as much as technological effort to forge disparate media into coherent schemes within integrated business concepts. Nothing could better refute the idea of a pregiven entity called 'the Internet'.

Yet although we have stressed the disaggregation of the Internet both as a necessary analytical strategy for researchers, as well as a central dimension of people's experience of new media, a notion of '*the* Internet' still plays an

important role. This is particularly evident in public, policy and business discussions in which 'the Internet' collectively labels the juggernaut of social transformations (many of them not technological at all) which is bearing down on Trinidad furiously and with apparent inevitability: 'The Internet will change the conditions of global competition whether you like it or not!' This framing of the Internet as a totality is related to objectifications of 'the net' (whether religious or net libertarian) as a space of utopian possibilities or to other ways of looking into 'the net' and reading the future there. Indeed, in the Trinidadian case (though it is not alone here) 'the Internet' has come to represent a utopian future conjunction of personal freedoms, market freedoms, global mobility and cultural identity that we will deal with further as a dynamics of normative freedom. Hence, it is important to understand the Internet as a symbolic totality as well as a practical multiplicity.

3. Dynamics of normative freedom

Both a premise and a promise of Internet development has been a concept of freedom. Discourse encountered on and about the Internet has been notoriously libertarian: like the wild west, it has provided a screen onto which could be projected images of freedom, danger, transformation and transcendence. The Internet has both produced new freedoms (of information and of speech) and has come to stand as a symbol of potential freedoms. Indeed, two quite contrasting notions of libertarianism have been closely linked to the Internet (Ross 1998), one from free market ideologies of neoliberalism, the other, 'net libertarianism', from postmodernism. These discourses have been articulated in Trinidad in terms of a correlation between Trinidad itself, the marketplace and the Internet in which each was mapped onto the others in very complex ways. The term 'normative freedom' seeks to capture the apparent paradox by which no notion of freedom is really absolute, but necessarily takes the form of a normative structure, a social order.

Miller (1994) has previously argued that the primary legacy of a history of slavery and indentured labour is the centrality of a project of freedom that permeates a wide range of values in Trinidadian society and is as likely to be expressed in Carnival as in ideals of business. Freedom in Trinidad is ontological, reflecting a basic sense of personhood. So a discussion of the term must be attuned to the specific history of the region and the contradictions that has thrown up. Twenty-five years ago this underwrote the nationalism which led Eric Williams, Trinidad's first Prime Minister, to transform the country from a supplier of raw materials to the developed world into an industrial economy. Today it accounts for an easy appropriation of the language and policies of liberalism. Both government and commerce see the Internet as providing a new form of free communication that will ultimately help Trinidadians to attain their rightful place on the international stage through success in enterprise and careers. As a result whatever seems to stand in the way appears as an irrational constraint that has to be overcome. This is seen in the prevailing attitude to TSTT the local telephone monopoly. Even where the company can present itself as effective and efficient, all the other players – government, the ISP's and the public – regard it as the bottleneck whose restrictive practices are preventing Trinidadians from properly capitalising on the Internet. Modernisation clearly means enthusiastic use of the language (though not necessarily the implementation) of WTO treaties and other mechanisms of global deregulation. Many of the highly reflexive and articulate business community were able to paint a convincing portrait of what they saw as free Internet development. The government shares this ideal or idyll of liberalism, claiming that where possible, as in the licensing of ISPs, there is to be simply no regulation, anyone is free to enter as a player.

Much of the story told in Chapter 5 has to do with specific features of the political

economy but it is important to note that it has strong resonances in other areas also. There was the considerable liberalism in attitudes to on-line activities, with hardly any debate about pornography on the net (despite people regularly claiming that it accounted for 60% of on-line activity). Even a church may see the Internet as largely a step forward beyond the language of the free market in objectifying a concept of freedom per. se. Similarly in Chapter 3 the use of random chat for engaging in relationships that were anonymous, could come from anywhere and be ended any time exemplifies the ideal of freedom.

There is generally a remarkably expansive attitude in Trinidad: people see the opening up of markets and the Internet as an opportunity to be grasped, as new freedoms that increase people's potential. At the same time, this needs to be seen in a regional context that has included the ravages of structural adjustment in Jamaica or of 'banana' wars elsewhere in the Caribbean that result from the opening up of unprotected markets. It is hard not to anticipate that freedom in the form of deregulating the telecommunications market might result in replacing a quasi-local monopoly (a company jointly owned by the government and the multi-national Cable and Wireless Ltd) with direct ownership by a company such as AT&T. As already noted our fear is that the expectations that seemed to be rising as we watched will be unfulfilled and quashed. As described in Chapter 2 we can already see some real constraints on the entry into the IT labour market of skilled, deserving and aspiring younger workers, especially women.

Moreover, liberal discourses of unbridled freedom tend to obscure how 'freedoms' are always normative and constructed. In this case, government policies have been as important as any 'automatic' market mechanisms in expanding Internet use, most especially the provision of loans to public sector workers and the removal of customs duties on computers and their parts. Similarly many of those in business espouse the free market in principle but are looking for all sorts of interventions to secure their interests in practice.

Similarly, what the Internet produces cannot be understood in terms of the liberation of new and fluid identities. Not only were older identities such as religion, nation, and family embraced online, but the Internet could be seen by many as *primarily* a means of repairing those allegiances. This requires special attention to the ways in which freedom and normativity are linked rather than sundered in these newer media of social interaction. In fact, this applies to many Internet contexts. This point was well made by Dibbell (1994, see also 1998) in what is already seen as a near classic essay on Internet use called 'A Rape in Cyberspace'. Although the people involved in activities such as MUD have strongly libertarian or even anarchistic principles, they turn quickly to the re-constitution of moral and normative order when faced with some action that deeply offends them. Similarly, Slater's (1998, in press b) earlier work on 'sexpics trading on IRC' found that various libertarian discourses of freedom (sexual, consumerist, neo-liberal, cyberutopian) were embedded in obsessive practices of normativity and order such as policing, enforcement of quasi-economic exchange rates, and forms of reification.

Finally, we should understand many tensions arising from the Internet not in terms of freedom versus constraint but rather as conflicts between different models of order and normativity. For example, much Internet use involves decentralisation and diffusion of authority and power, and hence challenges to both hierarchical organisational models and those whose interests are vested in them. Two examples stood out: the tension within an 'Apostolic' organisation between a vertical organisation based on elders and a horizontal relation between members expressed in Internet chat; and the organisational models of semi-autonomous and flexible project groups embraced by some younger employees in businesses. In each case, the interconnectedness and flow of information afforded

by the Internet gave new powers and autonomy to individuals which had then to be understood within and disciplined by their institutions.

4. Dynamics of positioning

Internet media position people within networks that transcend their immediate location, placing them in wider flows of cultural, political and economic resources. The boundaries of markets, nations, cultures and technologies become increasingly permeable and require people to think of themselves as actors on ever more global stages. For example, a high street retailer in a provincial Trinidad town knows that the very idea of a 'local price' is coming to an end: her customers are encountering in the Internet a single marketplace in which they can compare prices and order goods from anywhere in the world. How does she understand this new *positioning*, how does she reconceptualise her business? How do people understand this new landscape of 'economies of signs and space' (Lash and Urry 1994) or 'network societies' or 'spaces of flows (Castells 1996, 1997, 1998), and how do they try to pilot a course through it?

In Trinidad, these developments are seen as inevitable: the Internet, and particularly ecommerce, is considered central to its position in relation to the rest of the world. However, there was a notable oscillation between excitement and anxiety. On the one hand, Trinidadians feel confident and familiar with competition along international networks: as noted, this is a society that has long been constituted in relation to the global (dispersed families, market orientation, geographical mobility) and sees itself in terms of cosmopolitanism and freedom. At the same time, people are desperately worried that they are already too late or have fallen behind, worries that fit into a long-standing counter-discourse of fatalism and disappointment in which nothing that is Trini can be all that good, and the country constantly has to be 'talked up' through expressions of global confidence.

This is about the local and the global being out of step with each other. For example, in order for provincial retailers to enter the new world market, they need to understand new technologies and concepts for doing business. They also need specific infrastructures such as banking systems that allow on-line credit card processing and telecommunications companies that provide lots of reliable bandwidth. There has in fact been huge frustration over these bottlenecks on national development. At the same time, both banks and telecomms may be moving slowly because they are dealing with their own positioning problems, as specific industries. For example, local banks are often related to larger banking groups which had always been neatly divided up into non-overlapping geographical regions; the on-line services that local retailers are demanding can be accessed from anywhere and therefore set each bank up in direct competition.

Issues of repositioning are evident at the personal level too: for example, a sense of being cosmopolitan, of having the knowledge and capability to act in global contexts (particularly through diasporic experiences of considerable social and material success in education and careers 'away'), has been important to Trinidadian identity. This cosmopolitanism has always run head-on into an awareness of Trinidad as marginal and even unknown. This experience is both replicated and partially dealt with on the expanded terrain of Internet media. For example, in the case of ICQ and Internet chat, Trinidadians who know a great deal about a wider world in which they see themselves as eminently capable participants suddenly discover that most of the people they chat with have never heard of them, and that members of such supposedly metropolitan centres as the US are actually far more parochial than they are. And yet these very same Internet media in which they appear as localised and marginalised also create possibilities for participating in a global cultural space which they thought had already existed.

For example, they can engage with world music or global youth culture or pan-national religious communities as cosmopolitan citizens rather than as marginalised observers, and hence are able to 'repair' at this expanded scale a central part of their self-understanding: that the 'natural' stage for being Trinidadian is a global one. Nonetheless, it would be as impossible for an on-line Trini, confronted by a zillion belief systems on offer through websites, newsgroups, chat, etc, to remain unaware that, for example, their religious identity is a choice within a 'free market' of spiritual possibilities, information, communications, and so on. That is to say, identities have to be positioned in relation to a far wider context and dynamic than before.

Positioning is about strategies for surviving or succeeding in these new flows and spaces. At one level this is a matter of development economics. Trinidadians in government and business are examining their 'competitive advantages' in terms of new technologies: can their level of education, industrialisation and entrepreneurialism position them successfully in high value-added offshore Internet work for Northern corporations, producing software, websites or databases. This also means entering into flows of technology and skills transfer from North to South, and trying to ensure that the extra mobility of the information society does not intensify the historic brain drain of gifted Trinidadians to highly paid jobs in the North.

The idea of websites and a 'world wide web' is a potent metaphor as well as vehicle for thinking about this repositioning. Following Gell's (1998) work on the notion of 'aesthetic traps' (Chapters 4 and 6), a website can be understood as a form that expands space and time by allowing one to operate on people at a distance. As in the classic anthropological case-study of the Kula ring (Malinowski 1922; Munn 1986), a website in a network of hyperlinks can expand the 'fame' of its creator by placing them in an expanded circulation of symbolic goods. In Chapter 6 we start with the case of the Miss Universe website in which the entire nation seemed to become obsessed with an attempt to project Trinidad onto a global stage which would return to them the new 'fame' of Trinidad. Fame could be reckoned in such things as numbers of 'hits' and reciprocal sponsorship (the site displayed such international names as Microsoft and Oracle, whose sites in turn displayed the banner of the Trinidadian company that produced the site). This placing of Trinidad on the Internet world map also worked in conjunction with leading edge notions of ecommerce which also focuses on integrating the visitor into a website through appropriate enticements, such as chat, information, photographs of the contestants and multimedia. At a much lower level in Chapter 4 a schoolgirl appears desperate to have visiting surfers (which may be largely limited to the others in her class at school) sign her guestbook which in turn attests to her own expanding fame.

A Short Note About Ethnography

It should be clear by now that for us an ethnographic approach to the Internet is one that sees it as embedded in a specific place which it also transforms. Our four 'dynamics' indicate fields of force or tension between ways of life and potentialities to be found in these new technologies. Moreover, our approach is ethnographic in that it uses immersion in a particular case as a basis for generalisation through comparative analysis.

In a more narrowly methodological sense, an ethnographic approach is also one that is based on a long-term and multi-faceted engagement with a social setting. In this regard we are both relatively conservative in our defence of traditional canons of ethnographic enquiry. This seems particularly important at the present time, when the term 'ethnography' has become somewhat fashionable in many disciplines. In some fields, such as cultural studies, it has come to signify simply

a move away from purely textual analysis. In other cases, the idea of an Internet ethnography has come to mean almost entirely the study of on-line 'community' and relationships – the ethnography of cyber-space (e.g. Markham 1998, Paccagnella 1997).

We assume ethnography means a long term involvement amongst people, through a variety of methods, such that any one aspect of their lives can be properly contextualised in others. Slater's (1998) prior study of the Internet lasted 18 months and Miller's prior study in Trinidad was one initial year and three further visits. For the present study, although we each spent only five weeks actually in Trinidad this volume relies on eleven years of prior research on Trinidad by Miller, which included work on many topics – business, consumption, kinship, identity – which proved critical to making sense of the Internet there. There were also specific advantages derived from this: e.g., the house to house surveys reported in Appendix A comprised the same four areas described in two previous volumes. Corresponding to this, Slater's long term involvement in Internet research, particularly chat, laid a basis of skills, methodology and experience against which the Trinidadian case could be more quickly understood. Moreover, the study extended beyond five weeks in Trinidad to 15 months of collecting and analysing Internet data such as websites, interviewing Trinidadians in London and New York, extended email correspondence and participation in chat and ICQ, which could be sustained over time as on-line relationships. Some of our informants remained in touch for this 15 months. The extension of the work across time and location naturally follows from a general discussion which has problematised the concept of the fieldsite (e.g. Marcus 1995; Gupta and Ferguson 1997), in general, and with respect to the Internet in particular (e.g. Hakken 1999: 58–60).

As to the use of multiple methods, the Trinidad field work was divided between several sites and forms of research. Mornings usually comprised several interviews in the capital, Port of Spain, largely devoted to the study of the political economy of the Internet including businesses, the ISPs and governmental officers. The afternoons and evenings were spent 'liming', that is 'hanging around', in cybercafes watching people go on-line and chatting with them. We also interviewed them more formally. In addition we tried to become re-involved in the private lives of long-standing friends to see how the Internet fitted within their worlds. We employed students at the University of the West Indies to carry out a basic house to house questionnaire, which we followed up with in-depth interviews. We also tried many informal encounters such as liming with the same friend whose parlour had proved an ideal spot for liming in Chaguanas in Miller's earlier study and who now ran a shop, with an on-line computer, that became our base in Port of Spain. He attracted countless friends and visitors during the course of the day who we could chat with.

For us an ethnography does include participating, which may mean going on a chat line for the eight hours that informants will remain on-line, or participating in a room full of people playing networked Quake (both activities Slater is well practised in, and enjoys). But it also includes knowledge of how the Internet has become involved in households Miller has been working with for over a decade. An ethnography is also much more than fieldwork. Just as Miller's (1998a) previous ethnography of shopping turned largely into a study of love, and not as might be expected one of spending, so Slater found a study of Internet pornography led onto the study of normative morality and not, as might have been expected, just libertarian freedom. In most ethnographic reportage of quality, the length and breadth of the study allows one topic to become understood as also an idiom for something else. Finally an ethnography should form part of a comparative project. Slater's prior work and the differences between those results and our work in Trinidad meant that this particular example

of Internet use could not be glibly generalised as Internet use per se. While Miller's prior work meant that Internet use could be set against other practices in Trinidad. In addition we have tried to contrast our findings with those which seem comparable in other studies.