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Edited by Azy Barak

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Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace

Hundreds of millions of people across the world use the Internet every day. Its functions vary, from shopping and banking to socializing, dating, and getting help in numerous areas. From a psychological perspective, the Internet has become a major vehicle for interpersonal communication that can significantly affect people's decisions, behaviors, attitudes, and emotions. Moreover, its existence has created a virtual social environment in which people can meet, negotiate, collaborate, and exchange goods and information. Cyberspace is not just a technical device but a phenomenon that has reduced the world to a proverbial global village, fostering collaborations and international cooperations, thus reducing the barriers of geographical distance and indigenous cultures. Azy Barak and a team of prominent social scientists review a decade of scientific investigations into the social, behavioral, and psychological aspects of cyberspace, collating state-of-the-art knowledge in each area. Together they develop emerging conceptualizations and envisage directions and applications for future research.

AZY BARAK is Professor of Psychology in the Department of Education at the University of Haifa, Israel. He is one of the world's leading researchers in the psychology of cyberspace and a founder of important applications in this area.

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Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace

Theory, Research, Applications

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AZY BARAK
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This book is accompanied by a dynamic website
(<http://www.cambridge.org/barak>) in which the chapter contributors
publish further ideas and additional information. Readers may
ask questions and write comments to which authors respond.



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To my students, from whom I’ve learned the most

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Preface

The psychology of cyberspace, or cyberpsychology, is a new field of study. Fewer than a handful of universities around the world offer a course in this emerging area, despite the unequivocal fact that many activities today take place online. In this novel social environment, new psychological circumstances project onto new rules governing human experiences, including physiological responses, behaviors, cognitive processes, and emotions. It seems, however, that psychology gradually is acknowledging and accepting this new field of study, as more behavioral scholars have begun to research the field, growing numbers of articles in the area appear in psychology journals, and an increasing number of books related to this domain are being published. This change reflects not only the growing number of professionals who find interest in researching the new field but also the growing number of people – students and laypeople alike – who search for credible and professional answers in this relatively unknown and uninvestigated area of human psychology.

I discovered this exciting direction in psychology mainly because of personal necessity. I was living in London, Ontario, Canada – affiliated with The University of Western Ontario and collaborating with my long-time friend and colleague William (Bill) Fisher, with whom I have thoroughly studied issues of sexuality on the Internet – when the revolutionary computer network, called the Internet, emerged (quite innovative in comparison to the relatively primitive Bitnet we used before). About the same time, Microsoft upgraded to the Windows 95 version and PC screen resolution and colors became more lively and attractive. The geographical distance to my homeland, Israel; the sudden subjectively realistic ability to “be there” while physically in Canada, including more efficient communication with faraway friends and colleagues; and the sensations and activities involved in the new medium led me to a personal insight: The Internet was going to revolutionize humanity in many terms. It took me a while to realize that the field of psychology was going to go through a considerable change, too. I then started to search the Internet for other psychologists who were undergoing a similar experience and similar thoughts. It took a relatively short time to become virtually acquainted with John Suler, John Grohol, Michael Fenichel, Storm King, and several other less conservative psychologists. From a distance, I viewed with much respect Sheizaf Rafaeli’s amazing work in implementing the Internet in the Israeli society. Shortly thereafter, I contacted a few more of the leaders in the emerging field, among them

Adam Joinson, Tom Buchanan, Mark Griffiths, Janet Morahan-Martin, Kate Anthony, Jason Zack, and the late Al Cooper. These researchers have become my close colleagues; some of them have contributed to the current collection. Many of my ideas in developing field projects, such as SAHAR – a successful online suicide prevention enterprise (Barak, 2007) – as well as numerous research studies, came into action as a result of continuous online discussions with these and other colleagues.

The idea of putting together the knowledge and creative ideas accumulated by leading world scholars in cyberpsychology emerged after intensive online group communication among most of the contributors to this volume. Though the initial plan was to meet face-to-face and spend two weeks together in an isolated facility to share ideas and visions and to brainstorm on emerging psychological issues, practical constraints, as well as personal priorities, resulted in a written collection of individual essays that form the chapters of this book. Although the unique value of this volume lies in the originality of the thoughts and the creative views of the authors, this anthology – representing a variety of topics about our new field of study – may also serve as an effective sourcebook for professionals who wish to know more about and understand the innovative world that the “information revolution” has brought.

No doubt, “the world is flat,” as a well-known columnist stated (Friedman, 2005), and we all share now “a global village,” a term coined by Marshall McLuhan (1962) in forecasting the information revolution. What we used to know and believe in – whether psychology, medicine, physics, economics, or meteorology – is falling apart. As a result, we are in the midst of a social revolution. No one knows where it will go or what forms it will take because of such movements and trends as globalization; innovative technologies; fast-growing, synchronous, and limitless communications; and vast and powerful computerization. Psychology has to disconnect from its historical roots and perceptions and adapt to this new world if it desires to stay relevant and influential. Or, as I put it almost a decade ago: “Psychology, on the threshold of a new millennium, is driving on a superhighway that is taking the world to an unknown destination. To avoid potholes in this road, cautious considerations, international brainstorming, and intensive attention to this new, unprecedented development may maximize the social benefits and minimize the costs of the journey” (Barak, 1999, p. 241). It seems that psychology is gradually getting there. But is it going too slowly?

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I would like to thank Giuseppe Riva and Tom Buchanan, whose ideas and suggestions have significantly contributed to the depth and scope of this book. I am also grateful to A. M. Goldstein, whose editorial assistance is priceless.

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Azy Barak
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