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Foreword

RONALD E. RICE

Introduction

The authors of this edited book—Adams and Smith; Davidov and Andersén; Olaniran; Standerfer; Dewberry; Russ; Brignall; Skinner; Vance; Rosenthal; Zlot; Naughton; Abrams and Grün; Roy; O’Neil; and Kperogi and Duhé—have written a very interesting and diverse collection of essays and studies on “e-tribes.” One indication of this intriguing diversity is some of the words appearing in these chapters. Consider, for example: anarcho-primitivists, crafters, craftsterbate, cybercrews, cyberhate, cybertime, digital dreamtime, eco-brutalism, electronic tribal warfare, e-tribes, fetish, fictive kinship, flist, gift economy, hierarchies versus heterarchies, Horde versus Alliance, kerfuffle, massively multiplayer online role-playing game environment, mayhem, online shunning, palimpsest, resurrection, retribalism, slash, talisman, technoshamanism, transparency. It is entirely possible that no prior book (possibly not even a dictionary) includes all of these words.

Rather than make some vague and general statements about the importance, irrelevance, contributions, or threats of e-tribes, I am going to highlight some of the main themes from these chapters: what are e-tribes, sites of analysis, methods, theories, and social implications. In that sense, everything that follows comes directly from the chapters, so in essence I am citing all the authors.

What Are E-Tribes?

The chapters take different positions on the concept of “tribe” and “e-tribes.” Some are more traditional, historical, anthropological, even

technological. Some are more positive, others more negative. Here are some of those positions.

Tribes are more organized than bands, but less than chiefdoms or communities. Tribes coalesce around conflicts with outsiders over scarce resources. Civilization weakens tribes, increases resources, and promotes individualism. Tribes are associated with war, civilization with peace. This rejection of mainstream civilization may also mean racism, stereotyping, eco-brutalism. Tribes self-identify as unique, with shared affinities, and are often narrow, exclusionary, undemocratic, and antagonistic to open debate. Tribes are homogenous and autonomous with common speech, culture, and territory. Tribes involve extensive hierarchies of status, power, gender, age, fears, taboos. Tribalism may involve fragmentation, struggles, competition, and hostility.

Alternatively, tribes may encourage individual identity; there may be only a little formal structuring, and that based primarily on frequency of interaction. Tribe members are empowered within the tribe, through collective responses and through projecting identities into the tribal network. Tribalism may reduce hierarchy and inequality. Tribes have fluid boundaries externally, and heterarchies (webs, networks) instead of hierarchies (strict vertical subsets) internally. Tribes are not amenable to centralized control and persuasion. Tribes may not have historical reality beyond being a conceptual and political artifact of colonial relations with indigenous political elements.

E-tribes may be similar to or different from online discussion groups, forums, and communities. They may represent, in the modern world, a retribalization and return to affiliation groups; they may be quite similar to "lifestyles" or both represent and foster "fictive kinship" ties. E-tribes may consist primarily of those with strong shared interest, and either few ties or strong ties. But people may move from one online tribe to another, or even become members of multiple e-tribes (nearly impossible in their real-life counterparts).

Sites of Analysis

There are Internet sites on more phenomena than people could imagine, and indeed even on many that some would be unable to imagine. The topics analyzed here cover a wide range, including: the creation and maintenance of online culture or tribe; e-tribes versus communities; fostering different versions of traditional identities, such as people

engaged in making crafts; maintaining community online after the devastation of the physical community; how online tribal groups can foster as well as inhibit civil discourse; how physical and virtual relationships, and offline and online companies, are parallel and reinforcing; how to inhabit and make habitable online territory; human life as fundamentally a network of communication; increasing organizational transparency whether intended or not; massively multiplayer online role-playing and tribal behavior; online Aryan tribalism and hate groups; online role games as fairy tales or Aboriginal myths; online tribalism as a form of fictive kinship; organizational relations with e-tribes or stakeholders; similarities of music downloading with the Aborigine Dreamtime; slash fans; and the validity of online ethnography.

Methods

The approaches to studying these sites are also varied, including: conceptual essay; content analysis of forum postings and replies; ethnography; grounded theory; historical recounting of foundations of types of online tribes; informal interviews; reflexive note-taking; online surveys; participant-observation (including a major sacrifice toward academic goals—extensive multiplayer video gaming over fourteen weeks!); rhetorical analysis of language and argument strategies within and across online tribes; semistructured interviews; and review of theory and implications.

Theories

While some of the chapters are primarily analytical essays, many ground their approaches in specific theories, including: adaptive structuration; civil society; communication rules; communitarian theory; complex adaptive systems; complexity science; crisis and disaster communication; critical mass; field theory; group cohesion; hyperpersonal computer-mediated communication; identity formation; interpersonal and intercultural theory; prescriptive and descriptive dialogue; public discourse and positive public dialogue; rules of dialogue; social constructionism; social fields; social individuation and deindividuation theory; social influence; and uncertainty reduction.

Social Implications

A central question, of course, is what kinds of social implications are associated with e-tribes. Among the primary issues I've identified in these chapters are inclusions/exclusions, norms, paradoxes, and structure.

Inclusions/Exclusions

E-tribes may foster both utopian and dystopian aspects of tribalism. E-tribes may well foster various kinds of inclusions. People can find others with similar identities; online groups can provide networking and pointers to other authors or sources; organizations may improve their relations with e-tribes and stakeholders; and e-tribes allow participants to overcome the isolation of rural areas. Indeed, in e-tribes comments, interactions, and hyperlinks represent cliques of friends and other relationships. Social networking software can be said to invoke and re-create an idealized historical society, or "fictive" kinship relations.

However, e-tribes can also foster exclusion. Consider just the range of terms for members and nonmembers, such as "slashers" versus "mundanes." Members can set filters (friends groups, friends lists), conceal and protect themselves from the traditional/outside world, and easily avoid nonmembers and social critique or discrimination by nonmembers. Some online groups reject outside groups, at the same time emphasizing divisions within their groups (examples of e-tribes exhibiting both include primitivists and Aryan hate groups); a minority group in a tribe can found its own online tribe, using its own terms and accepted discourse. Digital music players, playlists, and stored songs can be forms of inclusion and exclusion, both of people or groups, as well as of times and places.

Norms

A crucial aspect of e-tribes is the extent and nature of their norms. Online groups may perpetuate social norms; online guilds often replicate real-life ethnicities and orientations. E-tribes may foster ritualized ingroup/outgroup relations, and online game actions are ritualized. Shared music tastes and knowledge can be the basis of cultural tribes, manifested through aural signals. Online group rituals may be central to maintaining an e-tribe identity, such as frequency of mail checking, fake/humorous as well as real/serious titles, shared stories, acceptable

formats, and responding or not responding to posts. Strong tribal norms can suppress disagreement. An online cultural identity can be fostered through enforcement of norms and in-group beliefs, and expel intruders and doubters.

Alternatively, some virtual tribes are very egalitarian, supportive, and dialogic, allowing for discussion of opposing positions. Individuals are free to start over with a new pseudonym and new norms. Hard-core players may prefer online to offline socializing, and some video game players or forum members reject central norms. Participation in certain kinds of postings can maintain users' membership in a group, and reinforce the ideology and values of an otherwise dispersed tribe.

Paradoxes

While in no way a central theme of these chapters, some intriguing paradoxes are noted. Using modern Internet technology to participate in neotribalism, primitivism, pantheism, and antitechnology resistance seems pretty clearly paradoxical. For example, Dreamtime ritual and myth, from a timeless, atechhnological spiritual perception, are being obtained through commercial, corporate, technological digital music. There is also the paradox of participating in fashion tribes to experiment with alternate, noncommercial identities, but most of these opportunities are generated through commercial and manufactured experiences (such as online video games). Underlying some broad-based concerns about the negative social or individual effects of Internet technology are deep-seated anxieties about loss of or threats to kinship.

Structure

Finally, an ongoing theme has to do with both the structure and structuring of e-tribes and related technology.

Internet technology allows people to participate in multiple groups, and maintain weak and heterogeneous ties. The anonymity of participants and accessibility to posted materials decrease some tribes' control over peripheral members (such as skinhead cybercrews). New communities may form, but they may be ephemeral or temporary; however, that may be appropriate, such as in the case of contact, grief, support, and relational links after Hurricane Katrina. The ability to search, obtain, store, retrieve, mix, and update digital music allows and represents transient personal and group identities. The organizational use of online

connections to stakeholder tribes allows proactive development of dialogic and more reciprocal relationships with those stakeholders. Thus, computer-mediated communication may inhibit the emergence of a dominant or centralizing user. However, analyses of e-tribes founded by a proactive leader (whether an Aryan supremacist group, an academic discussion list, or a support group of baby-boomer women) provide counterexamples.

The rules and rewards of a video game may foster tribalism, in the form of guilds and quest parties, competing to kill rivals; limited or pre-assigned icons and avatars may reinforce stereotypes. Role-playing and video games invoke the magic and myth of folklore, and allow manipulation of time and sequencing, crossovers into other worlds, and resurrections from in-game deaths. The digital media experience is a way to cross temporal, physical, and spiritual boundaries; and downloaded music and associated material talismans (personal digital music players, as well as shared playlists) are social resources. The Internet allows the words/texts of actors to be used, manipulated, recorded, and precisely critiqued by tribal rivals, generating an ongoing discourse of appropriated and critiqued arguments.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is not only a wide range of interesting and intriguing topics here, but also diverse and contrasting perspectives on those topics across the chapters. To what kind of e-tribes do you wish to belong?