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Dual Spacization of Cultures: Problematization of Cyberspace and Cultural Matters

Saied Reza Ameli

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Abstract

This paper examines the problematization of cultural issues related to the dual spacization of life. The emergence of the second space of life over the first place of life combining local and translocal, national and transnational capacities and challenges. We discuss the capacities and opportunities occurring through the instant communication industry which made the spontaneous connection between absence and presence possible which overcome the domination of place and distance. We will also elaborate on the challenges and threats facing cultures because of access to other cultures, subcultures and individuals around the world without having enough time for nurturing the relationship between inner cultures and outer cultures as well as facing many abnormalities, distancing from genuine culture and natural communications.

Keywords: dual spacization; virtual capacity; internet challenges; cyberspace; culture

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Introduction: Dual Spacization of Cultures: Culture in place, culture in space

Dual spacization is the emergence of a second space of life — a virtual space parallel to the first place of life — the physical space. The plan, content, process of life and the concept of culture have always been intertwined with the concept of place and geographical origin. With life affairs being increasingly put into practice in the virtual space and the expansion of such lifestyle elements such as music, games, fashion and cosmetics, interior and exterior designs and a plethora of others which have to do with more serious aspects of life such as hygiene, medical care, financial and administrative services, urban management, etc. culture has become associated with an ‘emerging larger capacity’ which can be referred to as the (1) ‘Instant Space’; ‘Omnipresence Space’; (3) ‘Global Space’; or (4) the ‘Translocalization of Communication’ (Ameli, 2011a).

The dual spacization of human lifestyle and the concurrent nature of virtual space with the traditional way of life have indeed expanded the communication space. This has given way for the ‘individual’s global presence’ in the most isolated communities from rural to urban structures and megacities. Whether you define this phenomenon as ‘Translocalization of Communication’ or not, it has prepared new grounds for social communications which will give birth to fresh serious social issues in the years ahead, as the communication distance keeps disappearing, especially since ‘everyone is splitting from the society’s structure’. New sensitivities will arise around the world that will create common concerns for the global communities. As a result, issues arising from ‘Dual Spacization of Culture’ and the shaping of virtual culture could turn into a crucial notion for international organizations like The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF); and, a host of other institutions affiliated with the OIC and the United Nations. The present paper deals with some of the issues which have come forth as a result of ‘Dual Spacization of Culture’. However, discussions, workshops, international academic conferences and vast research are required for scholars to come up with solutions to elevate the

cultural well-being of modern societies under such influence.

In the following sections we will discuss the capacities and opportunities occurring through the instant communication industry which made the spontaneous connection between absence and presence possible which overcome the domination of place and distance and it gives open ground for access of cultures around the World. We will also elaborate on the challenges and threats facing cultures because of access to other cultures, subcultures and individuals around the world.

Cultural Capacities and Opportunities of Cyberspace

Considering the potentials of cyberspace in terms of connectivity, accessibility, dispersality and digitalism, huge changes are perceptible in comparison with physical space. Virtual space therefore is the space of omnipresence, globality and accessibility of one to all and all to one. Here some of the important changes in terms of strengthening cultures around the world will be discussed.

Connecting the cultural experiences

Nowadays, cyberspace is offering a shared room for all events and occasions no matter how sweet and bitter they are. The same holds true for scientific, political, cultural and economic achievements. As a matter of fact, the virtual space is a visa-free world, where one can enter other countries without holding a passport. Despite that such a world is gradually getting aligned with political and social alliances. There are certain minorities that can enter a 'shared space' to access what is available for the entire global public.

Homogenization of dissident culture

Homogenous elements as a network – a greater capacity of culture for elitism and at the same time, the formation of new dissident culture for resistance against 'corruption on earth' as an inevitable consequence of the increase in awareness and enlightenment. The world in the future is described as the more aware and more alert world: one closer to the truth. The world here refers not to the world of power, but rather to the world inhabited by ordinary people and intellectuals, where there is a

growing tendency towards 'good' and well-being, reconciliation with the divine nature and the truth as promised by the Lord. The human world is moving faster towards greater rationality, with wisdom and reason serving like a tremendous asset as described by Imam Ali (PBUH) is 'greatest wealth' as opposed to ignorance which he calls the 'worst form of poverty'.

The 'culture of opposition' is developing in a vast scale, worldwide. This opposition could appear in various forms against war, poverty, child abuse, destruction of the environment, alcoholism, usury, and different forms of oppressive behavior towards human beings, animals and nature. Now, the homogenous elements as a network could create a chance for unifying 'stances against the divine and human nature', thus the emergence of worldwide cults is growing within the very Islamic communities.

Virtual space as a nurturer of sub-cultures

While creating the hotbed for subcultures to develop, the virtual space can also serve as grounds for the shaping subcultures as well. In other words, the nature and identity of many subcultures is rooted in or arising from the content existing in cyberspace. Such spaces help new subcultures shape and develop. However, this has a great impact on forcing out subcultures which show adaptability to the structure of the virtual space (Ogbonna & Harris, 2007).

Interaction, co-existence and the growth of multiculturalism

Nowadays world communities can take advantage of the growth of media and mass communication tools for positive changes and towards achieving a peaceful coexistence. Multiculturalism as a new phenomenon is a sign of both pluralism and unity. Pluralism is a necessity in the greater world, as it represents local and unique qualities and identities while uniting different cultures because it pushes for a Global Village (Floridi & Sanders, 2002).

The global fight against narcotics, preserving the environment, solidarity with other communities, respecting the right to live, valuing the individual's privacy, world justice, protecting the dignity of human beings, respect for the rights of religious and social minorities, sustainable development, and offering room for the activity of other cultures and values among others are notions

which can be promoted within the same shared information space and indicate the interaction among various cultures.

Multiculturalism encourages different cultures to recognize and respect others as they are, without collapsing in the trap of racism. This recognizes the difference between 'us' and 'the others'. As applied in the modern form, it also promotes tolerance for the differences with others (Floridi, 2003). With its eye-catching global spread, the Internet is based on the idea of valuing all cultures and encouraging a closeness and unity among different cultures. Indeed, the global spread of the information society has become possible by the Internet as it has paved the way for the voices of isolated minorities to be heard. As a result, multiculturalism like a new phenomenon is a sign of both pluralism and unity. There are many who argue that multiculturalism is a phenomenon within the borders of individual countries. The phenomenon, however, is fast developing into the international sphere. As it is the case with the new economic world order. The new cultural order has its own history. With the growth of information around the world, thanks to the Internet, the elite, the middle class and the isolated under-cast communities replace the former ruling layers.

Universalization of social relations and particularization of Muslim relations

Although the emergence of nation-states would create unity within limited geographical borders, it can potentially fragmentize the Islamic world and the internal strife among state members of that community. However, nowadays the virtual world can offer the chance for an environment within which unity with nations beyond borders and uniting them around the truth of Islam is made possible. White et al. (2015) shows how Internet can play a critical role in improving interfaith relations between Muslims and Christians. For example in interfaith contact sessions—in the form of a synchronous online chat program, a reduction in interfaith bias and willing for expansion of contacts and interactions were viable.

As mentioned above cyberspace is a visa-free world, where one can enter other countries without holding a passport. Despite the fact that such a world is gradually getting aligned with political and social borders, there are still certain layers which can enter

a 'shared space', and access what is available for the entire global public.

New cultural digital diaspora

'Cultural Diaspora' has always come as a result of physical immigration or displacement, while digital and network diaspora (Larner, 2015) as a new cultural phenomenon is a product of the mental departure and a change in the values and thoughts of individuals due to the introduction to the virtual world (Ameli, 2011a). This cultural phenomenon is capable of affecting one's nationalistic tendencies as well as national and collective identities. In such a connected environment motivation for interaction is locally and globally increased and attitude for going around the world to visit or immigration is inspired (Cover, 2015; Thulin & Bertil, 2016)

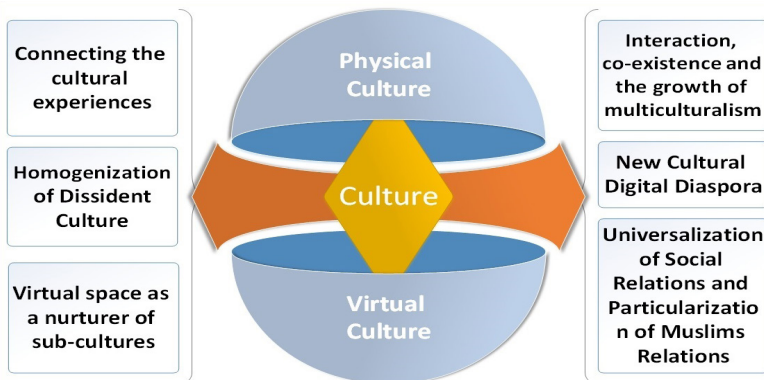


Figure 1. Capacities of Dual Spacization of Culture

Challenges and Questions Related to Dual Spacization of Culture

The growth of the virtual world from late 20th century has created a 'new post-human awareness' (Mort cited by Ameli, 2011a, p. 90) which in itself has led to the development of a new culture or 'post-culture'. In such space, the sources of culture multiply that combined with parallel institutions focusing on virtual teachings expose individuals to the world's existing variety of cultures. What is new about this fresh mode of communicating culture is the fact that they are accessible to all citizens regardless of their connection to the hierarchy of power. Basically, the increasing

use of information technology can potentially enable every individual to have the chance to create within the virtual space, reducing the authority of the elite and the sources of culture in that environment which is turning more and more democratic (Ropolyi, 2013).

The distance between the real and the recreating culture

Representing culture is one of the major issues dealt with in cultural studies as discussed by Chris Barker (as cited by Ameli, 2011a). According to Barker, cultural shows are conveying cultural meanings through which communication is established with the individual and the society. However, it has to be stressed that in the real world representing different cultures takes place within a real, tangible and accessible environment based on a face-to-face model, while in the virtual space it happens through virtual reality. It must also be noted that virtual space is where identity and the self are reproduced and “a flexible representation of the self” as well as “self-narrating” take place (Chioung as cited by Bell, 2001, p. 117). When it comes to cultural phenomena, one can witness the quiet and elusive rise of cultural issues. As a matter of fact, representing the virtual reality brings in new imagery into the individual’s structure of cultural meaning (Ameli, 2011a).

The decline of natural behaviors and trends

The decline of natural behaviors and trends in the virtual space is in a way due to the fact that all cultural trends are becoming relative there. For instance, virtual space and virtual realities are increasingly developing new fears which come against natural fears. Put it another way, with nature disappearing in the virtual space, natural behaviors begin to diminish as well (Ameli, 2011b). As work relations and social ties grow more automatic, natural communications lose their charm and color. Such a trend, indeed, will leave a multitude of consequences upon human relationships.

The decline of natural cultural sentiment

The virtual culture has managed to transfer human behavior into humanoids and robots, fixating the individual and social behaviors and making social relations void of variety and feelings. The automatization of communication or communicating with

databases has led to behavioral changes in the communicator and the communicatee. Even programmed robots have led to a decline in the presence of the “cultural sentiment” in the new world order (Ameli, 2001). Such a trend sets the virtual cultural sentiment in parallel with the natural one which is a product of real observation and close understanding of human reactions. One can simply argue that the virtual version of cultural sentiment pictures a reduced form of the real one.

The decline of communication with others in the public sphere

The notion of anonymity or the covert presence also known as non-physical presence as well as the non-physical appearance of users which has grown out of the post-modern technological cultures based on communicating via computers has brought forth a debate on the level of trust in the authenticity of cultural virtual phenomena. Under such circumstances, the picturing of virtual reality introduces new forms of imaging into the individual’s sphere of meaning with regard to the concept of culture (Ameli, 2011b). This, as a result, leads to a reduction in the way individuals communicate with one another in the public arena.

Individual-only leisure time and hobbies-Tendency toward loneliness rather than socializing

The virtual space has given birth to a magnificent world of novel and exciting hobbies, with unique features and elements. Still, the main characteristic distinguishing amusement in such a world is “individuality”. Although, there has been a fast growth of collective games and hobbies such as ‘Integrated Social Game Networks’, offering users a chance to communicate with one another, individuals are still sitting by their PCs alone, as they go through a paradoxical experience of being virtually in the crowd while being alone in reality. In the real world, hobbies commonly serve as part of the socialization process and are supposed to strengthen one’s cooperative and creative capabilities. This, in the virtual space, can turn into web browsing which is one of the major harms one may receive in that environment. Browsing is one of the most common forms of activities carried out by Internet users and is basically a side activity in the virtual space. It has now evolved into a form of online addiction which can expose the

user to different forms of harm including cyber sabotage (Ameli, 2011b).

The change in family structure-Rise of families with independent members

Virtual space has changed the concept of family, presence at home, interaction with the outside world and family relationships. Such phenomena as virtual marriage and the virtual family have also grown from it. While virtual space has also brought up serious questions on the role of real families as the source of collective identity in shaping the individual's identity. One of the issues highlighted in virtual space is the expansion of the individual's scope of action. In other words, in virtual space, one basically deals with a new individual and the concept has indeed gone through a considerable change and demands a modification in the way parents and children interact. Thus an authoritarian treatment based on norms and the sense of leadership with parents determining the way of life has turned into a source of tension within families (Ameli, 2011b).

As a consequence, the notion of family has gone through a dramatic departure to 'a group of independent individuals' from its traditional role of maintaining shared values, collectiveness, togetherness, loyalty, seeing eye to eye and a sense of commitment. This is due to the fact that individual members of the family have a tendency toward independence and spending their leisure time in their own environments. For such members, interaction within a family of independent individuals might sound awkward and painful. In a way, they each suffer from a negative mood: they suffer from being 'not understood' and 'ignored' by other members. Meanwhile, from a broader perspective, one can view the negative impacts of virtual space upon families in two major categories:

A) Cultural pluralism within the family. The diversity of sources for culture within families have created different structures for value. Social networking, online friendships, etc. are other sources of culture in virtual space that can affect family values.

B) Independent individuality and a fading of collective identities. A multitude of communication tools have singled out the individual from the crowd, making him increasingly independent and strengthening his self-conscious world. The trend leads to

the formation of new collective identities with limited common features and a wider individual nature that replace the older notion of collective identities with greater commonalities. The long-term consequences are religious relativism, the spread of a sense of poverty, a decline in realistic attitudes as well as the growth of radical secularism and religious fundamentalism (Ameli, 2011a).

The disintegration of ethical and moral values as well as social and individual boredom

Separation from normal life and human nature as a result of living in virtual space bring about individual and social boredoms. This deepening cultural and moral nostalgia make the individual long for his original moral values. The new space is indeed a strange world of varieties making members feel alienated in an environment replete with ethical values which are different and relative (Ameli, 2011a).

The quest for identity within the virtual space

The anonymous nature of virtual space where there is no bodily and physical presence form a basis for the growth and nurturing of new identities. Goffman (1975) argues that the Internet has provided new frameworks of interaction for communication among individuals, giving users a new chance for demonstrating a positive and acceptable image of themselves. As a matter of fact, virtual space is a new realm where social excitements and the adventure for identity are put to test.

The impact of virtual space upon dynamism of identity

The expansion and spread of the World Wide Web has reduced distances, creating a kind of a dynamic identity among the youth in particular. A UN Development Commission report in 2002 (Floridi, 2003) highlights the rise of a new common identity among the youth in various parts of the world. This has been particularly growing as borders among societies have started to disappear, leaving room for a tendency towards a greater information and network-based world. The growth of a dynamic identity, thanks to virtual space can be described as an opportunity. However, at the same time, there is a negative side to it, as it can weaken and undermine the individual's national identity in two ways.

First, virtual space has the capability to serve as a platform for borderless communication, replacing such identity features as nationality and language with gender and age. This can in turn gradually put aside the elements which are meant to strengthen national identity and prepare grounds for the growth of elements which put more emphasis on the sub-cultural notions of age and gender.

Identity factors are interrelated. For instance, gender can be dependent upon the greater identity factor which is nationality. In simple terms, an individual's understanding of their identity to a great extent depends upon their nationality. Any impact on certain identity features can leave their effect on other features as well. In this context, virtual space which affects the national identity, causes an imbalance in the traditional structure of identity, more specifically gender and age. Nowadays, with individuals modifying the definition of their gender and that of others signifies a disintegration from the traditional and sustained notions.

Superficial virtual relationships

The formation and development of online forums and friendship rooms are examples offered by virtual space meant to fill in the cultural communication gaps which exist in the real world (Ameli, 2011a). At the same time, major conventional forms of communications have been replaced systems such as the Short Message System (SMS), e-mailing and video chatting, etc. The main characteristic of such forms of communications in virtual space is 'deceit' as users may take advantage of the anonymity, leaving a variety of negative mental consequences on the opposite side.

The downfall of relations among individuals and the decline in emotions

Industrial relationships are growing rapidly replacing natural communications in virtual space, where users can simply enter the digital world by pressing a key, behind a monitor, accessing a complicated world. Such a wide and instant access to the vast virtual world coupled with the lack of real emotions has produced human beings who have to deal with a dual form of communication and suffer from a chaotic sense of nostalgia, which leaves them hanging between the real and the virtual worlds (Ameli, 2011b). On the

other hand, in virtual space, the concept of time is fading and the notion of place is turning vague. Such form of accelerated placeless communication lacks characteristics such as depth, impact, attention and concentration of the real face-to-face communication. Therefore, the emotional side of mutual relationships has a downfall. In fact, verging beyond real time and physical space, virtual world communications do not limit users within the natural boundaries. As a result, such features disconnect individuals from natural communications, thus causing a paradox between individuality in the real cultural space and the virtual one. Of course, communications in the virtual space offers less power of presence (Ameli, 2011a).

Distancing from genuine cultural space

Communications in the virtual space are considered the cause of distancing from the real world cultural space. For instance, instead of dropping by at a loved one's place, individuals make phone calls or they may resort to e-books and gain access to online resources instead of physically attending a library and interacting with other readers in real space.

Real community and the nostalgia of exclusion from social events

The idea of real social togetherness is all about face-to-face communication. However, there are aspects to it which have to do with the sense of belonging to a greater community scattered in different parts of the world. That aspect is referred to as the "imagined community" which can create a sense of belonging for the virtual notion of community even in the real world. In virtual space, the individual establishes contact with the community, participates in religious rituals and ceremonies despite staying alone, without having to physically show his presence and experiencing the conditions of face-to-face communications. In the virtual community, the individual tends to be passive, playing the role of a mere observer without actively interacting with the members. As a result, the emotions are rooted in a non-physical presence which sometimes brings about a sense of frustration and nostalgia for real togetherness (Ameli, 2011a).

The impact of virtual communication on work and profession relations and the disconnection from social environment can be huge.

Despite offering a multitude of advantages for professional

communications, various studies have demonstrated that the phenomenon is creating new challenges. Thompson and Nadler (2002), for instance, argue that one of the merits of virtual technology is bridging the gaps and long physical distances between large companies and professional corporations, helping them enjoy fast communication. Nevertheless, they also highlight a challenge in virtual negotiations being the unsure guesses due to the delay in receiving responses. Nie and Erbring (2000) have also shed light on how replacing emails with phone conversations in work environments leads to a decline in communicating with the social milieu.

The change in social and group structure: individual as a member and the social support from the virtual space

There are various social networking groups in the virtual world which users join to interact with other fellow members to share their opinions on different issues. Such virtual networks, in which values and interest are common, create new opportunities for friendships and close relations. This is particularly striking when the group offers no outside world, physical access to the members while it serves as the majority of the individual's social life. Such groups can generally be categorized as (1) communities, memberships of which bring embarrassment and infamy in the real world; and, (2) communities in which offer social support to their members.

The socially embarrassing identities and the related communities could be such groups as homosexuals or political minorities who resort to the Internet to enjoy anonymity and security compared to the face-to-face communications in the real world. Here, online interactions become particularly vital for the members, as it is the only means through which communication is made possible and the common accepted norms determine the behavior of the members. In the second category, there are individuals who, for instance, suffer from HIV, thus using online communication to avoid the social embarrassment while establishing anonymous contact with fellows who share the same suffering and exchange common experiences and support is another kind of virtual community (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

Online betrayals

The emergence of virtual space has been directly responsible for a host of modern social problems. For instance, the lengthy time periods spent online reduce the time that couples should spend together. Indeed, one of the main reasons behind betrayals is the fact that some couples spend time with people outside their marriage (Ameli, 2011b). Cooper and colleagues (1999) argue that relationships established with people other than one's spouse affect different dimensions of marriages. The consequences range from quarreling and verbal exchanges to adultery. Aside from these, there are side effects to betrayal including embarrassment, sense of guilt and aggressiveness among other negative feelings.

Children and the irreparable harms from virtual space

The introduction of communication and information technologies has provided grounds for the spread of online pornography in different forms with varying means of access (Chatterjee, 2001, p. 74). Child pornography is manifested in the form of pictures, videos, and sometimes in open and covertly obscene material targeting users who are not beyond the accepted legal age, making them involved in some sort of sexual activity (McQuade, 2009, p. 24). Alongside pornography, there is another phenomenon described as "Internet luring" which refers to misusing computers and the Internet to persuade children for sexual purposes (Cross, 2008).

It is noteworthy that virtual space has fundamentally changed the production, publication and access to child pornography by creating a new market in which spreading such material is becoming increasingly simple. The Internet can also easily be used for sharing child pornography and allowing it to be traded online (Ameli, 2011b).

Children prematurely entering the adult world; premature demands and inhomogeneous growth

Public access to all sorts of online material with no restriction exposes users to content which is not appropriate for their gender and age. This includes children gaining access to both healthy and unhealthy adult material. As a matter of fact, some contents are considered obscene for all age groups, which can leave harmful consequences

upon children. This calls for more extended and stricter regulations on limiting the open access of some contents for users.

Question of survival of ethnic, lingual and religious diversity as well as the threat against linguistic identity

One major cultural asset of the Islamic Republic of Iran is its vast ethnic, lingual and religious diversity. Combined with social homogeneity, such diversity can produce intellectual growth and high cultural tolerance and admissibility. As a result, unlike countries with a unified racial texture that are paying a huge price for racial supremacy, the Iranian society has never approached and judged other countries based on race. The same diversity and cultural tolerance guarantees the civil and cultural maturity of Iranians when they enter the virtual space where cultures of different origins and forms come together. But one definite harm originating from the same environment is the linguistic brevity which is a characteristic of the online world. The impact does not only end there: since language is pivotal to understanding cultures, it is not too much to say that linguistic influences are of the strongest and most definite degree of impact upon culture. Language is indeed the origin of culture and at the same time a factor that determines its future. Therefore, as brevity becomes a common habit in one particular language, growing concerns over gradually losing the tolerance based on mutual understanding, occur. In other words, brevity is associated with a kind of haste, imposing the wrong notion on culture that healthy communication is redundant and obsolete.

The impact of virtual space upon individual's introvert behavior

There is a specific damage as an objective result of the spread of individualism, particularly visible among teenagers and youth. The reason could probably be traced to the fact that those age groups are more inclined toward technology in their communications and friendships. At any rate, introvert behavior not only reduces the interaction of youth with the real world. It also creates a gap between different generations in societies. Accordingly, the consequence is that virtual communications will easily replace the transfer of cultural assets preserved and compiled by older generations.

When it comes to their role in either strengthening or threatening social communications, the media fall within

different categories. Television, for instance, can be associated with some form of family-oriented social togetherness (at least in the traditional basic form). But analyzing hardware platforms (transferability and portability of technology by the individualized physical body) as well as software platforms (such as creating an avatar, “my dictionary”, “my blood pressure record and heartbeat history”, etc.), one could come to the conclusion that online technology is injecting an authoritarian individualism into everyday life. As a result, human beings are trapped in channels where their expertise, interests and lifestyle become increasingly individualistic.

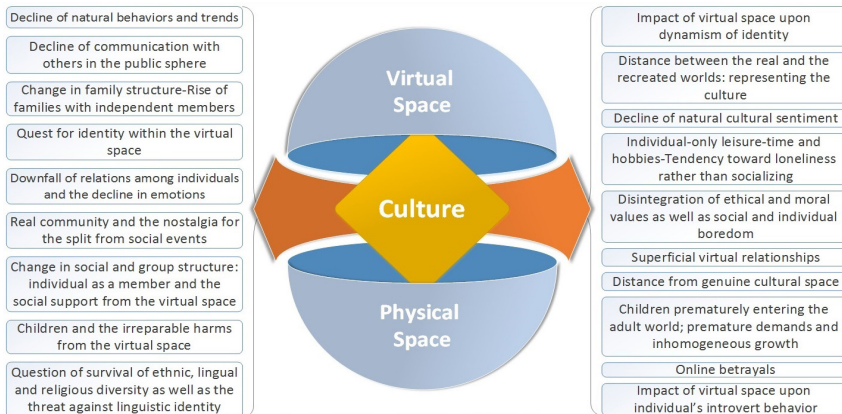


Figure 2. Challenges and Questions Related to Dual Spacization of Culture

Conclusion: Hybrid Cultures and Empowerment of National Cultures

The question is whether the mixture of physical and local culture with virtual and translocal cultures, will result in a third culture without any identification or does it go towards a type of hybrid which has no particular origin and orientation but it is between two or more cultures and does it cause empowerment or embargo of national cultures. The answer depends on the stability, originality, creativity and flexibility of cultures. It seems many societies are facing cultural shock and serious cultural changes that in some way or another have changed cultural values, lifestyles, cultural productions and indeed cultural consumption of the society. Serious thought must be given to return to the original cultures in comparison to diversity, instability and lacking a sense of

belonging in the diversified cultures, subcultures and social cults in the virtual world. Uprising movements for protecting the environment, family, national cultures and returning to the original religions are symptoms of reacting to a globalized and virtualized world.

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