**Class Note**

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Course Name: Emerging Areas in Socio-cultural Anthropology

Topic: DIGITAL CULTURE (31.8)

Teacher – Dr. Sumahan Bandyopadhyay

The last thirty years have seen both the rise of globalization and the domination of free market capitalism, the increasing ubiquity of information and communications technologies, and the burgeoning power and inﬂuence of techno-science. Digital technology is an important and constitutive part of these developments, and has, to some extent, determined their form. The computerization of banking, international currency exchange and trading has greatly aided the rise of globalization and ﬁnancial liberalization. The possibilities of convergence and integration that digital technology offers have led to it to dominate technical developments in media and communications. Computers are also the essential means by which the vast amounts of data that large techno-scientiﬁc projects require are managed and manipulated. The concurrent development of science, media and capital under the aegis of digital technology produces a kind of fast-forward effect in which everything appears to take place at an accelerated rate and to produce dramatic change in a very short time. This excites both euphoria and terror, not least because of the shocking pace at which things happen. One has barely enough time to register one set of events and its possible consequences when another makes it irrelevant. At the same time these events offer extraordinary challenges to the preconceptions through which our existence is negotiated. These include, for example, the annihilation of physical distance and the dissolution of material reality by virtual or telecommunication technologies, or the apparent end of the human and the rise of the so-called posthuman as a result of advances in Cybernetics, robotics and research into consciousness and intelligence. Given how important digital technology has become to our lives it is useful to know what the word ‘digital’ actual means. In technical terms it is used to refer to data in the form of discrete elements. Though it could refer to almost any system, numerical, linguistic or otherwise, used to describe phenomena in discrete terms over the last 60 or so years, the word has become synonymous with the technology which has made much of the aforementioned possible, electronic digital binary computers. To some extent the terms ‘computer technology’ and ‘digital technology’ have become interchangeable. Computers are digital because they manipulate and store data in digital, binary form, zeroes and ones. But, as the above indicates, the term digital has come to mean far more than simply either discrete data or the machines that use such data. To speak of the digital is to call up, metonymically, the whole panoply of virtual simulacra, instantaneous communication, ubiquitous media and global connectivity that constitutes much of our contemporary experience. It is to allude to the vast range of applications and media forms that digital technology has made possible, including virtual reality, digital special effects, digital ﬁlm, digital television, electronic music, computer games, multimedia, the Internet, the World Wide Web, digital telephony and Wireless Application Protocol (WAP), as well as the various cultural and artistic responses to the ubiquity of digital technology, such as Cyberpunk novels and ﬁlms etc.

From this it is possible to propose the existence of a distinctive digital culture, in that the term digital can stand for a particular way of life of a group or groups of people at a certain period in history, to invoke one of Raymond Williams’ useful deﬁnitions of culture as a keyword.1 Digitality can be thought of as a marker of culture because it encompasses both the artefacts and the systems of signiﬁcation and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life from others. Digital culture in its present speciﬁc form is a historically contingent phenomenon, the various components of which ﬁrst emerge as a response to the exigencies of modern capitalism, and then are brought together by the demands of mid-twentieth century warfare. The Second World War was the catalytic event out of which modern electronic digital binary computing emerged and the Cold War the context in which it developed to assume its current form. But technology is only one of a number of sources that have contributed to the development of our current digital culture. Others include techno-scientiﬁc discourses about information and systems, avant-garde art practice, counter-cultural utopianism, critical theory and philosophy, and even subcultural formations such as Punk. These different elements are as much a product of the paradigm of abstraction, codiﬁcation, self-regulation, virtualization and programming as the computer. Digital culture has been produced out of the complex interactions and dialectical engagements between these elements.

Digital culture is the several ways people engage in digital media and technologies in their daily lives. Young people especially in the Western and urban area have experienced the intersection of new media technologies and globalization . Digital culture has changed drastically over the past recent years. The amount of information required to be “literate” within a media-rich culture is changing.

*Features of Digital Culture*

1.Digital literacy: This involves using the new information and communication media to evaluate and sort out information.

2. Permanence: Whatever we do in the digital world leaves a trace.

3.Copiability: Digital information and products are easily copied and reproduced. Instantaneousness: In the digital environment, we send and receive information instantly.

4.Interconnectivity: This creates the opportunity for constant access.

5. Identity: Identity is a field of tensions, dilemmas, and creativity. Displays of digitally remixed culture are used to enact identity.

6. Multitasking: This means that several tasks are managed at the same time. Media consumption and entertainment are typical examples.

**Social Context of Digital Culture**

ICTs in combination with the distributed network infrastructure of the Internet haveenabledextensivechangesinallaspectsofourlifeandwork.Today,networked PCs (a basic physical capital necessary for communication and creation of meaning) are good enough tools that have much bigger capacities than the big mainframe computers in the past. Most citizens in the developed countries can afford to have access to them. Users, by using ICT, can produce, store, copy, modify, send and receivedigitalartefactsandinformation.AsaveragePCandnetworkconnectionsare not very expensive, this led to the lowering of production and distribution costs and the availability of new communication and delivery channels. The rapid growth of the Internet, in number of its users8 and available information9 and services that can be accessed through it, indicate the importance of activities taking place in the virtual domain. In the process of virtualization the world has changed scale – information has been dematerialized, virtual space has changed the importance of the time and space categories, an immense wealth of information became relatively easily availabletousers.Inthevirtualsphere,towhichLévy(2002)ascribespotentialityas its main characteristic, new opportunities and threats presented themselves for users and for established models of organizing one’s business.

Different trends can be observed taking place in today’s society that relies heavily on information and communication resources. On the one side, ICT and digital networksareanecessaryinfrastructurethatsupportsglobalizationprocessesandthey are used to support global market and production processes, enabling central control and coordination over dispersed production units. On the other side, the Internet is a communication tool that is intensely used by citizens, activists and NGOs, as it facilitates efficient and far-reaching communication. On the Internet, as in the real world, not everyone is equal, as possibilities depend on resources available. Digital culture seems to be a product of bottom-up and top-down processes simultaneously.

While the Internet has been used by users/citizens as an ultimate communication and cooperation tool and an alternative to the mass media public sphere, businesses have triedtomakesurethatitsdevelopmentdoesnothaveadisruptivetechnology10 effect on their established ways of working. Industrially organized businesses are trying to ensure that while the physical/technological realities change the social arrangements remain static.

Virtual space has fewer boundaries and different characteristics than the real one. Digitization has enabled the process of media convergence to take place. When previously separated industries (media, telecommunications and computers) could, by using the same digital technology, do things that previously needed different analogue tools, the limitations they faced in running their real world businesses changed.Thismeansthatconvergenceismorethansimplyatechnologicalshiftandit affects changes that shape relations in a society. As Jenkins tells us “convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, market, genres and audiences. Convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment” (Jenkins, 2006: 17). It is a process in the making and its final shape will be influenced by economic factors,legal battles, new (cultural) practices, etc., that are all in the process of transition