

# INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

## Lecture37

### **Cyberculture and different types of digital divides, ethnographic methods**

Today, we'll discuss cyber culture and its significant impact on the broader discourse of popular cultural studies, emphasizing its role as an integral part of cultural studies. Initially considered a subculture, cyber culture has increasingly blurred the lines with the dominant culture, reflecting its growing influence. Emerging prominently in the last three decades of the 20th century, cyber culture encompasses networked electronic and wired cultures, marking a transition from a niche area to a central aspect of contemporary life. This evolution is reflected in various related fields, including Internet Studies, New Media Studies, Digital Media Studies, Digital Culture Studies, Networked Culture Studies, Information Society Studies, and Contemporary Media Studies. These terms collectively address the profound influence of digital and networked technologies on cultural practices and societal structures, illustrating how cyber culture has transformed and shaped modern discourse.

Cyber culture encompasses a range of terms, including Internet Studies, New Media Studies, Digital Media Studies, Digital Culture Studies, Networked Culture Studies, Information Society Studies, and Contemporary Media Studies. These terms reflect various facets of the digital and networked realms, all falling under the broader umbrella of cyber culture.

Cyberspace, often referred to as techno space, can be defined as a set of relations and actions within the electronic or technological realm. With advancements in technology and evolving studies, the terminology for these concepts continues to develop. Cyberspace and techno space are closely related, with technology playing a central role in both. Essentially, they represent new social spaces where individuals interact, communicate, and fulfill societal roles in digital environments.

Cyber culture has effectively redefined social spaces, becoming the new arena where people interact, share ideas, and engage in various activities. According to the Encyclopedia of Media, cyber culture encompasses cultures formed in or associated with online social spaces. These new social spaces—primarily the digital realm—have become central to contemporary life, with people socializing, dining, traveling, and more through social media platforms. This virtual engagement has become so pervasive that it often feels as though real life is incomplete without it.

In essence, what people do in the physical world is mirrored in the virtual space, making online interactions a vital part of daily life. Cyber cultures are thus seen as formations that are deeply intertwined with material contexts and conditions, indicating that production and social interaction occur within this digital sphere.

Cyber culture is expanding and applying itself in ways similar to traditional social spaces. It is embedded in material contexts and conditions, and it functions to produce, expand, and apply various aspects of human interaction. In the same way that physical social spaces allow for the production of emotions, products, and relationships, and their subsequent expansion and application, cyber culture operates similarly. This makes it a cultural process comparable to any other, influencing and shaping various dimensions of identity, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and more.

Cyber culture affects these aspects through its capacity to offer platforms for diverse expressions and identities. For instance, individuals can explore and express queer identities in ways that might be less accessible in offline spaces. This digital environment allows for the visibility and articulation of various identities and experiences, contributing to the broader discourse on social categories and personal representation. Therefore, understanding cyber culture involves recognizing its role in shaping and reflecting complex social dynamics.

Cyber culture has become a space where individuals can connect with communities sharing similar identities, such as race, class, and gender, on a global and transnational scale. This virtual interaction transcends geographical boundaries, making it a significant aspect of cultural studies. Cyber culture studies build on cultural criticism by examining how these virtual spaces impact and are impacted by real-life identities.

In this digital age, people often navigate two personas: one in their virtual life, shaped by social media interactions, and one in their physical reality. Understanding the impact of cyber culture on these identities is a key focus of current research.

Furthermore, cyber cultures are influenced by material considerations of profit and power, paralleling traditional cultures in this respect. Like any other societal structure, cyber culture is intertwined with economic and authoritative factors. Therefore, technology should be viewed as contextual and techno-cultural, where its meanings, values, and functions are closely linked to its use and impact.

When considering an object, such as a smartphone, how it is perceived and valued can vary greatly across different cultures and contexts. For instance, in one culture, a smartphone might symbolize social status, while in another, it may serve primarily as an educational tool, aiding in studying. In yet another context, it might be valued for its role in facilitating connections with loved ones. These varying uses illustrate how technology is not merely a functional object but is imbued with different meanings, values, and functions depending on the cultural and personal context.

Cyber culture arises from large-scale movements of people and the diffusion of culture, leading to hybrid forms of cultural production and consumption. The spread of capital plays a significant role in this process, as it influences the production, circulation, and consumption of goods and services. This capital flow helps shape and control how cyber culture evolves, reflecting a dynamic interplay between technology, economy, and culture.

This discussion brings us back to Marx's theories and the market's influence on production, consumption, and commodities. These elements are intricately connected and help regulate and control cultural and economic practices. A pertinent example of this connection is evident in the e-commerce industry, which exemplifies large-scale human movements and cultural integration. E-commerce demonstrates how global trade and technology lead to the hybridization of cultures, emphasizing the need for enhanced connectivity and control within the digital landscape.

In the realm of cyber culture studies, several key concerns emerge. These include globalization, techno-capitalism, and the evolving nature of cyber cultures. Globalization reflects the worldwide exchange and integration of cultures facilitated by digital technologies. Techno-capitalism highlights the influence of technology and capital on cultural production and consumption. Finally, cyber cultures themselves are studied for how they shape and are shaped by these broader economic and cultural forces.

Globalization refers to anything happening on a global scale. Techno-capitalism refers to changes in capitalism associated with the rise of a new technological sector, where the power of corporations and new forms of organizations come together. Essentially, it is capitalism generated through technology. Cyber cultures, meanwhile, refer to the kind of culture or movement around culture happening in cyberspaces.

Globalization has been enabled by the advent of high-speed communication. Capitalism is increasingly becoming techno-capitalism. Without technology, capital generation is no longer possible. It has reached a stage where the distributed nature of production, marketing, and consumption demands technological linkages to synchronize technology 24/7. We need this technology to generate what is now called techno-capitalism. Without these tools and technologies and communication, it is not possible.

Manuel Castells has demonstrated how the flows of information assume prime importance in this context. It is the management of information and financial flows that becomes the key focus in globalized techno-capitalism. How you manage information—whether it is at your disposal or being distributed—becomes crucial.

The information is being retained—how are you managing that information? That is the question. This information today is entirely data-driven, and the way financial flows are working is also a major concern. These are key areas of focus in cyber cultural studies.

The materiality and corporeality in cyber culture studies are particularly interesting. Howard's studies on cyber culture highlight intriguing aspects, such

as how virtual worlds enable users to transcend geography and the body. Cyber culture and technology allow us to transcend physical limitations through technology. But how does this happen?

When Howard speaks of transcending geography and the body, he refers to things like remote work. Today, people work from home, effectively transcending physical spaces. You are in your home but operate as if in an office, assuming a professional identity while physically remaining in a personal space.

Howard's discussion on transcending geography is evident in remote work, where people operate professionally from home, bypassing traditional office spaces. As for the body, similar transcending occurs through other digital platforms like MOOC courses. Students are no longer physically present in classrooms, but learning continues through virtual means. In this scenario, learners from different locations use technology to engage in education, creating a virtual classroom where the physical body seems to "transcend" its actual location.

Another example of this is telemedicine, where patients consult with doctors virtually. Here, despite not being physically present in the same room, a consultation and diagnosis occur, transcending the limitations of geography and the body.

Cyber culture studies delve into how computer technology and ICTs affect not only the social, cultural, and economic realms but also the material and physical conditions of our bodies. This is particularly intriguing as it raises questions about the long-term impact of technology use on our physical well-being. For instance, prolonged screen time may lead to poor eyesight and back issues due to continuous sitting, highlighting the real-world bodily consequences of our interactions with technology.

In future discussions, especially with the rise of AI, there will likely be further exploration into how these technologies will manifest through robotics, potentially reshaping our understanding of the relationship between technology and the body. Cyber culture studies will need to closely examine these shifts in how our material bodies experience and adapt to the ever-evolving technological landscape.

For instance, consider a scenario where a robot is programmed to act on your behalf, simulating speech or tasks that you would otherwise perform. This raises intriguing questions about how technology will interact with our material bodies. The long-term impact of relying on such technologies on human conditions is an area ripe for exploration in cyber culture studies. How will these robotic or AI-driven surrogates influence the way we engage physically or cognitively? The implications for how material bodies are utilized—or not—by technology present an important avenue for future research.

Let's turn to another key topic in cyber culture studies: the digital divide. This term describes the uneven nature of access to and the quality of the internet, electronic communication, and cyber cultures across different societies. What constitutes this uneven access? For instance, is the access ethical? Consider illegal practices like downloading films from torrent sites or using pirated software, such as Microsoft Office. These examples illustrate how uneven access to legitimate resources varies across regions and social groups.

Furthermore, aspects such as internet bandwidth, broadband availability, and the speed of connections contribute to this divide. Who has access to fast, reliable internet, and who doesn't? What are the social, economic, and geographic factors at play? This digital divide is particularly stark when comparing first-world countries to third-world or developing nations, where access to digital resources can be significantly limited.

Pippa Norris identifies three layers of this digital divide. The first layer is the \*global divide\*, which highlights the disparities in access and quality between developed and developing nations.

Referring to the divergence of Internet access between developed and developing nations. Again, coming from the previous one where they are talking about the third world and the first world countries. and then we see the social divide, which is referring to the divergence between Internet access users and between classes and section with a particular society termed information rich and information poor. Now, people who do not have Internet and till 2018, India was still one of the less Internet user country. Maybe after the pandemic, it might have increased with coming of other more cheaper networks.

The concept of the digital divide, which refers to the gap between the "information rich" and the "information poor," illustrates the uneven access to information in today's digital age. This divide becomes evident when one person asks, "Did you see this viral video or meme?" and another responds, "No, I didn't." The person who missed out on the information is considered "information poor," while the other, who is in the know, is "information rich." However, this divide is not solely about access to the internet; it also reflects a \*social divide\*. Certain information circulates predominantly in urban or semi-urban areas, while rural regions may remain unaware. This highlights how digital resources and information do not reach everyone equally, perpetuating class and sectional gaps.

The second layer, the \*democratic divide\*, refers to disparities in the nature and quality of internet use. Not everyone has access to high-speed broadband or other advanced digital resources. Some may still rely on mobile data, limiting their ability to engage with certain types of content or digital experiences. This lack of uniform access results in varying degrees of participation and experience in the digital world, reflecting deeper inequalities in access to technology.

Lastly, the third point involves the \*political economy of ICTs\* (Information and Communication Technologies). This relates to how the political and economic structures influence access to and control over digital resources. Advertisements, for example, often reflect the ideologies of the nation-state or mainstream society, shaping content in ways that cater to popular opinions and trends. This alignment with dominant ideologies helps generate profit by appealing to the majority, leading to what can be described as a "political economy" of the internet, where technology and profit are shaped by broader political and social factors.

Political economy in the context of cyber culture also addresses issues of power, justice, social agendas, and the political consequences of ICTs. A prime example of these political consequences is the rise of IT cells in political parties, showcasing how ICTs are now integral to political strategy and influence. Additionally, digital spaces have become a key arena for activism, where issues related to power and justice are often contested. This highlights how cyber culture plays a role in the social agenda, with studies calling attention to the racial, gendered, and classed nature of the information revolution. The biases in

access and participation in digital spaces often reflect broader societal inequalities, reinforcing structures of race, gender, and class.

In cultural studies, cyber cultures are viewed as a convergence of the economic, technical, and socio-cultural spheres. They encompass questions of labor, finance, political control, and power, both at the individual and community levels. These studies explore how technology is not just a tool but also an agent of control and empowerment, questioning labor practices and the financial structures that govern digital spaces. A comprehensive study of cyber culture must address all aspects of the information society, as technological advancements and the ways information is shared continue to evolve rapidly.

For instance, platforms like WhatsApp now allow not only the sharing of media but also financial transactions, GIFs, and emojis, indicating how deeply integrated these technologies have become in everyday life. Approaching cyber culture, therefore, requires an eclectic and multi-sided approach, as it is a complex field with numerous facets. Addressing its nuances without overlooking any critical aspect is a significant challenge for scholars, given the continuous evolution of digital technologies and their societal impacts.

Though you have to be very narrow in how you study, taking it one at a time, you also have to consider the other aspects. Keep those in mind and don't sacrifice them while conducting the study. Some theorists refer to this as digital ethnography or anthropology. We have reached a point where these studies are also being done, fitting into the larger framework of cyber cultural studies, which discusses how digital ethnography and anthropology are conducted, how questions are formulated, and how methodologies are devised.

Christine Hine identifies three key areas of studying the Internet ethnographically: travel, face-to-face interaction, and reflexivity in creating ethnographic objects. These ethnographic objects are artifacts that reveal cultural insights. The first area calls for redefining what face-to-face interaction means. If you are doing ethnography in cyberspace, the person is not physically present. What does face-to-face mean? They might use Google Classroom or other ICT tools like Zoom. Is it still appropriate to call it face-to-face, or how should we name it? The Internet is a collection of texts, and the ethnographer's task is to understand the meaning generated by these textual practices.



Movies act as texts, and advertisements and films also serve as texts. Similarly, the Internet is a collection of texts, and the ethnographer's task is to understand the meanings generated by these different textual practices. The Internet must be treated as a cultural artifact linked to offline relationships and contexts to situate it within a larger framework and see how they complement each other. Is there a possibility that offline relationships and context will complement each other? An example illustrates this: consider an e-commerce company like Amazon.

Amazon invites sellers, allowing small business owners to interact with the larger context of e-commerce. In the online context, Amazon enables customers to buy goods from various sellers and small businesses. What is the offline context? Many local businesses use Amazon-like platforms to reach a broader audience, connecting to a wider offline community. This is why it is considered a cultural artifact.

In ethnographies, we see studies of cyber culture as suggested by Escobar. He emphasizes the need to examine how software and applications are designed and used, as well as how online communities and networks are created. This is an ethnographic study, and we need the involvement of people—not just monitors. We should explore how software is designed, how it is used, and how it fosters online communities and networks. Previously, networking occurred offline; we must note how this has changed and evolved.

Studying cyber culture ethnographically will differ significantly from studying offline spaces. This includes examining popular culture forms of technology, such as cyberpunk and computer games, and the cultural identities that emerge in this new techno-space, along with the political economy of cyber culture—especially the relationships between capitalism, the global economy, and power. All these dynamics are coming together, and we must observe how ethnographies of cyber culture will evolve and integrate.

An instance of such an ethnography is the London School of Economics' Young People, New Media Project, which studies young people's media use, the individualization that results from it, and new forms of leisure, literacy, and sociability. This ongoing project examines how leisure time interacts with literacy and sociability to help us understand young people in the new media age,

encapsulating intricate views within this framework. It also investigates how young people engage with media in their daily lives, revealing patterns of consumption and interaction influenced by both online and offline contexts.