

# Being with Information Technology

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## 1. Introduction

It seems like our life with, through and in information technology are becoming experiential, susceptible and sensitive. That is, people are more and more inclined of turning to information technology in quest of meaning in life. As such the core of information technology is changing.

One example is recent year's development of virtual communities, which, by creating new or enhancing existing relationships between humans, actualize dimensions of social relationships previously not existing. Through the existence of virtual communities and other forms of experiential information technologies, conventional understandings of reality, communities, cultures, and representations are becoming blurred and challenged.

In order to understand the entanglement of virtual communities and other social forms of information technology, researchers within this area need to develop a sensibility for the diverse ways in which technology is entering our lives. Drawing on the work of Anette Markham (1998a and 1998b) this paper elaborates the notion of being-with – in contrast to using – information technology. It might be a way to capture the significance and meaning of an extended presence of information technology in people's everyday life.

## 2. Sense-making in Cyberspace

Various information technologies, such as e-mail, IRC, BBS's, MUDs and virtual worlds engage us in diverse ways at a number of conceptual levels. Often these technologies are regarded as a tool to help us communicate with people or retrieving information from around the globe. At the same time people are attributing information technologies with characters previously, mostly, associated with humans and the commodious and comfort of homes and communities (Stolterman & Janlert 1997, Reeves & Nass, 1996).

The diverse and various ways in which people speak of computer mediated communication indicates that information technologies puzzle and amaze. People are trying to make sense of a new and unfamiliar technology and forms of communicating and being with others, through various notions and metaphors. At the same time they are forming new ways of community and life.

Researchers, that studies the impact of information and communication technologies, often consider organizations, institutions, communities, and cultures as bounded containers for work, play, learning and living. These studies utilize a variety of theories about how we process and make sense of stimulus in our communicative worlds and explores information technology, including social presence, media richness, cues filtered out and social information processing (Sproull et. al 1991, Baym 1995 and Herring 1996). So far, these theories have been useful informing a body of research that explores information technology and *as a tool* to be examined, utilized, improved and applied within various organizational and social contexts.

In contrast to the tool perspective, there are more and more users and researchers that conceptualize computer-mediated communication itself as the organizing process. Most researchers within this perspective argue that information technologies are very influential mediators and moderators of human experiences. For scholars such as Benedikt (1991), Featherstone & Burrows (1995), Jones (1995), Markham (1998a), Rheingold (1994), Turkle (1995), and Ågren (1998) online communication not only structure relations, *it is* the structure within which the relation occurs. As such, very different issues become salient.

### **3. Being-with information technology**

Anette Markham (1998a) explores how people create, negotiate, and make sense of their social experiences in computer-mediated contexts and tries to understand what it feels like and what it means to spend substantial portions of one's everyday life in chat rooms, support groups and virtual communities in cyberspace. In her work she raises questions of what it means to be – in spaces online.

One of her conclusions is that people, for most part, have diverse kinds of relationships with information technology. As such the relationships vary and change, depending on what people are doing and on various situations. In order to capture this she elaborates a framework for understanding people's relationships with information technology – from tool, and place, to a way of organizing and a way of being (Markham 1998b). Each with its own distinctiveness and meanings. Depending on the kind of relationship people hold to be significant, various rationales and meanings are attributed.

Her understanding also destabilizes the distinction between actual and virtual realities and recognizes that computer-mediated communication, for most part, is extending the horizons of human experience in new and unfamiliar ways. Also, by attributing importance to the many ways in which individuals are creating meaning in their encounters with information technology, Markham forms an understanding that are similar to others, who regard information technology as experiential and sensuous (Heim 1998, Laurel 1993, Davies 1998 and Waterworth 1997). An important and significant aspect of this understanding is that information technology is regarded as a provider of new and different experiences of reality – experiences not possible without the technology. I hold this aspect to become more and more acknowledged and desirable.

An understanding of being-with information technology has just begun, but not as an attempt to solely capture the way people understand their experiences online. It challenges us, thus, to a different way of seeing, a distinctly different understanding of people's fascination and responses to information technologies and cyberspace. This view also accepts and acknowledges people's diverse experiences of the information technologies and as such motivates researchers to understand why people refer to it with such variety. Over time and continued use, our terms and notions will change. This is part of a new way of belonging to reality that information technology permits.

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