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Source: *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Aug., 1995), pp. 8-13

Published by: [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783106>

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# Signposts along the road

## Monumental public writing in Egypt

### GREGORY STARRETT

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*Left: Illus. 1. Varieties of public writing in Tahrir Square, Cairo.*

*Right: Illus. 2. Chalked graffiti on a workshop wall: 'There is no God but God/There is no God but God/Muhammad is the Apostle of God? God curses the people among whom the truth has disappeared'.*

I have written ... for this anticipated vanguard [of Muslims struggling against ignorance] ... during times when quick successive glances into the divine program of the Holy Qur'an have revealed themselves. All of them have in common – despite their fragmentary appearance – the fact that they are signposts along the road, and it is the nature of signs along the road to be scattered. [Sayyid Qutb 1988: 12-13].

Studies of writing in developing societies generally focus on book, newspaper and commercial literacy, and do not address the cultural significance of writing on craft and manufactured objects, on the one hand, and the use of writing on public signs, murals and billboards, on the other. Although 'scattered' indeed, the two latter genres of writing are important. They are also quite similar in their social roles, for although commodities circulate between public and private space, and public signs form relatively permanent parts of the built environment, both are manufactured displays which use writing in exaggerated form, and act simultaneously as geographical and identity markers, art, and foci of ritual acts (Starrett 1995). Given the centrality of written texts to the theology and practice of Islam, and also the importance of calligraphy in the visual art of the Islamic world, it is surprising that not much attention has been paid to these alternative uses of the written word. Thus I would like here to examine a specific subset of written culture in urban Egypt: the use of monumental writing in public space (*Illus. 1*).

With respect to the Middle East, there are two partial exceptions to the literature's silence about monumental public writing. These are Fischer and Abedi's (1990) work on posters, and Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994) on the use of 'small media' in the Iranian revolution. Both these works distinguish between

so-called 'small' or 'minor' media, and 'big media' – radio and television broadcasts, newspapers – but they do so in very different ways. While Fischer and Abedi define minor media as a collection of specific genres – 'jokes, songs, tapes, leaflets, graffiti, posters, cartoons ... [and] insignia', irrespective of their audiences or authors – Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi define small media in terms of their locus of control. 'Small' media are

participatory, public phenomena, controlled neither by big states nor big corporations. Thus the distinction between 'big' and 'small' cannot depend on particular kinds of technologies or even on their putative audiences, but rather on the manner of use ... This shifts the focus ... to the use of channels and technologies that are readily accessible and available; and to messages that are in the main produced and distributed freely as opposed to private corporate production for profit or control by state organizations (1994: 20-22).

Although the distinction is useful in illuminating some of the media dynamics of revolutionary Iran, I would like to propose that with respect to public writing, the labels big and small, or major and minor, are misleading, both because numerous agents make use of it – states, municipal bureaucracies, corporations, voluntary associations, and individuals (*Illus. 2*) – and because these labels imply that public writing is culturally secondary to hegemonic, high-capital/high-technology media. It is not always clear just how the messages, the audiences or the sponsors of big and small media differ from one another. What is clear is that public writing coexists with, refers to, feeds off of, and reciprocally constitutes the rest of the media environment. Consumers tend to perceive this environment as relatively undifferentiated. They often have difficulty, for example, remembering the association between specific advertising campaigns and particular products, and do not necessarily draw sharp distinctions between different channels of communication (Schudson 1984).

What does monumental public writing do? Here is a striking thought experiment from philosopher Jean Baudrillard:

Let us imagine for the moment modern cities stripped of all their signs, with walls bare like a guiltless conscience ... And then GARAP appears. This single expression, GARAP, is inscribed on all the walls: pure signifier, without a signified, signifying itself. It is read, discussed, and interpreted to no end. Signified despite itself, it is consumed as a sign. What does it signify, if not a society ca-



**Top left: Illus. 3.** Character from an animated television advertisement: Knorr bouillon cubes are 'the only natural one'.

**Top right: Illus. 4.** 'Yes, Islam is the Answer'. Campaign poster for parliamentary candidates from the Muslim Brotherhood, 'The Islamic Voice in the Consultative Assembly'. The slogans read 'Religion and State', 'Justice and Mercy', 'Freedom and Counsel', 'Pious Struggle and Muslim Outreach'.



**Above left: Illus. 5.** 'Cleanliness Proceeds from Faith', on a trash receptacle.

**Above right: Illus. 6.** 'Protein: What God Intends', sponsored by a social service agency.



pable of generating such a sign? Despite its lack of significance it has mobilized a complete imaginary collectivity; it has become characteristic of the (w)hole of society. To some extent, people have come to 'believe' in GARAP... [C]onsensus, even when ironic, establishes itself on faith in a pure sign. All of a sudden, the real signified of advertising appears in all its purity. Advertising, like GARAP, is mass society, which, with the aid of an arbitrary and systematic sign, induces receptivity, mobilizes consciousness, and reconstitutes itself in the very process as the collective. Through advertising mass society and consumer society continuously ratify themselves (Baudrillard 1988:10; emphasis added).

Baudrillard's notion of modern society as a hyperreality – an environment of signs which signify nothing but themselves – has been criticized for a number of reasons (e.g. Bruner 1994), not least because it appears to assume that all signs have an advertising function, which they do not. Single signs may have multiple

functions as well as multiple physical aspects which lend them complex properties.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that there *are* no pure signs in Baudrillard's sense, but before we look for them, we should survey the variety of signs one does find in urban Egypt.

Signs can be directions for the use of urban spaces: labels on buildings, street and traffic signs. They can be orientations to the special ethos or changing character of local communities: in some neighbourhoods in Cairo one finds neatly hand-lettered signs affixed to lamp posts announcing 'Obedience to God is through Modest Dress', or 'Modest Dress is your Path to Paradise'. These are signs-about-signs, metasigns placed by men to warn women about the limits of their own deployment of signifying dress.<sup>2</sup> Then there are merchant, corporate and product advertisements (*Illus. 3*), political posters (*Illus. 4*), reminders not to litter (*Illus. 5*), fam-

**Top left:** Illus. 7. 'Allah' painted outside a confectioner's shop downtown.



**Top right:** Illus. 8. 'God is Great', on a pharmacy near the Nile.



**Left:** Illus. 9. In the City of the Dead, protective and commemorative slogans. The *basmallah*, written commemoration of a pilgrimage, and to the left of the palm, 'God is Great, In the Name of God, In the Name of God'.



**Right:** Illus. 10. Decorative calligraphy in blue and white tile over a mosque's inner door.



ily planning campaigns, policy announcements, concert promotions, movie posters, advice on proper diet (Illus. 6); the list is nearly endless. Some examples of public writing depend for their meaning on juxtaposition with a picture or physical object; others do not.

But in a search for 'pure' signs, let us narrow our focus by concentrating on one of the most pervasive kinds of writing in Egyptian public space: religious signs, often quite simply the name 'Allah' (Illus. 7).

There are few places you can stand in Cairo and not see, somewhere, the name of God. On the roofs of the Corniche headquarters of the National Democratic Party, military Officer's Club complexes, and the administration building at al-Azhar university, metre-tall letters in green neon spell out the name of Allah. Municipal governments and private corporations have lined the median strips of major avenues with signs displaying the divine name in decorated Kufic script, and along the river between the Cleopatra Hotel and the National Circus, a small pharmacy bears no other name on the lighted plastic sign above its door than 'Allahu akbar' – 'God is Great' (Illus. 8). On pedestrian overpasses in downtown Cairo, both in the medieval and modern sections of the city, signs span the street bearing Abraham's plea in the Qur'an (xiv:35): 'Lord, make this land secure'.<sup>3</sup> Owners of stores, offices and apartment buildings attach or paint the *basmallah* ('In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate') over the entrances (Illus. 9); peddlers, bus- and taxi-drivers affix the divine name on their vehicles in paint, wood,

metal, plastic, vinyl and foil. And in the late 1980s, along the extensive stretch of desert road between Alexandria and Cairo, the public-sector Olympic Electric Company placed dozens of signs, like a set of prayer beads strung between the two cities, each bearing an exclamation of prayer, 'subhan Allah', 'al-hamdu li-llah', and 'Allahu akbar'.<sup>4</sup>

While the use of the written word in charms, amulets and decorative art is an ancient tradition throughout the Islamic world (Illus. 10), the use of the sign (*yafta*) as a public display is new. Conventions of writing such as the *basmallah* over the door of a residence or shop are apotropaic devices which protect the tenants from evil, but public signs have educative and political functions. On the one hand, they help create a physical environment in which the unseen takes material form in written symbols that surround the urban audience as a constant backdrop. On the other hand, they display, in codes of varying degrees of transparency, the interests, obligations and allegiances of their sponsors. Unlike the name Allah on a soft drink kiosk (Illus. 11), Allah on a lamp post is not protective of the lamp post. It means something very different.

The cultural effects of public media like signs, newspapers or electronic broadcasts are not necessarily straightforward. Not all individuals attach existential significance to the religious symbols that confront them, even though most people understand their meaning and are nimble in their use. One night in August 1989, for example, a young Egyptian financial



**Illus. 11.** 'Allah', and 'God is great' in wood and paint, on a Pepsi kiosk.



*Illus. 12. 'Allah', discovered and highlighted in white paint on the wrought iron front gate of the American University in Cairo.*

analyst was driving me and another friend through Garden City, the former centre of the British expatriate community in Cairo. Drunk, and feeling in a philosophical mood, he suddenly declared,

Everything is permitted in heaven. In heaven we'll only drink the finest liquor, and you'll be perfumed with the scent of cognac, and what all. You can drink, you can use drugs, you can steal. Whatever, it doesn't matter. If you want a car, you just take one, there are always more cars. You have sex all the time. Everything is OK in heaven, but not here! I mean, either a thing is right, or it's wrong, you know? Who do they think they're trying to kid with this stuff?

His parody of the Muslim image of heaven as a sensual paradise was not a product of ignorance (it would not have been a parody otherwise), but of unbelief, his response to a discussion among religious scholars he had heard on his FIAT's radio earlier that day. If asked to explain what Muslims 'really' believe heaven is like, he would have been able to give a perfectly acceptable answer; he simply would not have attributed any truth to it. But far from indicating the impotence of public religious culture in modern Egypt, this example illustrates, on the contrary, its power to intrude on the consciousness and animate the imagination of even the non-religious, whose personal beliefs might disagree with official dogma.<sup>5</sup>

Saying that religion is familiar to all Egyptians is more than just to assert, as Leftist politicians are fond of doing, that 'The masses speak the language of religion to express themselves politically'. That statement carries with it a cluster of tacit assumptions about the linkage between social structure and ideology which rest more on political than sociological considerations and which obscure recent changes in the way Egyptians relate to their religious heritage. It assumes both that the masses, trapped in a pre-secular state, are awaiting eventual enlightenment, and that the privileged classes are immune to religious ideology. In fact, neither is true. While specific religious practices may be class stratified, there is little predictable correlation between class standing and religious commitment or interest,

either in Egypt or in Europe (Bourdieu 1984:111). The current revival of religious interest in Egypt cuts across class lines and represents far more than merely an oppositional political movement. During the 1980s, for example, enrolment increases in the Islamic faculties at Egyptian universities far outstripped overall enrolment growth in the Arts and Humanities, the circulation of public-sector religious periodicals more than doubled, and surveys of elite Cairo University students showed that both males and females overwhelmingly favoured 'modest dress', or *higab*, for women (Starrett 1991: 9).<sup>6</sup>

If we are to make sense of this religious awakening, we cannot dismiss religious concerns as benighted survivals of earlier social stages, or 'inflammations' symptomatic of social pathology (Kepel 1985: 22). Instead, we must see them as perennial questions which persist in an active manner, adapting and reproducing themselves within and between generations through increasingly complex interactions with institutions and communications media whose own advent, according to Euro-American social philosophy, was supposed to *reduce* rather than increase the influence of 'traditional' ideas in society.

The Islamic content of the mass media (Abu-Lughod 1993), mass schooling (Starrett 1991) and public space is just one aspect of the general process through which Islam and secular institutions have embraced one another. But it contributes to making that embrace a mutual choke-hold that won't allow either to escape again unharmed. On the one hand, every one of the major political parties in the country has been scrambling for the support of the partisans of the religious awakening since it became apparent that catering to religious concerns delivers votes.<sup>7</sup> Once having committed themselves to Islamic rhetoric, it may be difficult for any of them to pull back from promoting an Islamic future for Egypt. On the other hand, the sacred tradition has also committed itself fully to the products and processes of secular life, a retreat from which might be even more threatening.

A cynic might look at the roadsign advertising cam-



- Abu-Lughod, L. 1993. Finding a place for Islam: Egyptian television serials and the national interest. *Public Culture* 5(3): 493-513.
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- Fischer, M. and M. Abedi. 1990. *Debating Muslims: Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition*. Madison: U. of Wisconsin P.
- Foucault, M. 1970. *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage.
- Heyworth-Dunne, J. 1938. *A Report on Arabic Broadcasting in Egypt & Palestine with special reference to the Arabic Broadcast from London (Strictly Confidential)*. 23 January. (Item 7357, James Heyworth-Dunne Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford U.).
- Ibrahim, S. 1988. 'Taqdim' [Introduction]. In N. Guenena (ed.) *Tandhim al-Jihad: Hal Huwa al-Badil al-Islami fi Misr?* [The Jihad organization: is it the Islamic alternative in Egypt?] Cairo: Dar al-Huriyya.
- Kepel, G. 1985. *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*. Berkeley: U. of California P.
- al-Khashab, S. M. 1988. *Al-Shabab wa al-Tayyar al-Islami fi al-Mujtama' al-Misri al-Mu'asira: Dirasa Ijtima'iyya Midaniyya* (Youth and the Islamic Trend in Contemporary Egyptian Society: A Sociological Study). Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-'Arabiyya.
- Marx, K. 1978. *The Grundrisse*. In Robert Tucker (ed.) *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, pp. 221-93.
- Qutb, S. 1988. *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts along the Road). Cairo: Dar
- paigh that Olympic Electric has waged along the Cairo-Alexandria road, with its ritual phrases mounted above salespitches for fans and water heaters, and say that the company was greedily capitalizing on religious sentiment to hawk its products. But it is perhaps more interesting to approach the campaign from the opposite direction, looking at how this familiar God-talk has succeeded in spreading itself between the two cities by hitchhiking on the back of a commercial vehicle and capitalizing on the human desire for temperature control. The idea of religious culture exploiting profane institutions is not as strange as it first seems. It merely requires the recognition that, in literate societies, ideas are physical objects that can be manipulated and juxtaposed in ways that have less to do with their internal logic than with their practical possibilities. Expressed in words and pictures, ideas are printed, distributed, traded, bought and sold, consulted and stored in material form, which means that ideas that do not find expression in the widest possible number and range of physical manifestations will find themselves quickly overwhelmed by others that do, drowning in a white noise of competing claims.
- When rejected en masse, as a matter of ideological change, fashion, security concerns, or political protest, ideas are disposed of in material form as well: in book and record burnings, secret document shreadings, the trading-in of old royal or sacred images for new ones. But the more firmly entrenched those ideas are in public space, the more difficult it is to dispose of them, and the more pervasive their influence. Islam is now making full use of the communications revolution and manifests itself in every conceivable medium, saturating the physical environment with messages that are not without effect. Recall Durkheim's poetic description of the interchange between human beings and their surroundings:
- ... the external world echoes inside of us; it is prolonged in us in the same way that we overflow into it. Things, beings from the outside, penetrate into our consciousness, mingle intimately in our inner lives, become entwined in our existence, and, conversely, we merge our existence with theirs. Our ideas, our sentiments, pass from our minds to others and vice versa. There is in us something other than ourselves, and we are not entire in ourselves; there is also something of us in the objects that become assimilated, or that we assimilate, into our lives [Durkheim 1973:216].
- I would argue that the pervasiveness of Islamic messages in Egyptian public space is not only one result of the revival of religious interest in Egypt, but is one of its contributing factors as well. It has created a public demand for religious messages in public space. Like Baudrillard, Schudson (1984) views advertising not so much as the celebration of particular products, but as the celebration of consumption in general. He thus dubs it 'Capitalist Realism', on the model of Socialist Realism in Soviet art. In Egypt, by extension, the religious sign acts as a form of 'Metaphysical Realism' which marks religious concerns and practices as natural, obvious, and commonsense (Marx 1978: 230; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 38).
- Illus. 12*, for example, is not a conscious inscription of God's name, but a discovery of His name in a seemingly neutral artefact. Its presence on the fence around an American institution heightens rather than diminishes its significance, for it shows that God directs even non-believers to reiterate his signs in the world. Likewise, one will occasionally find photographs in Muslim periodicals of honeycombs in which the bees have blocked off cells to spell the divine name, or 'Allah' inscribed by natural blight on the surface of a leaf. In the summer of 1993 I found a particularly good example of this convention on the wall of a Cairo juice bar. The proprietor had taped up a double-page spread from a private-sector religious periodical purporting to be a photograph of a grove of trees, the trunks of which had naturally grown into the shape of Arabic letters spelling the *shahada*: 'There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger' (see Foucault 1970, chapter 2).
- This creation of a desire for religious communications is a complex process in which schools, communications media of all sorts, commodity manufacturers and political institutions participate. Information technologies (including the decidedly low-tech written sign) continuously feed off one another: books refer to street signs, newspapers refer to television programmes, school textbooks refer to radio broadcasting, television programmes refer to the Qur'an, advertising murals refer to television campaigns. As we saw above, one medium occasionally becomes another, as when a magazine photograph becomes a sign taped to the wall. New information technologies have blanketed urban Egypt since the 1870s, when the first Arabic-language newspapers were founded, and their influence only spread when radio came in the mid-1930s (in part the result of a propaganda war between Britain and fascist Italy over Arabic broadcasts to North Africa). In 1938 a British professor at Cairo University wrote in a confidential report to the BBC that
- Nearly every Egyptian home of some standing has its radio set, but nobody is deprived of the pleasure of listening-in, as every cafe boasts of a set, every barber's shop, every grocer's shop, and many others. I have even found them in workshops and factories. As the Egyptians ... like to get their money's worth out of their sets, it is not surprising to note that they tune-in their sets in the morning directly the station starts broadcasting, and they do not turn them off until the station closes down ... If one walks up the Sharia Farouq in Cairo, one need not stop at one cafe or barber's shop to know what is on the programme; one merely walks along and there is a continuity of radio transmission as though it were one set. In nearly every building there are three or four cafes where the working classes and the out-of-works sit for hours on end listening-in ... [Heyworth-Dunne 1938: 6].
- This image of entire streets awash with a single radio broadcast aptly captures an important aspect of the new urban environment in Egypt: the sheer pervasiveness of written and spoken information whose sole purpose is the creation of an audience. This audience, once formed, demands and stimulates the creation of further communications. But because of the proliferation of different telecommunications channels since the 1930s, the rise of video and audiocassette technology, and the progressive privatization of broadcast media consumption – people can listen in their homes rather than exclusively in public places – I would argue that public writing currently surpasses broadcast media in providing message saturation in public space.
- The religious sign, as a kind of advertisement for God, is a vital part of the religious and visual environment of urban Egypt, its ubiquity giving it important cognitive and social effects. As a teacher in a private Islamic school told me, 'You see that sign over there, that says Allah? The children get used to seeing that, to having Allah there all day long and thinking about him'. Practically, if not ontologically, God is omnipresent in Egypt. As a social and psychological object, God exists for all Egyptians regardless of whether or not they respond to him with traditional forms of worship, whether or not they acknowledge the existence of saints, angels and *jinn*, whether they describe themselves as committed Muslims or as atheists (Rizzuto

al-Shuruq.  
Rappaport, R. 1979. Sanctity and lies in human evolution. In Rappaport, *Ecology, Meaning and Religion*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 223-246.

Rizzuto, A.-M. 1979. *The Birth of the Living God*. Chicago: U. P.

Schudson, M. 1984. *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*. New York: Basic.

Sreberny-Mohammadi, A., and A. Mohammadi. 1994. *Small Media, Big Revolution: Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P.

Starrett, G. 1991. *Our Children and Our Youth: Religious Education and Political Authority in Mubarak's Egypt*. Ph.D dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Stanford U.

—1995. The political economy of religious commodities in Cairo. *American Anthropologist* 97(1):51-68.

1979). No one can escape for long the overpowering sense of God's existence in the public domain. Furthermore, even though some of the ritual and theological elaborations of God's nature and intention can be contested (for example, in the conflict between 'state' and 'opposition' Islam, on the one hand, and between the latter and popular Sufi Islam, on the other), particular instances of the Divine Name do not bear explications of these conflicts (Rappaport 1979). The word Allah, a sign into which each can silently read his own significance, becomes the taken-for-granted in terms of which other conversations and contestations proceed. □

1. Remember, for example, the crucial scene in Frank Capra's classic American movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which the hero, being shown by his guardian angel what the world would be like had he never been born, first fully realizes that he has entered an alternative reality. Having been thrown out of his local bar after the second visit in one evening, he notices that the neon sign above the door reads 'Nick's' rather than 'Martini's' the name with which he was familiar. Not until the cognitive anchor of writing the label on the building was altered, did he realize that his world was not merely seeming a bit odd, but was totally different. This sort of sign is both a written label specifying a location, and also, because of its medium (bright coloured neon), an attention-getter and implicit advertisement. In this context, it is also an index of temporal transformation (and may have been covering up an unsightly blemish on the wall underneath, as well).
2. The same is the case in Jerusalem, where some Orthodox Jewish neighbourhoods post signs in Hebrew and English advising women not to wear high-heeled shoes or inappropriate clothing.
3. This sign, sponsored by the Egypt Insurance Company, is

a play on words, since the Arabic word for 'secure' is derived from the same verbal root as the word for 'insurance'.

4. 'Thank God', 'Praise God', 'God is great', the three invocations Muslims say when doing *tasbeih*, counting through a string of prayer beads. Below each of the signs is a smaller placard advertising fans, space and water heaters, and other electrical appliances.
5. Neither do educated Egyptians confine their religious curiosities to Islamic or even 'mainstream' religious traditions. Two of my Egyptian Muslim acquaintances, a Supreme Court judge and an accountant (they did not know each other), had prominently displayed in their sitting rooms a full set of Time-Life books from the 'Mysteries of the Unknown' series. Each volume explores a different supernatural topic: 'The UFO Phenomenon', 'Psychic Powers', 'Phantom Encounters', 'Psychic Voyages', etc.
6. Al-Khashab's (1988) survey of Cairo University students also indicates that they perceive the official religious establishment to be derelict in its duties and ineffective in meeting the religious needs of young people, while being optimistic about the role of private-sector religious organizations for fulfilling such needs.
7. For example, in the 1984 elections to the Egyptian People's Assembly, candidates supported by the Muslim Brotherhood won seven seats in an alliance with the Wafd Party, an alliance which captured a total of 65 of the 455 places in the Assembly. In the 1987 elections, the Brotherhood broke its alliance with the Wafd and instead ran its candidates with two smaller parties, the Liberal and the Socialist Workers Parties; Brotherhood candidates captured 35 of the 60 seats won by that coalition (Ibrahim, 1988: 16). Considering that Egyptian elections are always fixed in favour of the ruling National Democratic Party, these results probably underestimate the strength of political sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood and other representatives of the Islamic Trend.

# comment

## 'CYBARITES', KNOWLEDGE WORKERS AND NEW CREOLES ON THE SUPERHIGHWAY

What is the social structure of 'cyberspace' and the world order it forms? For futurists and journalists, the Internet has become the mediatized stand-in for the 'Information Superhighway' and the latest in a series of technologies touted as engines of social change (e.g., Rheingold 1993, Escobar 1994, Negroponte 1995). Sceptics and critics challenge the utopian vision with a darker one of 'cybertribes' – bands of like-minded citizens 'threaded' together instantaneously, specifically, globally, sometimes obsessively – eager not just to reinforce each other, but to influence real events' (Fineman 1995: 30), on the one hand, or of profound alienation on the other (Stoll 1995, Rifkin 1995). These are familiar dichotomies in advocacy and critique of industrial society, extending back through Marshall McLuhan (1964, 1967) to nineteenth century formulas such as *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* and even Mary Shelley's monster, brought forward to post-industrial society. Running through this mechanicalism joined to a succession of new ages marked by new machines is a tendency to overlook more immediate variables of communication and techniques of knowl-

edge at play – particularly in larger, more complex and evanescent social spaces.

Cyberspace, at least as met on the Internet, occupies such a social space between 'hard' institutions and 'soft' culture. Its advocates register this liminal character as 'virtual community' (Rheingold 1993), which is intimate and distant at the same time, intensely engaging but along a narrow slice of life. Well enough; but the character of this community, and of the social space of the Internet, is built in the first instance on properties and practices of communication. What we see in the spaces that focus on the identities of the participants are mixed discourses, crossover talk between domains (notably science, religion, social and cultural issues), borrowing and trafficking in alternative forms and bases of authority and legitimacy. Some discourses have 'migrated' to the Internet from pre-existing communities and sites; others emerge there as its denizens to utilize the potentials of near-instantaneous, near-global and, to them, nearly free communication to reach out and find each other – including, just as crucially, the

unlike- as well as the like-minded.

The social organization of this world is rooted in the worlds which gave rise to the Internet as a tool of scientists and engineers seeking quick and open access to others like themselves. It embodies their values on speed, reach, openness, quick response and the emergence that they seek in the research they communicate. Responding to these needs, the Internet grew not just technologically but sociologically as the forms and occasions of collaboration grew to include additional interests brought by its users. Like the earlier subscription listservs, Usenet newsgroups for open discussion were developed in response to these needs, and often in 'peripheral' places, for which these devices erase time, distance and other marginalizing factors or scientific-industrial social geography. The Internet first organizes this space according to the values built into it.

First among these are the narrowing of communication, and obliterating of features of identity other than what they communicate. Each group and list tends to have a core of active participants, around