

## Cybercafe.

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Cybercafes are bars, coffee houses or restaurants, equipped with an Internet access. In the beginning of the eighties, they were the only public places where you could connect cheaply to the Net. The first-ever opened in Santa Monica (Ca), in 1984, on the occasion of the Olympic Arts Festival of Los Angeles. Over the nineties they strongly expanded throughout the First World. The first European cybercafe was founded in London, in 1994.

They were supposed to be short-lived : just long enough to introduce most people to the Internet. It was a mistake : their number keeps on increasing today, even in places where almost everybody has a private connection and where you can find all-for-free public access. Victim of its own success the expression "cybercafe" has even experienced a semantic shift : now it also means a virtual meeting place on the Internet where people communicate using a chat program or posting messages. In this acceptation CAFE is the acronym for "Communication Access For Everybody".

### **A process of multiplication and diversification.**

As far as "physical" cybercafes are concerned, at present we can distinguish :

- Internet cafe chains, like Easyeverything, which spread all over urban places. Their greatest asset is an all-day and all-week-round opening, and very low connection costs.
- Independent cybercafes which are subject to intense competition and offer personal support and activities beside browsing and mail services. Here the atmosphere is friendly and you can often get over your allocated time by a few minutes without paying for it.

Cybercafes concentrate mainly in the First World, many of them in big urban areas but with regional differences in the distribution. In the European Union you find cybercafes, everywhere, while in the USA or in Canada they settle to tourist areas and really big cities : actually, the cost for high-speed home connection is really low —all-in packages for less than 20 \$ a month— and public libraries offer free and unlimited access to the Internet.

In developing nations, cybercafes are few but they play a dynamic role in opening up landlocked territories. On that basis, Mexican authorities decided to cover the whole country with proximity Internet public access : consequently they promote cybercafes, which expand quickly. The first one opened in 1993 and today more than 200 can be recorded. Even in the outlying of Mexico-City you find Internet cafes just outside your place, anywhere between the "tienda" and the "comedor" : small stalls where immigrants can communicate cheaply (on average 1.20 \$ a hour) with their families or friends. In South America, Peru and Ecuador experience a similar process.

Africa lacks of cybercafes : the only ones you can find are in the capitals and yet 70 % of the population of these countries lives in the country. Anyway, connection costs are exorbitant for many of the inhabitants : almost 9 \$ a hour. Senegal et South Africa are two exceptions [UNESCO, 1998] :

-South African Universal Service Agency helps local communities to create Internet cafes. Even in Khayelitsha, a slum nearby The Cape, a cybercafe —the Internet Shop— opened recently.

-Senegal receives support from Senegalese community in France : two Parisian ethnic cybercafes —Vis@vis and Tatt@Guine— contributed to create several internet cafes in Senegal : the Ambidou, the Champs-Elysées, and Metissacana.

As their number increase, cybercafes diversify. Thematic Internet cafes appear like cultural cybercafes offering multimedia performances and virtual happenings, or ethnic

cybercafes and others dedicated to job seeking. Actually, almost any store —from bookshops to cobbler's— can be coupled with a public access to the Internet : in Paris, you can even find one —Eurocafard— that sells insecticide against cockroaches.

But all that kind of places are not necessarily cybercafes. Thus, a new kind of Net terminal called Webfinger with a touch-sensitive screen and no keyboard, is invading progressively the European "bistros" and "pubs" : though they don't convert suddenly into Internet cafes.

The genuine cybercafe requires a comfortable environment : beyond computer supported social networks it provides physical proximity between persons otherwise exchanging online with members of their respective virtual communities [Wellman, Gulia, 1997]. In such a context, people with similar interests can meet physically, have a drink or eat together. So cybercafes spark tangible social networks which link the customers to proxemic communities. What are the main characteristics these specific communities ?

### **Cybercafes, social networks and tangible communities.**

Cybercafe embodies the meeting-point of a physical public place and virtual spaces. It acts like an interface between "here" and "elsewhere", thus combining on the same spot two types of communities : virtual communities between persons exchanging online, and tangible communities that form between customers of the cybercafe.

These tangible communities may predate the cybercafe : in this respect ethnic cybercafes are typical. They develop specific services : so, African cybercafes in Paris provide cheap and sophisticated netmeeting with visio-conferencing. This is essential for migrants whose families and relations remain in Africa, and who would spend otherwise 120 to 160 \$ a month in international phone calls. Ethnic Internet cafes develop many other services : virtual letter-writer, travel agency, marriage bureau and African papers news agency. Finally, they are new landmarks in the city where isolated minorities can meet.

Cybercafe acts too as a pointer to potential communities in the local scene : it may awake the conscience of living together among the inhabitants. In Paris, for example, the cybercafe Sputnik is attended by a tremendous number of neighbors : storekeepers, teenagers, adults and elder people. They are most of the regular customers and give a spirit to the place. People who would never met, weave ties here.

Internet cafe unveils too solidarity networks that otherwise would stayed invisible. In this sense, it can convert to a center of political protest : in Algeria cybercafes become rallying points for the young students, besides stadiums and public libraries [Boumaiza, 2001]. This worry some governments, that would like to control what people read and write online : in China, authorities require by law the installation of spy-filters in the cybercafes, that identify each user and all his connections. This system called "Filter King" is programmed to detect and inform the police about anybody connecting to censored websites [Thorel, 2002].

### **What tomorrow will bring ?**

Cybercafes are modeled by their —tangible and virtual— environment and by their attendance, and model them in return. They are hybrid scenes combining the partial privacy of the relation online with organized sociability : consequently they form new types of public places. Engraved in everyday life territories, everyone can handle all of his numerous and peculiar identities there. They will probably last for a long time, the point is : in what form ?

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