

Blue Water Sailors in the Information Age

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This research project comprises a qualitative examination of changes wrought in the day-to-day lives of members of the Ocean Cruising Subculture by the recent proliferation of Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) technologies. The Ocean Cruising Subculture is made up of individuals and families who go to sea in small vessels (mostly in sailboats with auxiliary engines) to travel the world, working port-to-port with no scheduled plan to return to shore bound life.



The *Mah Jong* at St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, August 2005.

The shared sub-cultural ideology of Cruisers, the maintenance of norms and values, and nearly all of the Cruisers' other social interactions with friends and family, are highly communications/media dependent since individual vessels may be out of physical contact with others for fairly lengthy periods. Because of this rather unique characteristic of the cruising lifestyle, the Cruisers are a fertile field for exploratory research into the changes in human interaction precipitated by the CMC revolution over the past two decades. Specifically, the Cruisers are experiencing increased numbers of loose ties in individual social networks, increased mediated contact with close friends and

family members over extensive (indeed global) geographic areas, increased ability to use the power of social networks to achieve desired goals, increased ability to access goods and services from isolated regions of the world, and increased reciprocal surveillance by the purveyors of those goods and services.

Background

I have had a close but peripheral connection to the Ocean Cruising Subculture for nearly two decades through my parents, who have been cruising on and off since the late eighties and have been living aboard the yacht *Mah Jong* full time since 1996.

To clarify, Ocean Cruisers (aka. Blue Water Sailors) are people who have left mainstream culture and gone to sea in small boats (mostly sailing vessels less than 70 feet in length). They come from dozens of countries, and their boats are as varied. Every type of vessel is included here, from home built steel hulls, to old wooden ones like my parents sail, fiberglass catamarans worth twenty thousand dollars and modern synthetic vessels worth a couple of million. In my experience, the most expensive boats are rare among the cruisers. The high-end boats are more the toys of ocean racers who are in the life part-time –for the status or the adrenaline – that is not what the cruisers are about.

Jim Macbeth, one of the few sociologists to study Cruising lifestyles, suggests that cruisers are seeking a utopian mode of existence outside the hurly-burly show of modern life. He writes:

Cruisers espouse an uneasiness about modern society which is expressed in their choice of lifestyle... [The cruising lifestyle] is both creative and critical. Cruising is creative because it is an end in itself...a lifestyle that is intrinsically satisfying to the individual. This

creativity is their utopian action. But, Cruising is also critical in its orientation to modern society. It is thus utopian action and thought. (2000, p.27)

I cannot disagree. I have spent more than a month aboard the *Mah Jong* with my parents on a couple of occasions, and several other times I have visited them in the Caribbean for one to two weeks. During the past four years, I have used these opportunities to observe the Cruising lifestyle as a participant observer noting norms, values, traditions, and other unique characteristics of the Blue Water Sailors as an adjunct to my sociological education.

The inspiration for this specific research came from an incident that occurred December 26th 2004 at a family gathering for Christmas in Santa Barbara, California. As media began reporting a tsunami in the Indian Ocean sparked by a massive earthquake off the shore of Thailand, my mother was checking her email and exclaimed, "Oh my God, Tom and Cindy are in Thailand right now." Seconds later, "Hey! I just received an email from them." She then proceeded to read a brief email sent from the epicenter of the disaster zone by a Cruising vessel crewed by friends of hers. The email was sent only hours after surviving the tsunami wave they saw approaching them, by cutting their anchor line and heading out to sea under engine power. The email message, sent to their entire list, made clear they were safe and reported the conditions of their survival.

What shocked us was how quickly we received this news. The major networks were just coming on-line with the first hints of the disaster and we already had a first-hand report, sent through a cell phone plugged into a laptop on a boat off the coast of Thailand. This incident prompted me to begin thinking about how communications have changed over the past decade, and how easy contact is now in comparison with how difficult it had been to contact my parents when they were

cruising the Sea of Cortez in the late eighties or even when they first headed south out of Maine after purchasing the *Mah Jong* in 1996. In just nine short years, the world has changed dramatically in respect to interpersonal communications.

There were other emails and cell phone calls as exciting as that first one, such as a firsthand report of a pirate attack on two cruising vessels in the Red Sea last spring. But it is the day-to-day ability to pick up the phone or send an email to my distant family that truly tells me how far we have come.



Mah Jong, Eastern Caribbean Sea, August 2005

Motivation

I was prompted to intensify my interest in the sociology of technology and the changes it has wrought in individual lives by two courses on Knowledge, Power, and Information Technologies that I took as GE requirements for the Honors Program at CSU Stanislaus. One was a Cognitive Studies class, and the other a Philosophy course; however, both utilized social theory in discussing the human implications of CMC. In the philosophy course, *Human Interests and the Power of Information*, I was introduced to Manuel Castells' three-volume magnum opus, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, which has become one of the theoretical backbones of this work.

To put the radical growth of the internet in perspective, in 1995 there were approximately *one million* people in the world online, almost

all of them in government and academia. In 2005, there are more than *one billion* nodes (individual computers) on the world network. Also in 1995, there were approximately *a million* web pages online, while in 2005 Google is indexing approximately *six hundred billion* web pages. That comprises more than one hundred pages for every living person (Kelly, 2005). This period of technological growth is exponentially greater than in any other period in human history. Given the changes in social structure resulting from previous technological and communications milestones (such as the printing press, steam engine, telegraph, internal combustion engine, electrical power, and telephone) it seems crucial to begin examining the impact of this new technological paradigm on existing social interactions and institutions.

Cruising and Media Technology

In discussing the cruising subculture, Macbeth (1992) points out that cruisers are often successful in mainstream careers before dropping out to go sailing. Furthermore, they often adopt subculture norms and values from media exposure, reading cruising stories, and subscribing to subculture publications such as *Cruising World*. Many potential cruisers do not actually engage in face-to-face contact with practicing cruisers until they begin active participation in the lifestyle by climbing aboard their boats and sailing away from home. Nonetheless, he insists, this mediated contact with subculture ideology is enough to induce adoption of subcultural norms and values as goals (cf. Fine and Kleinman, 1979).

This point is consistent with more recent ideas about social networks. Social network theory (Castells, 2000) serves to explain many of the unusual characteristics of the cruising subculture. He writes: "From the point of view of social theory, space is the material support of time-sharing social practices" (p. 441). If material support for social interaction constitutes social space, then media space constitutes social space as much as a

neighborhood bar, classroom, or any other place-based space where people gather. Interactive media involving the internet, e-mail or written letters are perhaps more social than television, magazines, or books; but insofar as these media influence behavior by conveying ideologies or subculture norms and values to prospective members, they become social spaces.

By engaging in interaction using mediated social spaces, people who are dissatisfied with their everyday lives, or experiencing the anomie and normlessness (Durkheim 1897, Merton 1938) of modern life, may find messages from fellow travelers who have found various deviant solutions to similar problems. "Deviant" in this context means the solutions are outside the norms and values of the social context people find themselves in. People begin the process of subcultural enculturation by adopting these solutions as normative goals for themselves and begin moving towards participation in a subculture. This mode of subcultural adoption agrees with Macbeth's description of cruisers process of enculturation, and with the findings of Fine and Kleinman's (1979) discussion of media diffusion of subcultural norms and values in American youth subcultures.

My father provides a perfect example of this type of subcultural value acceptance. His movement from Fire Department Captain to Marine Vessel Captain followed very closely to the model provided by Macbeth. He was well into his thirties by the time he completed this process of acculturation. This late acculturation is not atypical of Blue Water Sailors, if only because joining the cruising lifestyle as a full participant requires a significant investment of time and resources.

The Cruising Subculture was born out of anomie and dissatisfaction during the Industrial Age, a time characterized by increased rationalization and bureaucratic domination of social practices, and by a growing proliferation of urbanization and

materialist values. Cruisers escaped the emerging world system by going to sea. They could do this by sailing away, and only occasionally returning to shore in developed nations to re-provision their vessels with supplies unavailable to them in the tropical backwaters they otherwise chose to inhabit.

The ease with which we can divorce ourselves from the dominant world-order is rapidly disappearing. Escape is no longer an easy or viable option, not even for the truly adventurous. Living at this point in the Information Age, we may have reached a point that precludes any complete escape from mainstream life. The way we communicate with each other has changed dramatically under the influence of technological information channels, making the factors of synchronous time and proximity increasingly irrelevant to information connectivity

The point of my study is to examine these changes in the context of cruising experience, and to highlight the fact that the world is moving forward at an aggressive pace. My son visits his grandparents aboard *Mah Jong* every summer and can stay in contact via computer with all his acquaintances and any significant events unfolding in the world, without having to leave the boat anchored offshore from a tiny Caribbean paradise.



Jaime online in the main cabin of *Mah Jong* – Isla de Culebra, Puerto Rico, 2005.

Other cruisers also enjoy the benefits of this technology allowing them to continue

working while they sail from port to port in the tropics as exemplified by the following comment, taken from an interview with one of my participants:

The biggest change for us in 25 years of on and off cruising is the computer and internet, then the GPS. The personal computer enabled us to do our consulting work from basically anywhere in the states or other countries. The cities we work for have no idea we are on a boat and not in an office in San Diego. They never ask and we never tell, they think we are still in town like 20 years ago. All they want is the work done on time. If they want a meeting I fly in, preferably without a tan. That has been the single best change for us in being able to make a living while out (T.G., January, 2005).

Theory and Initial Findings

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michael Foucault (1979) discusses the concept of the Panopticon, an idealized prison design from the nineteenth century that left the inmates fully visible at all times; the inmates, can not tell whether they were being observed at any given moment, only that it is possible that they are being observed. This arrangement replaces the crowd with “a collection of separated individualities . . . to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that insures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 201). This visibility and recording of every deviation from the norm in modern bureaucratic society best describes the social constraint Cruisers are trying to abrogate with their nomadic lifestyle.

The Information Age, especially as discussed in Castells’ *Network Society* (2000), has produced significant changes in how people communicate, live, and escape, and it has done so in ways that are still unclear to us. These changes are the focus of my study.

Over the past decade, communications technology has undergone rapid change; cellular phone and internet services are now available at a reasonable rate in nearly every

area of the world. Wi-Fi and satellite uplink technology (still expensive, but dropping in price) are bringing broadband internet access to businesspeople and travelers (Kelly 2005). With these technological changes, come ever-greater changes in the way that social interaction may take place and that social control may be exercised (Castells 2000).

In a manner largely in agreement with Castells' theoretical framework, Mark Poster has further developed Foucault's model of social control for the Information Age in his book *The Mode of Information*. Poster suggests that with the proliferation of CMC, Foucault's Panopticon has become a "Super panopticon" and now regulates nearly all of our social interactions.

The ocean cruisers are adopting these new communications and materials technologies at a prodigious rate. GPS systems provide easy and exact determination of where the boats are located on a chart, making it easy to avoid reefs and other dangers of the ocean. Portable internet provides safety through the easy access to up to the minute weather charts, easy online ordering of replacement parts for engine or navigation systems, research into what is required to enter a new country, up-to-date charts of unfamiliar waters, contact with fellow Cruisers, friends, and family through email and instant messaging (IM) and a host of other conveniences.

The various cruising organizations, such as *The Seven seas Cruising Association*, have gone online and members can read their journals and find host families in ports around the world while still out of sight of land. None of this was possible ten years ago and it is clearly effecting change in the lives of the cruising subculture. Here is a brief excerpt from an email from another research participant:

It is easier, undoubtedly safer, and much more comforting to be able to communicate so well. But these very factors tend to diminish the sense of adventure one feels, when he knows

that he is truly on his own, and that his comfort, wellbeing, even his safety, are solely in his own hands (J. A. D., Sept. 2005).

This exploratory study is to identify phenomenological categories of change in the day-to-day lifestyle of the Cruising subculture, through the eyes and experience of a number of active Cruisers. Then I will code these experiences and compare them to the results of earlier ethnographic studies to find out specifically in what ways things have changed for cruisers in the past decade. The results of this work will be compared to various theories of internet communications and I will attempt to use the results to suggest lines of research or new, grounded theoretical discourses that address the changing nature of the social landscape.

I am using survey and open-ended questionnaire research instruments, delivered to boats in various areas of the world by email, to find out what the Cruisers think about these changes in technology and communication. Furthermore, I am in the process of conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews through cell phone conversations and/or IM technology with those participants who are willing to invest the time and who have the technology.

Based on provisional analysis of feedback from my surveys, plus years of acquaintance with the cruising subculture and extensive conversation on the subject with my primary informants, my initial findings suggest Cruisers are ambivalent about the increasing ease and scope of communications. They enjoy the benefits mentioned above and think it is wonderful that they can stay in touch with friends and family, and with each other, no matter where in the world they go. But at the same time, they are increasingly concerned about their growing dependence upon such technologies and by the increasing amount of interaction with mainstream culture brought about by these technological advances.

Mark Poster (1990) suggests that the internet has transformed the world into a “Superpanopticon, a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards...result[ing] in a qualitative change in the microphysics of power” (p. 93). The extent to which the internet has grown in the intervening years was beyond anyone’s imagination at the time it was developed (Kelly, 2005). Today this Superpanopticon is ever closer to becoming that ideal form of “permanent visibility” in which our every purchase and our every communication is logged, monitored and entered into a file. Even without a coherent means for individual people to access this data, the network system

makes its own decisions regarding our wants, needs and interests. This is how Amazon.com is able to predict with some regularity what I might like to read.

The question in my mind as I embark on this project is this: can the Cruiser subculture of iconoclastic loners survive contact with the Network phenomenon? If it can, who will these cruisers become in the grip of the subtle honeytrap of the World Wide Web? Furthermore -- and this is the larger scope of my interest in how networks are effecting change in the cruising subculture -- what will the emergence of the Network Society mean for us all over the course of the next century?

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