

A Brave New World

A review of



Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace: Theory, Research, Applications

by Azy Barak (Ed.)

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Cyberspace is a term coined more than 25 ago by the noted cyberpunk writer William Gibson (*Cyberspace*, n.d.). At the time it referred to an immersive fictional world, a rich and vast electronic space of interconnected computers, information, data, and people. Currently, that space is a reality courtesy of the World Wide Web. Today people interact with others in cyberspace daily, as they read and comment on posted information, create art, share their thoughts and experiences, meet and develop relationships, and in many respects carry on an electronic existence.

Psychology has long studied the interactions between people and their environment. In cyberspace, “people experience and behave . . . in a way that requires fresh, innovative psychological conceptualizations” (*Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace: Theory, Research, Applications*, p. 2), leading to a new frontier in psychology. The 15 international contributors to this volume (from Canada, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Switzerland) are well suited to this endeavor, each having a long (at least in

cyberspace time) history of work in the field. Together they look at a wide-ranging set of issues, concepts, and questions concerning the interface between psychology and cyberspace. In keeping with the cyberspace spirit, the volume's full text is also available (in PDF format) on a blog (<http://cyberpsych.yeda.info/>) that permits readers to comment on and discuss the various chapters.

Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace: Theory, Research, Applications starts with a thoughtful description of why previously useful psychological concepts may not translate well into this new medium. Issues such as anonymity, interaction synchronization, eye contact, and safety differ between cyberspace and the real world and, as such, the authors argue that different psychological explanations are needed. However, this notion is not well supported by the chapters of this volume. The concepts used to describe cyberspace-based behaviors are quite traditional. They include such ideas as trust, introversion/extroversion, impulse control, self-disclosure, attraction, and status—all concepts that psychologists know and understand. What is different is that cyberspace-based interactions require one to use those concepts to describe behaviors in an environment that is significantly different from our previous real-world experiences.

Many of the chapters of this volume cover critical areas of our electronic interactions. The discussion of online privacy, trust, and disclosure provides theoretical descriptions of the forms of privacy and trust, how to enhance them, and how the relationships between them affect disclosure. These are doubly important: They explain interactions in cyberspace, and they inform our science as more and more psychological research moves to the Web.

Internet abuse, which is sometimes called Internet addiction, gets the longest chapter in the book, much of which asks the question “Does it exist?” The ensuing encyclopedic discussion raises various questions about the concept (e.g., is it separate from other disorders or a symptom of other disorders?) but leaves little doubt that there is a small percentage of individuals for whom Internet use does create life problems. Theoretical explanations offered for Internet abuse cross a broad spectrum, including biological, cognitive-behavioral, and psychoanalytic models. But in the end, while people do provide treatments for these behaviors, there has been little research to guide such treatment.

Assessment in cyberspace gets a thoughtful treatment. Barak and Hen's point is not so much that computer-based assessments are equivalent to traditional methods but rather that in some significant ways they may be better. For example, the disinhibition effect (p. 135) can lower an individual's defenses, thereby making it possible to more accurately describe themselves. Examiners, being distant and “invisible,” avoid inadvertent bias. And the availability, convenience, and low cost of these procedures make them much more accessible. While aware of the Internet's potential limitations, Barak and Hen argue for the use of computer-based testing in situations where it is appropriate and potentially superior to other methods.

While Suler's chapter, “Cybertherapeutic Theory and Techniques,” is short on practical advice, it is organized around a useful set of dimensions on which these activities

can vary. These dimensions include synchronous/asynchronous, text/sensory, imaginary/real, automated/interpersonal, invisible/present, and individual/group, and they offer a potentially useful multidimensional system of intervention classification. While extensive work will be required to explain how these dimensions can be used to determine optimal therapeutic intervention, Suler offers a unique and creative model of the therapist as consultant, creating tailored interventions for a client from various websites and interventions according to his or her dimensionally specified needs. This chapter provides a compelling example of matching treatment to a patient's needs.

Whitty and Fisher's chapter titled "The Sexy Side of the Internet" is a highlight of the book. While it clearly presents the problematic sexual aspects of the Internet (e.g., potentially encouraging pedophilia, pornography use, infidelity), the authors focus on the unique and often overlooked contribution of the Internet in transmitting positive sex-related information. Providing examples in HIV health promotion, sexual and reproductive health information, and sexual diversity, it makes a strong case for the utility and impact of this information, particularly in light of the strong negative bias against sharing such information.

I was particularly excited as I started to read the chapters describing the nature and functioning of online groups and motivation related to Wikipedia contributions. Both of these look at an important interactive (Web 2.0) characteristic—user-supplied content—which is critical to many modern-day websites. McKenna's chapter on online groups gives a description of two of the personality factors related to groups (namely, anxious members and aggressive members) and four different group types. These ideas are relevant, important, and interesting as far as they go. However, they offer only a small window into the functioning of online groups, and much more could be explored. For example, what is the impact of group size on participation? How does the use of avatars or tokens of accomplishment affect interactions?

Rafaelli and Ariel's chapter on the incentives for Wikipedia participation summarizes various conceptualizations of user motivations. However, there is little evidence to allow the comparison between these models, and we are left with more questions than answers and a longing for more breadth and depth.

As the cyberspace landscape changes from day to day, the book makes an argument for a real-time analysis. Unfortunately, there is no description of current projects using this idea and little discussion of what such an approach would look like. In fact, real-time analyses of cyberspace behavior go on all of the time as websites tweak their interfaces and watch the impact of those changes on user behavior. Heretofore this knowledge has been considered proprietary and is rarely accessed by the scientific community. However, there are discussions of this information in blogs and in various presentations, and researchers could work to gain broader access to this rich source of information.

This volume is itself an argument supporting the need for more real-time analysis and reporting concerning cyberspace. Due to the length of time needed to write, edit, and print a

book, the material it contains cannot describe the newly emergent ideas relating to cyberspace (e.g., the Dunbar number in group interactions [the theoretical limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships], the attention economy, continuous partial attention, Twitter, usability, and large-scale analyses of the impact of information presentation on websites).

In fact, the authors had planned for a more interactive forum, and the book arose from a failed attempt to organize a face-to-face meeting. Such a meeting would have been a fascinating interaction as these experienced individuals shared ideas and used their diverse experiences to create a sum that would have been greater than the parts included in this volume. Following their call for real-time work, it would have been interesting if that initial impetus had been carried over into cyberspace, as has been the case with other books, with the chapters being written interactively within a public community through blogging and other cyberspace-based social interactions.

In summary, *Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace: Theory, Research, Applications* provides researchers and students with a rich and diverse set of concepts to study as they explore the psychological aspects of this new reality.

Reference

Cyberspace. (n.d.). Retrieved October 31, 2008, from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberspace>
