# WHAT'S "CULTURE" GOT TO DO WITH IT? A (PERSONAL) REVIEW OF CATAC (CULTURAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION), 1998-2014.

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> *Expect the unexpected – for it is hard to find, and difficult.*
>
> – Heraclitus

**Abstract**

I first describe the personal genealogy and then history of what became the biennial conference series on "Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication" (CaTaC).   The series, begun in 1998, was among the first scholarly efforts to foster critical attention to the rôles of culture and culturally variable norms, practices, and communicative preferences in the design, implementation, and responses to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially as connected via the internet.  The beginnings of CaTaC in a particular experience of culture shock grounded its defining concerns with recognizing and thereby seeking to overcome ethnocentrisms embedded in both ICT design and research and scholarship on their diffusion and impacts across the globe: such ethnocentrisms could be observed to issue in a

"computer-mediated colonization," i.e., processes of cultural homogenization that thus threatened local cultural traditions and diversity. I review highlights and developments across the 16 years of the series, especially as they refract our defining concerns into four thematic foci: embodiment and gender; democracy and freedom of expression; design; and identity and selfhood. On balance, our signature concerns and critical attention to "culture" (an increasingly problematic concept) has become ever more mainstream since 1998: on the other hand, it is also apparent that the factors that incline both designers and scholars towards ethnocentrism remain. Hence our defining efforts to recognize and overcome such ethnocentrism, for the sake of avoiding cultural imperialism of various sorts, remain pressing and salient.

**Introduction**

What became known as the CATaC (Cultural Attitudes towards Technology and Communication) conference series began at a specific time in Internet Studies – and in a very specific experience of culture shock. I describe these beginnings as an introduction to the conferences for three reasons. One, the experience of culture shock illuminates both the conceptual and normative dimensions that came to shape the conferences. Two, this culture shock rests on a kind of ethnocentrism[1] that remains difficult to avoid – even among those of us who are privileged to research and reflect in these domains. Overcoming such ethnocentrism is a core goal of the CATaC series – and articulating it clearly from the outset is helpful. Finally, we will see in the conclusion that this kind of ethnocentrism – despite the kinds of developments and advances in understanding that I detail in the second section – remains intransigent, if not predominant. As it does so – specifically among those of us who study and to some degree may shape the histories and nature of the Internet – such ethnocentrism remains a core problem and danger.

In the second section, I describe the first CATaC conference (1998) in somewhat more detail, in order to bring forward the contributions that shaped what became defining themes and threads of the series. These began with demonstrating that "culture" (whatever it is) makes a difference in our design, implementation, and responses to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including those constituting the Internet. Both initially, and then throughout the series, the role and impact of "culture" can be seen especially in terms of four core threads: embodiment and gender; democracy and freedom of expression; the role and processes of design; and our understandings of selfhood and identity. Last, but certainly not least, the foundational notion of "culture" itself becomes problematized. I take up each of these from their beginning expressions in 1998 and trace their development through the subsequent fifteen years of the conference series, including affiliated publications and most recent PhD theses.

The third section begins with some brief summary remarks on the broad shape and trajectory of the series, identifying some distinctive moments and developments, along with some of the impacts of the conferences. I conclude with what lessons can be gleaned from the conferences – most especially for those of us who seek to foster both our histories and the future shape of the Internet in ways that overcome intransigent ethnocentrisms for the sake of protecting and fostering diverse cultural identities in an Internet-entangled and interwoven world.

**CATaC genealogies: the first age of Internet Studies and culture shock**

The first CATaC conference was inspired by a specific history and set of experiences that co-emerged in 1997. To begin with, I had come to Oslo, Norway, to participate in a conference on "Technology and Democracy - Comparative Perspectives", organized by the Centre for Technology and Culture, University of Oslo. I was invited because of my work on the democratization potentials and realities of computer-mediated communication – which, by then, had been subsumed under the larger name and notion of the Internet.

Barry Wellman has described this "first age" of Internet Studies as one in which "punditry rides rampant" (2011: 18). Broadly, in the absence of what we now enjoy –well established literatures, documenting an extensive array of disciplinary and interdisciplinary research that provides us with at least some reliable empirical foundations for our claims – much of the available literature and debate reflected what James Carey characterized as a Manichean debate (1989). On the one hand, pundits, and what we later came to call technology evangelists, boosted a picture of the Internet as "wiring the world" in ways that would inevitably bring about a McLuhanesque "global village" defined by democratic discourse, freedom of expression, and economic prosperity. On the other hand, anticipations of various cyber-hells ran the gamut from "McWorld" to jihad, that is, either the complete homogenization of all peoples and cultures under the pressures of globalization and multinational capitalism, and/or local – and if need be, violent – resistance to such imperialism and colonization (Barber 1995).

I had come to Oslo to discuss a Habermasian-feminist version of democratization via the Internet. Briefly, the hope was that the affordances of Internet-facilitated communication could help us better realize the conditions of an ideal speech situation, beginning with freedom and equality between participants, whose discourse would be guided by rational

argument rather than familiar sorts of force. Extensive feminist critique of Habermas helped extend the discourse model to include, e.g., narrative and emotion, thereby fostering the participation of those too frequently excluded from classical notions of rationality – namely, women and children (Ess 1994; cf. Thorseth 2011). And, for its part, the conference collected a remarkable range of diverse viewpoints and approaches to questions of technology and democracy. But even more importantly, my trip to Oslo was the first time I had left the United States in some 20 years. I was not entirely unprepared for the visit: in the 1970s, I had enjoyed considerable experience of life and work in Germany, France, and Switzerland – that is, I knew something of these diverse cultures, their defining languages, values and traditions, the practices of everyday life, and so on. Moreover, partly because of my own Cherokee heritage, and partly because I had witnessed some of the devastating consequences of imperialism and colonialism, I thought I was acutely aware of the grave dangers of falling into ethnocentrism, and thereby complicity, however tacitly and naively, with cultural imperialism.

But in the meantime, of course, the personal computer revolution had broken out in the early 1980s, bringing computing technologies and their near-infinite possibilities to the desktops of scholars, businesses, and the homes of everyday consumers and citizens. It was on the wave of this revolution that I had come to Oslo. So it was no small shock to come to recognize during my first days in Oslo that I had, despite my earlier experiences and sensibilities, also fallen into an easy ethnocentrism – this time, with regard to computing technologies, networks, and computer-mediated communication (CMC). By this, I mean that I had simply assumed that my Norwegian colleagues and their cohorts would be using CMC more or less as I and my cohorts in the United States did. In part thanks to patient and understanding colleagues from Norway and elsewhere, I quickly began to see that this was not the case. For

example, as compared with their U.S. counterparts, my Norwegian colleagues appeared to spend considerably less time on email and more on face-to-face communication in the course of their work days. On the other hand, I had the strong sense that young people in Norway were far more intensive users of MUDs (multi-user domains), MOOs (MUD object-oriented), and other then-prevalent forms of CMC than were their US counterparts. However spotty and inaccurate these initial impressions may have been – they nonetheless brought home the critical truth and insight that *culture made a difference*.

This recognition – however commonplace it may be for us today – was something of a heresy, however. In 1998, the vast majority (about 84 per cent) of those using the Internet were physically and thereby (with some exceptions) culturally located in North America (GVU 1998). This cultural dominance was manifest in many ways, beginning with the predominance of US-based scholarship on CMC. Still more importantly: much of the discourse – especially coming from the side of the boosters – reflected underlying and usually tacit assumptions that in turn were grounded in North American cultures and traditions. Some of these were obvious, beginning with the insistence on democratic processes and norms such as freedom of expression. More subtly, however, there was also a prevailing assumption regarding *technological instrumentalism* – that is, that technologies, including the technologies of the Internet and CMC – are somehow neutral: they are "just tools" that embed or carry no particular values, norms, or preferences. Against this orthodoxy, the suspicion that CMC and the Internet might indeed embed specific cultural norms and culturally variable communicative preferences was tantamount to heresy. To go further and suggest that the ostensibly beneficent vision of "wiring the world" in the name of democracy, et cetera, might rather risk becoming yet one more expression of cultural (and thereby, political and economic) imperialism was even more outrageous.

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These were nonetheless the growing suspicions and worries that emerged for me over the two days of the conference. And to make matters worse, a first look for research that sought to explore matters of culture vis-à-vis CMC and the Internet turned up, to put it kindly, very little indeed.

As noted in the introduction, these personal beginnings are significant in three ways. One, this genealogy explains the defining focus of the CATaC conferences on the complex intersections between "culture", technology, and communication. Second, our conference series began from specific *normative* grounds and commitments. These normative grounds popped up first in my background work on the democratization and emancipatory potentials of the Internet – a core theme of Internet Studies both then and certainly now. But these normative grounds were made all the more manifest – as perhaps they only can be – in the *collision* between two cultures, and the resulting personal shock in the face of important cultural differences in our use of the Internet. Such shock was (and remains) critical for recognizing my own ethnocentric assumptions about the nature of Internet-based technologies and their uses – and for further recognizing how these ethnocentrisms prevented me from anticipating important differences rooted in culturally variable norms, traditions, practices, and communicative preferences. Three, in the following section we will see that uncovering and seeking to find ways to avoid such ethnocentrism – both for the sake of more balanced and informed research and scholarship, and for the sake of avoiding complicity in the sorts of colonization (both overt and covert) that begins with ethnocentrism – in turn is a defining norm and goal of the conference series as it unfolds.

**The CATaC conference series: unfoldings and developments**

Following my culture shock in Oslo, I sought to explore these new insights and interests in terms of research and scholarship. I approached Teri Harrison at SUNY Press, who had shepherded me through my first anthology, *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication* (Ess 1996). Teri offered the possibility of developing a special issue for the *Electronic Journal of Communication [La Revue Electronic de Communication]* (EJC [REC]) – with the strong suggestion that organizing an international conference would serve better to attract good papers. Gulp. While I had had some experience with organizing regional conferences, an international conference seemed entirely beyond my depth. Most fortunately, Teri put me in touch with Fay Sudweeks at Murdoch University. Fay was a pioneer in CMC studies in her own right (see for example, Sudweeks, McLaughlin, and Rafaeli 1998) – and further had extensive experience in such organization. Most happily, Fay accepted my request for help and set to work on organizing our first conference.

It is hard to overstate Fay's contributions to the conference series – and this at all levels. First of all, she had as comprehensive an overview as anyone at the time of CMC studies, especially from a non-US perspective. Her work in Australia was also key in helping us take up research and scholarship on indigenous communities – those peoples and cultures most distant from US centers of ICT development and CMC scholarship. (These Australian linkages are manifest in the cover design of our 2001 anthology [Ess 2001], which incorporates an Aboriginal map that both reveals and conceals important information, especially with a view towards protecting vital information from white outsiders). Fay was also especially attentive to every detail of logistics, including venue, accommodation, catering, and excursions – all of which contributed to an overall conference experience of warmth and hospitality. This was neither a small accomplishment nor an incidental detail:

precisely because the conferences brought together scholars and researchers from across diverse disciplines and cultures, providing the most comfortable and enjoyable context for both formal and informal interactions was critical to establishing the atmosphere and conference culture required for those interactions to succeed.

Through a series of additional happy connections and fortunate circumstances – including colleagues who helped us line up our conference venue, other colleagues who helped us acquire a substantial grant from the Swiss Office of Technology Assessment, along with many other helping hands – we were able to greet the 60 or so colleagues who attended the first conference at the Science Museum of London, 1-3 August 1998. The conference participants represented some 17 diverse countries and cultures, including Australia, Europe and Scandinavia, Russia, Africa, the Middle East, Asia (Japan, Thailand), Latin American (Venezuela), as well as the United Kingdom and the United States.

*Culture makes a difference*

As it happened, our conference began at the cusp of what Wellman characterizes as the second age of Internet Studies – marked precisely by a turn from punditry to more systematic, empirically-oriented research (Wellman 2011: 19f.). And in fact, both individually and collectively, the conference contributions powerfully documented – far beyond my original suspicions and intuitions – that indeed, culture makes a difference. As a first example, Daniel Pargmann documented what he later called "ASCII imperialism" – the difficulties presented for Scandinavians who sought to use the Internet for both work and play, but whose distinctive three vowel sounds (ø, æ, å) were not available in the standard ASCII encoding at the time. This meant, for example, that researchers and libraries in

Scandinavia would be forced to rewrite even their very names in order to be searchable from a "global" perspective (Hård af Segerstad 2002). And, of course, these foundational mismatches only grew more dramatic the further one moved away from English and the US centers.

For instance, Lorna Heaton demonstrated the profound differences between the low-context/high-content cultures of the US and (northern) Europe, on the one hand, and the high-context/low-content culture of Japan: these differences more or less forced Japanese engineers to design their own CSCW systems that could capture the essential communicative elements of gesture, gaze, and body distance – elements essential in a culture whose communicative preferences emphasize the non-verbal, in contrast with Western (northern) emphases on direct communication via bare texts (Heaton 1998).

Soraj Hongladarom reiterated Pargmann's point regarding ASCII imperialism, as now faced all the more powerfully by Thai users of CMC. At the same time, however, Hongladarom offered a helpful middle ground between the prevailing binaries of jihad vs. McWorld. That is, he suggested that "Internet culture" would emerge as indeed a homogenous one – one that would span and conjoin the globe, but primarily as a "thin" culture. By contrast, "thick" cultures – ones preserving core values, practices, and traditions defining cultural identity – would likewise remain (Hongladarom 1998). Such "thick" cultures were manifest, for example, in the *resistance* to reshaping via CMC documented in many of these first and subsequent CATaC conference presentations.

To cite just one example from CATaC'02: James Piecowye documents how young women of the United Arab Emirates consciously chose what elements of global cultures they wished to

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appropriate while they simultaneously insisted on preserving their own cultural values and practices (2002). As this example suggests, moreover, one can trace through the CATaC conference presentations and proceedings a strong thread of focus on the Arabic world, including women.

Later on, in fact, we would adopt the phrase from Ulf Hannerz (1989) – "the peripheries talk back" – to point to this dialectical relationship between thin and thick cultures. Finally, some ten years later, Soraj would return to CATaC to review his notions of thick and thin, to argue that the boundary between these two was becoming "fuzzier" – in part, because CMC technologies had in fact developed in ways that <u>were</u> more culturally sensitive and adaptable, while users themselves (in the Thai example at least) had likewise developed new communicative abilities, precisely through the on-going dynamics of globalization and cultural change. Risk to cultural integrity and identity remain, however: as he put it, "the thick is probably getting thinner, and the thin is becoming thicker" (Hongladarom 2008: 85).

In particular, the conference contributions helped crystalize how the ostensibly cosmopolitan and beneficent visions of an "electronic global village" rested on several assumptions, namely:

> belief in communication as a sufficient condition for bringing about global understanding and democracy; belief in some sort of technological determinism, so that providing the infrastructure of CMC technologies will encourage, if not inevitably lead to, the appropriation of democratic and egalitarian values; and belief in a universally shared humanity, one more or less transparently communicable via CMC (Ess 1998: 12f.).

Of course, from a contemporary perspective, these assumptions are profoundly suspect. But in 1998, these assumptions were not usually articulated, much less called into question. One of the primary accomplishments of the first CATaC conference, then, was to focus on these assumptions – and then further highlight their questionability, not simply on philosophical grounds, but on strongly *empirical* grounds, that is, as critically illuminated precisely by the wide range of experiences and analyses brought together at the conference.

The conference experience further helped us highlight what would become characteristic questions and themes, beginning with:

> Do CMC technologies embed or encourage the appropriation of a given set of cultural values, and/or do pre-existent cultural values resist and reshape the use of such technologies?
> What culturally-related factors, including attitudes toward gender and gender roles, encourage and/or discourage the appropriation and use of CMC technologies? (Ess 1998: 12).

*Embodiment and gender*

In these directions, the venerable Steve Jones emphasized for us the importance of attention to embodiment and gender (Jones 1998). Again, from a contemporary perspective, this may seem obvious. But much of the 1990s discourse surrounding the Internet emphasized ostensibly sharp contrasts between online and offline experiences – between virtual and real worlds – in what I later characterized as Augustinian and Cartesian dualisms as central to, for

example, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the science fiction novel that shaped much of our thinking about "cyberspace" in the 1990s (Ess 2011). Such dualisms underlay Gibson's rapturous accounts of "bodiless exultation in cyberspace" (1984: 6) – an escape from the body that some feminists took up as a much needed escape from real-world violence and exploitation. These dualisms seem largely dead – first of all, as more empirical research through the 1990s and early 2000s increasingly demonstrated the inextricable interconnections between online and offline (Ess and Consalvo 2011: 3f.). Indeed, these interconnections are now so thoroughly documented as to have reached policy-oriented documents in the European Commission (Broadbent et al. 2013). But in 1998, foregrounding the body represented a still novel and courageous call.

The same must be said, unfortunately, for gender. On the one hand, 1990s' concerns about how we might encourage more women to make use of what began as a set of technologies almost exclusively dominated by males (Ess 1996: 6f.) now seem quaint in the face of the many ways and venues in which women have taken up and sometimes dominate in turn Internet-based communication technologies and venues. At the same time, however, as the most recent explosions over "Gamergate" make clear, hostility towards women – both overt and covert – remains deeply engrained in some communities and circles. The CATaC focus on gender thus remains centrally relevant.

Four further thematics emerged from CATaC'98 to become definitive of subsequent conferences.

*Democracy and freedom of expression*

To begin with, the utopian hope that wiring the world would thereby automatically bring in its trail greater democracy and freedom of expression was strongly challenged by both Hongladarom's observations and those of Michael Dahan (1998). Dahan drew on several episodes in Israel highlighting both the potentials and clear limitations of CMC to foster greater freedom of expression and democracy, with less than optimistic conclusions. With the advantage of some 18 additional years of research and exploration, we are acutely aware these days of how far CMC and the Internet may – and may not – foster greater democracy and freedom of expression. Examples abound of regimes around the world, including ostensibly more democratic ones, that achieve considerable, if not total, degrees of success in censoring diverse forms of content, often coupled with Internet-facilitated surveillance of their own populations that can result in jail, torture, or death for those who speak out. To be sure, a kind of Internet arms race is on – with those who, for example, develop new technological appliances to help counter government surveillance and censorship (e.g. Al-Saqaf 2014). However all of this continues to unfold – especially recent revelations of the comprehensive surveillance capacities of the US National Security Administration, along with ongoing successes of repressive regimes in limiting citizen access to Internet-based content and exchange, make clear that 1990s' optimism regarding an inevitable democratization and emancipation via the Internet was profoundly open to question once we began to look seriously at culture, technology, and communication.

At times, of course, the themes of democracy and gender intersect: a striking example of this was Rasha Abdulla's keynote speech and conference presence in 2012, following soon after the so-called Arab Springs (Abdulla 2012).

*Design*

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Secondly, CATaC'98 introduced a thematic that has, however gradually, developed into one of the most important foci for those of us motivated by normative commitments to democratic processes and norms, the importance of protecting cultural diversity, equality and gender equality, and so on – namely, the central role of the *designers* who shape and build the devices and their applications that constitute our communicative universe. CATaC'98 called attention to the possibility of design as embedding cultural elements, and thus risking cultural imperialism. To be sure, we were not the first to notice that design is not value-free, for example, something that ostensibly seeks to proceed from what Lucy Suchman has called "the view from nowhere" (2002). Very importantly, since the 1990s attention to these dimensions of ICT design has continued to grow and expand. In particular, José Abdelnour-Nocera – whose 1998 conference presentation examined Latin American virtual communities – went on to found the SOCIOTECH-INTERACTIONDESIGN mailing list in 2006, followed by *The International Journal of Sociotechnology and Knowledge Development* in 2009. (This is a first example of what I describe below in terms of the centrifugal effects of CATaC – that is, how persons and their research, as first presented and developed at a CATaC conference, moved on to help shape and influence research and publication in specific disciplines and communities). Indeed, the most recent CATaC conference (2014) took up design precisely as a central focus. Many good developments can be celebrated from this conference – along with ongoing recognition of how difficult it remains, in some quarters at least, to help bring deep awareness of culturally variable norms and communicative preferences into the design process.

*Selfhood and identity*

Especially from a philosophical perspective, among the most foundational components of human existence as shaped by "culture" are our conceptions of selfhood and identity. This theme is, of course, older than CATaC – (see, for instance, Goonasekera 1990, cited in Ess 2001: 33). At the same time, the philosophers among us in particular sought to foreground identity and selfhood vis-à-vis diverse cultures, including long-time CATaC participant Soraj Hongladarom (for example, Hongladarom 2007). In my own case, attention to how foundational conceptions of selfhood and identity are changing in conjunction with changing media technologies and practices, especially across "East" and "West" differences, has become a prominent focus in recent years (for example, Ess 2014a).

*Culture makes a difference – but what is "culture"?*

Lastly, "culture" emerged as both more articulate and more problematic as a concept. On the one hand, the foundational works of Gert Hofstede (for instance, 1980) and E.T. Hall (1976) made their appearance here – thereby beginning a defining thread for the series. Indeed, the first phrase of the conference series was marked by an ever-increasing use of Hall and Hofstede – coupled with rising critique and resistance. In 1998, one of the first criticisms launched against (at least the use of) what were becoming widely used frameworks was just that "culture" tended to be understood here as something static and monolithic – if not strongly deterministic (see for instance, Maitland 1998). Moreover, whatever "culture" might be – we as individuals represent the intersection of multiple layers and levels of "culture," most especially in a world marked not only by ever increasing cultural exchanges and encounters via CMC, but also by increased mobility, immigration, diasporas, and thereby the emergence of "third" or hybrid identities that mix two or more strong cultural backgrounds.

Subsequent CATaC conferences in this first phase saw increasing use of Hofstede, Hall, and others – sometimes conjoined in creative and expansive ways so as to identify, for instance, 29 culturally variable factors (Baumgartner and Marcus 2004, cited in Cantoni et al 2006), or more than 70 (Reeder, Macfadyen, and Chase 2004). At the same time, however, critiques of any sort of simple notion of "culture" likewise developed and expanded, for example, Kamppuri and Tukiainen (2004). This critical thread continued both beyond the boundaries of the conference series and within, so as to reach a kind of crescendo in our 2008 conference in Nîmes, France. Here, CATaC veterans Connie Kampf (Aarhus University) and José Abdelnour-Nocera (University of West London), organized a panel titled "Beyond Hall, Hofstede, and 'culture': Understanding diversity from the top-down to the bottom-up and back!" The various critiques and alternatives to Hofstede and Hall consolidated here thereby continued the problematization of notions of "culture" that began in 1998.

Our conferences in 2010 and 2012 continued both the critical and constructive uses of "culture" – and by 2014, something of a synthesis of views could be discerned. On the one hand, in his presentation, Abdelnour-Nocera summarized the now familiar criticisms of the term – but argued that "culture" could still be used as a "can-opener." And in these directions, a number of striking examples were presented of research that presumed one or more of these now (overly) familiar frameworks, so as to demonstrate – still and yet once again – how conflicts between the cultural norms, values, and practices, including communicative preferences that (still) shape the design and implementation of contemporary ICTs (now including mobile devices) and those of "target" cultures (still) generated friction and conflict. Perhaps most strikingly, Gwyneth Sutherlin developed an experimental inquiry carried out among the Acholi people, using Western-based ICTs such as computers and mobile phones, in order to discern the communicative impacts of the differences between:

narrative structures (linear vs. circular), time/space conceptions (abstract vs. concrete), and identity/agency (individualistic vs. relational) as rooted in chirographic ("literate") vs. oral cultures. She found that these contrasts resulted in a narrative distortion from what the informants could convey orally and thereby within their indigenous conceptual framework -- and what they then could convey by way of texting through a mobile device. The upshot was that important information got left out and/or distorted in the move from the one to the other – information that could be critical especially in crisis management and relief efforts (Sutherlin 2014a, 2014b).

At the same time, other long-term CATaC participants such as Patrizia Schettino (2014a, 2014b) have continued efforts to develop new analytical categories that capture our intuition that "culture makes a difference" – but in ways that move beyond the limitations of earlier frameworks. Schettino does so by developing notions of "home" and "place" that build on post-colonial concepts of "hybridity" (Appadurai 1998; Bhabha 1994) in order to identify important culturally variable dimensions of a museum installation intended to be accessible to visitors from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. As such hybrid identities become more and more commonplace in the contemporary world as a result of immigration and mobility, such conceptualizations are likely to prove more fruitful for both analytical and design purposes.

**The CATaC conferences: summary observations**

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of CATaC'98 was its success as conference: the first participants convinced us that we should do this again. Conferences then followed on a biennial basis, accompanied by a number of publication ventures that succeeded in bringing

this new research and reflection into the light of print and online publication. These included several special issues (Ess and Sudweeks 1998), including in such flagship journals such as *new media and society* (Ess & Sudweeks 2001) and the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (Ess & Sudweeks 2003, 2005; Ess, Zhu & Sudweeks 2002) as well as an edited volume (Ess 2001). In addition, the conference *Proceedings* themselves constitute a rich archive of papers: the most recent ones are available online (catacconference.org) and we plan to make earlier ones accessible over the next year or so. I think of these outcomes as *centripetal*, as the conferences worked to focus and make available research and scholarship from a wide range of disciplines, gathered under a single banner. In this direction, the conferences also gained recognition from the Australian Research Council as "B" level – that is, in the top 20 per cent of conferences analyzed in terms of impact and significance.

As these earlier publications indicate, the conferences managed to collect research from a very wide range of disciplines and interdisciplinary conjunctions, representing research and reflection from an exceptional range of peoples, cultures, and locales. Specifically, in their analysis of the first ten years of the CATaC conferences, Rogers, Robertshaw, and López-González noted that the conferences attracted participants from 38 different countries, whose research focused on at least 52 different countries (2008: 9). Research methods represented were equally diverse, covering the gamut of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches (2008: 5). Despite our best efforts at moving beyond especially US-centric work, however, "Europe, Australia, and North America are much better represented than Asia, South America, the Middle East, and Africa" (2008: 3).

Broadly, then, the CATaC conferences were growing in scope and impact – along with the Internet itself, of course, and thereby what we have come to call Internet Studies more

broadly. There are two moments in this (second) age of Internet Studies and the growth of CATaC that are worth noting. The first is that while it was certainly heartening to see more and more participants and publications with each conference – in 2004 (Karlstad, Sweden) CATaC attracted nearly 100 participants. Such large participation might seem like a strong advantage – but especially those colleagues who had participated in previous conferences uniformly agreed that a critical component of the conference series was lost: namely, the informality and warm hospitality that we had managed to establish from the beginning. These characteristics were not simply important: they were indispensable. That is, a uniform chord across the conference series has been that the collocations we focus on – "culture," technology, communication – require an exceptional commitment to interdisciplinarity. For interdisciplinarity to succeed – especially in a conference setting, especially for younger scholars and researchers – it is essential to set a tone of informality and warmth that fosters respect and gentleness when raising essential critique of a given presentation. Such a tone and atmosphere is equally critical to the manifold informal interactions that take place during the conference, where we are always newcomers and amateurs vis-à-vis someone else's deep expertise and specialization. Unlike other conference series, then, we made an explicit decision to keep the CATaC series comparatively small – on average, roughly 60+ participants. While clearly limiting our finances (the conferences are self-funded) and potential impact – we nonetheless recognized that such a limitation was essential to maintaining the distinctive atmosphere and mood that were so prized by participants. However justified from our perspective, this decision also guaranteed a kind of marginalization vis-à-vis other larger conferences. At the same time, however, the CATaC series was proving to be fruitful in a second, more *centrifugal* way – that is, as conference participants would take their work back into their more disciplinary orientations. In my own case, for example, I published a series of journal articles and chapters within philosophy,

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attempting to highlight the importance of cultural perspectives within the domains of information and computing ethics (for example, Ess 2002a, 2004) – while simultaneously attempting to take up central matters of computer-mediated communication within comparative philosophy (Ess 2002b, 2003).

Following the 2004 conference, we undertook fewer and fewer CATaC-specific publication projects (for instance, Ess, Kawabata, and Kawasaki 2007) – but it seems clear that the CATaC conferences continued to foster further publication and collaboration in more centrifugal directions. In this way, our development paralleled that of the conference many of us were also intimately engaged with – namely, the Internet Research conferences of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), which began in 2000. In particular, Wellman argues that 2004 marks the shift into the (current) third age of Internet studies. In this age, he notes that Internet Studies continues to develop into a field in its own right (however interdisciplinary) – that is, in what I have called a centripetal direction, as manifest, for example, in several handbooks and volumes devoted to Internet Studies (for example, Consalvo and Ess 2011; Dutton 2013; Tsatsou 2015). These developments are accompanied by a second, complementary trend, namely "… the incorporation of Internet research into the mainstream conferences and journals of their disciplines, with projects driven by ongoing issues" (Wellman 2011: 21). Wellman's additional comment here is also critical:

> This brings the more developed theories, methods, and substantive lore of the disciplines into play, although sometimes at the cost of the adventurous innovativeness of interdisciplinary Internet research (2011: 21).

In this light, it may well be that the CATaC conference series, especially as it remains comparatively small for the sake of fostering highly interdisciplinary engagement and dialogue, will thereby enjoy impact enough in centripetal directions, but will prove productive in more diffuse centrifugal ways as participants take their findings and insights back into their own more disciplinary departments, research, and publications.

**Concluding observations**

With the benefit of more than 15 years of research and reflection, it is clear that "culture" indeed makes a difference vis-à-vis design, implementation, and responses to ICTs, including the Internet as the medium that connects ever greater percentages of the world's populations. At the same time, just as the technologies themselves undergo constant development and transformation, so our most foundational conceptions likewise continue to develop and transform – most especially notions of what counts as "culture" and the culturally-variable elements that need to be brought to the foreground in our analyses (Schettino 2014a, 2014b, among others).

More broadly: perhaps we can say with some confidence that the once heretical questions of "culture" vis-à-vis communication and technology are now increasingly mainstream and diffuse – driven not only by whatever impacts the CATaC conferences may have had, but also certainly by the inescapable confrontations with cultural differences brought about by Internet-based communications themselves, most especially as a result of the dramatic expansion of Internet access via mobile devices in developing countries.

Beyond CATaC, however, my impression is that still a relatively small percentage of work within Internet studies takes up explicitly cultural dimensions. To be sure, there is now considerably more work on Japan and China as well as within Arabic-speaking cultures (represented early on at CATaC, as we have seen, e.g. Heaton 1998, Piecowye 2002; see also the chapters in Goggin and McLelland 2009). But attempting to publish research and scholarship in these directions very often falls into an uncomfortable pattern. On the one hand, as Goggin and McLelland observe (2009: 13), work sent to many of the top-ranked English-language journals - namely, those whose own cultural centers remain focused on the United States, Europe, and (perhaps) Australia – is often sent back with the critique that the research fails to speak to prominent US or European theorists. Of course, it is not unreasonable to request, in effect, a dialogue between such prevailing views and theories and the research and scholarship that in some ways may deeply challenge the culturally-shaped assumptions that underlie such ostensibly central frameworks and perspectives. At the same time, however, this request appears to rest on and reinforce the (ethnocentric) assumption that these theories are indeed the center and the default – the paradigms against which all other work must be measured. The upshot is that, apart from, say, the occasional anthology, theme issue, or conference proceedings (such as those from CATaC), much of our work has to be fitted into more specialized domains and publication venues. In my case, for example, we have been able to place important cross-cultural analyses of privacy vis-à-vis CMC and ICT in first-rank journals (e.g., Lü 2005, Nakada and Takanori 2005). But however heartening, significant, and influential this work may be – it thereby remains quarantined within a comparatively specialized domain, one that puts, in this example, the specifics of privacy above what for us are the more central and compelling matters of culture. In these ways, "culture" remains subordinated, if not marginalized, thereby reinforcing the ethnocentrisms that our work seeks to directly confront and overcome. To borrow from Hannerz (1989), our

efforts still resemble those of the peripheries to talk back. While I have argued that culturally-oriented research has managed to move from the heretical to a somewhat more mainstream status over the past sixteen years or so, it seems there is still much work to be done to overcome the tendencies of even our best colleagues and institutions towards an ethnocentrism that continues to privilege US and European models and frameworks.

There are, no doubt, multiple reasons for this – beginning with the complexities of "culture" itself. At the same time, there are multiple additional pressures working against these CATaC foci. To begin with, while there is still much discourse in the academy praising the critical importance of interdisciplinary work – there are also many and familiar pressures working against such interdisciplinarity. In particular, resources in the academy are always limited – and have been more so since the financial crises of 2009 forward.

At a more foundational level, it seems to me that a primary blockage remains the one I highlighted from the outset – namely, our own tendencies towards ethnocentrism, despite our best efforts to the contrary. A key factor in this direction is our tendency – most especially in the United States, which remains at least somewhat dominant in these domains – to remain within a single language. To state the obvious, crossing cultures requires acquiring facility in new languages and the correlative skills required for research and dialogue in multilingual environments. In the case of CATaC, our most manifest success in this direction was the 2008 conference in Nîmes, France, organized as a bilingual conference with particular emphasis on thereby attracting participation from both France as well as the many and strikingly diverse Francophone countries around the world. The challenges in making this conference work, however, were also exceptionally high – beginning precisely with the demands on many of us to work with some fluency in at least two and often more languages

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(English, French, Arabic, and so on). *Par contra*, there appears to be a counter move away from more international towards more nationally focused scholarship (for instance, Ess 2014b). Perhaps this should not be surprising, both in light of the difficulties of moving beyond our own linguistic and cultural homes, and in light of shrinking resources in the academy that weigh against international travel, etc.

Most fundamentally, perhaps, it may be that the explicitly normative commitments that have defined CATaC from its inception also represent obstacles. That is, whatever one's personal ethical and political commitments may be – especially within the social science disciplines that tend to dominate both Internet Studies broadly and CATaC work in particular, the positivist roots of these disciplines weigh heavily against taking up explicit normative commitments or goals as definitive of one's work. (There are, to be sure, many and important exceptions to this, along with important, on-going debates over the appropriate role of normativity in these disciplines: Ess 2015.)

Nonetheless, it seems clear the temptations of ethnocentrism and thus the correlative risks of colonization and imperialism remain, whether in more overt or more covert forms – especially as these ethical and political concerns are marginalized in Internet spaces driven more by commercialization and commodification, including self-commodification (for example, Fuchs and Dyer-Witherford 2012). Insofar as this is true, then it seems equally clear that the signature concerns and foci of the CATaC conferences remain as critical as ever.

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[1] By "ethnocentrism" here I refer to the more or less universal human cognitive and emotive maneuver to simply assume that the norms, practices, beliefs, behaviors, etc. of our home culture(s) and society are universally the same for all peoples at all times in all cultures. When stated so baldly, it is blindingly obvious that such a maneuver is deeply mistaken. But part of my point here is just that such ethnocentrism is stubbornly difficult to avoid – even among those of us who, as well educated, well travelled, experienced in diverse languages and cultures, et cetera, do our best to avoid and overcome it.