The High Cybercafe: Internet in the Nepal Himalayas

SVF-3903

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May 2012

Acknowledgements

My fieldwork, film and thesis were made possible through the help and participation of many people. My gratitude goes to: my wonderful informants and others from Khumbu Lodge for permission and help with conducting fieldwork in this establishment; teachers of the Shree Himalaya Primary School in Namche, especially the computer and mathematics teacher and 5th grade children; my hosts at Moonlight Lodge for a wonderful and cosy stay; translators Ramesh Simkhada, Dik Rai and Prakash Sapkota; Bente Sundsvold for supervision, time and devotion, Ane Lyngstad Oltedal for the Fleck 2000 tip; and all my other classmates (except Esben:)). VCS 2010 will be in my heart forever.

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1 Introduction

It was a long hike. I had planned to walk the distance from the airfield to my fieldwork site in a day, maybe two. But the reality of my 30 kg backpack and hard mountain trails going either up or down but never really level for any length, dictated my tempo and it took me three days instead.

I was 3000 m up in the Himalayas of Nepal, on a hike from the airfield at Lukla to my fieldwork location in Namche Bazaar. Tourists carrying light day packs were constantly whizzing past me. I was moving more or less at an equal tempo with the porters, poor Nepali men, slowly taking their careful and measured steps uphill, carrying their incredible loads of up to 90 - 100 kg. I had refused to hire a porter myself. It's cheap for a westerner, but I wanted to carry all my own gear. “To get to know what it feels like to be a porter,” I had thought. “What an idiot,” was I thinking now, my lungs gasping for oxygen in the thin atmosphere and all my strength squeezed out of me. This is the High Himalayas. There are no roads, only frail mountain trails. The only means of transport besides your own feet are charter helicopters or yak caravans for those who can pay.

Anthropologists are not among the wealthy and the powerful, so I walked. On the third day, totally exhausted, I reached Namche Bazaar. A beautiful place, as I remembered from my visit as a tourist about one year ago: a crescent-shaped little cluster of houses on the side of a mountain above a huge gorge, with a nice stream running through it. It takes a day or two to hike to the airfield, a week to the nearest bus stop. Mountainous terrain isolates this place from the transportation networks, roads and airports of our planet. But it is located 30 km from Mount Everest, and therefore it is visited by tens of thousands of tourists per year. It is a place interwoven into the global cultural fabric of economic ties, personal acquaintances and communication networks. The latter was the aspect I came here to study – communication networks, more specifically the internet. For more or less than eight years the people of Namche Bazaar have had access to the internet, and it is slowly working its way into the everyday life of the people here. Smartphones, wifi and cybercafes are a part of everyday life for a growing part of the population here. Physically isolated but still interwoven – this is my research setting.

1.1 The Topic

The aim of this paper is to look more closely at the processes involving the adoption of internet in a Nepali mountain village. Two and a half months of fieldwork was performed at a primary school and a cybercafe in Namche Bazaar, Solukhumbu district, Nepal. My aim is to be informative about the processes revolving around the internet in a general global sense. Therefore my thesis is more concerned with the internet than the particular cultural setting of Nepal or Namche.

Internet is a form of information and communication technology. The fact that it is information AND communication technology is of importance here. While no device is able to purely transmit a message without modifying it, communication technology coupled with information technology is designed to not just relay information, but also to process it. Chat messages are saved in log files, e-mails are scanned for viruses, uploaded digital photos are automatically shared with certain people, etc. Technology affects our communication in ever more ways.

Computers and the internet originate in the achievements of white North-American military engineers and mathematicians of the Cold War period. By now, however, 44.8% of internet users are from Asian countries, with over a billion Asian people using the internet. Europe and North-America account for just 34.1% of internet users (Miniwatts Marketing Group n. d.). Contrary to these statistics we still tend to assume that internet is “English” and “Euro-American”, and if people from other countries start using the internet, then it makes “them” more similar to “us”. So I went on fieldwork to have a look and find out what is really happening: how does the adoption of internet, as an alien technology (i.e. used but not produced locally), take place and what other processes are related to it?

1.2 Reflexive Aspect

I think the best research is done on subjects to which the researcher has a special relation. It does not have to be a wholly positive one, a relation of love and kisses only, but it better be a long, eventful and emotional one. I find my immersion into the topic to be long enough – I wrote my first computer programs about 25 years ago. It was done in the BASIC language on a personal computer with a green monochrome monitor and using a cassette tape recorder as a

storage device. From using 2400 baud modems to connect to nodes on a precursory internet-like formation called the FidoNet on the ancient analogue pulse-dialling phone network of the collapsing Soviet Union, to the 12 Mbaud ADSL connections of the digital broadband of today, I have witnessed the development of computers, and the ensuing altering of the face of the society, of the ways we talk and think. My generation has, in a way, grown up as the same time as computers, spending our childhood in the computer-free age, suffering our adolescent hardships and self-discovery period together with the computers coming out of the nerd niche and breaking into mainstream use, and living as grown-ups in a world of which the computers and the internet are a natural part.

My homeland Estonia is seen as a quick developer among other post-Soviet countries, the so-called “Baltic Tiger”, with one of its characteristics being the fast adoption of information and communication technologies (including internet banking, voting on elections and doing administrative things such as declaring your taxes and establishing limited liability companies over the internet). The concept of e-state (which means that the Estonian state is accessible to its citizens online in many convenient ways) together with the fact that the popular internet voice-call software Skype was founded and is being developed in Estonia, form a very important part of the identity of Estonians.

This aspect of our identity makes me feel interest in the internet, after having witnessed on the one hand its going through such an enormous change during the past couple of decades and on the other hand my own society being so thoroughly transformed by it. Therefore it dawned on me, when travelling in Nepal as a tourist and seeing the internet popping up everywhere – here I have an opportunity to see this kind of a phenomenon again!

1.3 Technology, Society and ANT

Broadly speaking, I will be exploring society and technology. I will not give precise definitions of these terms for now, and I will come back to this in the end of this section.

There is a spectrum of theories about the mutual interaction between society and technology, with extreme technological determinism constituting one end of it, and the social construction of technology (SCOT) on the other.

Social construction of technology started out as a protest against the mindset according to

which social factors were needed only when explaining a false belief or adaption of a non-working technology. The claim of the founders of SCOT was that social input is needed for the proper explanation of *all* beliefs, true and false. SCOT recognises that the criteria for judging whether a technology actually works are the socially conditioned. One of its core concepts is the "interpretive flexibility", meaning that different groups of people can have very different understandings of a technology, including, but not limited to, the symbolic meaning of a technology like a car or aircraft (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999, 21). The internet, for example, can be a information-finding-engine, a communication device, a political tool, a status symbol, etc.

Technological determinism is in many ways the opposite of SCOT. It claims that technology matters, not just to the material and biological conditions of our lives, but also to the way we live together socially. Langdon Winner, in his essay "Do artifacts have politics?" discusses some very valid points about political consequences that certain technologies may have, bringing some (by now, classic) examples of technology either enabling the settling of a certain issue: the low bridges of the parkways of Long Island, New York, that were arguably designed to keep out the buses of the public transportation system (and people from the lower classes with them) or huge plazas on US university campuses that were designed to defuse student demonstrations; or technologies that *inherently* contain a certain political model, like the centralised nuclear power with a techno-scientific-military elite versus the egalitarian, more democratic, decentralised solar power (Winner 1980, 33-34).

Technological determinism does have some valid aspects and our SCOT-inspired sensitivity towards the influence of social relations on technological artefacts should not result in neglect of the valid points of the opposite view. Further, technological determinism would be very tempting to use in the case of this research. This seems to be a clear cut case of "foreign" technology coming in "determining" certain kind of social change. But to view matters this way would mean to lose sight of half of the situation – why and how does the "foreign" technology "come". We must preserve a holistic view on the situation and remember that changing technology will always be only one factor among many others: political, economic, cultural, and so on (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999, 5).

The reason I refused to define "society" and "technology" above is that they are not isolated spheres, with only some kind of "influence" moving between them. There is a tight

interwovenness there – technology and society are mutually constitutive (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999, 23). In that sense the word "society" also includes "technology", among all the other persistent and patterned relations that make a troop of primates of the biological species *Homo sapiens* into a society. The phenomena denoted by these two words should not be ripped apart by theory.

One approach which attempts to theorise society and technology (and much else) holistically is the actor-network theory, often abbreviated as ANT. It starts from the standpoint that to reduce all social relations to either human or material/technological actors is an unacceptable reductionism. Social networks are not composed only of people, but also of machines, animals, money, texts, architecture, etc. (Law 1992, 2-3). Both society and technology are made of the same "stuff": networks linking human beings and non-human entities (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999, 24).

1.4 Modernity, Globalisation and Cyberspace

Technological change, especially such where new technology (like the internet) is adopted by a more traditional society (like Nepal), can be seen as an act of two things: modernisation (a pre-modern society adopting modern characteristics) and globalisation (a Nepali village becoming interwoven into the interconnectedness of the global modern world through internet and telecommunications). So both modernity (the state of being modernised) and globalisation, and the relation of internet to them, are relevant and require some explanation.

"Globalisation" is an umbrella term denoting a complex set of phenomena. One of these is disembedding, the movement towards a more abstract world. A world with writing, that allows knowledge without a given person, a "knower". A world with the clock, which externalises time, chops it up into units that are identical for everybody, anywhere and any time, independent of the ebbs and flows of experienced time. A world with units of measurement – abstract concepts of otherwise subjective experiences like length and weight. Anthony Giddens defines disembedding as the "lifting out" of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space (1990, 21). In other words, it is a transition from a concrete society, based on intimate, personal relationships, memory, local religion and orally transmitted myths, to an abstract society

based on formal legislation, archives, a book religion and written history (Eriksen 2007, 18). A lifting out of things from their context into abstractness.

The above description of globalisation as a movement towards a more abstract world also fits modernity. In fact, modernity is in many ways a similar thing, except it takes place on a smaller scale, like that of a nation or a state (Eriksen 2007, 25-27). So globalisation is modernity with a global spread (Eriksen 2007, 30). So globalisation is (among the plethora of other phenomena) global disembedding.

What role does the internet play in this? A good amount of theory has been produced on the relations between the internet and globalisation. One of the authors in this field, Manuel Castells, says the conditions for an accelerated and intensified globalisation were created primarily by three processes: the deregulation of world markets, the end of the Cold War, and the growth of information technology (1996, 3). Now, thanks to the latter, distance between cause and effect can be enormous and space is relativised through the use of telecommunications.

Now, let us clarify one final notion, that of “cyberspace”. The word was coined by the science fiction author William Gibson. In his 1984 science fiction novel “Neuromancer” he depicted cyberspace as a global monolithic placeless medium in a future world which had degenerated into a similarly placeless capital-driven dystopia ruled by transnational corporations, where words denoting locations and nationalities were used as mere adjectives or trademarks: Danish vodka, Japanese neurosurgery, German steel. The novel demonstrated eerie foresight and the word entered mainstream use together with the internet in the 1990-s. Initially it denoted the idea of what internet use was going to be like: global and placeless, almost a psychedelic experience of extreme disembedding from the offline reality. As shown by many studies (Miller and Slater 2000, Ahola 2005, Burrell 2012), this is a fruitless view. The term “cyberspace” has by now become ubiquitous and its field of meanings has exploded to the point of uselessness. Meanwhile, the view of internet as a disembedded online reality has fallen out of use, as people do not see the internet as a “place” where you go and become detached from your physical surroundings. In my work the situation appears to be similar – this new media appears to be deeply embedded in the rest of the participants' social lives, not separated from it.

1.5 High-Context and Low-Context

The concept of context played an important role above: we saw how globalisation and modernisation signify the "lifting of the social relation out of their local contexts of interaction". The movement towards abstraction is all about losing the context, hiding it or decreasing its importance.

In current research the approach of high context versus low context communication plays an important role. This approach was developed in the 1970-s by Edward Twitchell Hall, Jr., an influential American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher. Hall was an adherent of a view (quite trivial now, but important at its time), according to which culture is a model constructed by its bearers, that helps us make sense of the real world. It protects our senses from information overload, categorises reality and puts order into it (Hall 1976, 9-15).

According to Hall, culture defines how we experience reality through the use of context. Some cultures rely on context more than others. He distinguishes between two different styles of communication, high-context and low-context: "A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation, or a child trying to explain to his mother why he got into a fight." (Hall 1976, 86-91)

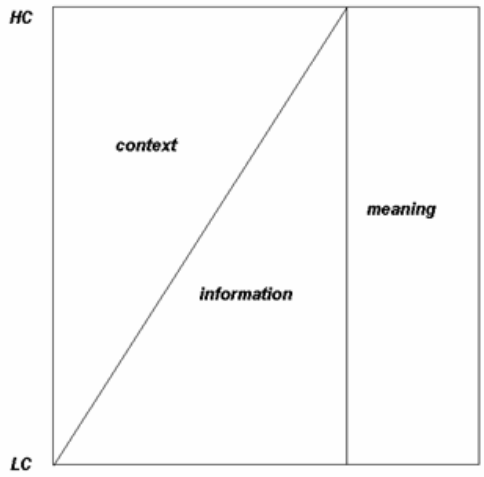

Illustration 1: The LC-HC axis (Hall 1976, 102)

Change pushes our communication towards the LC end of the scale. Since change makes a lot of context dysfunctional we have to be more and more explicit (LC) in our communication. Globalisation, i.e. change towards disembedding "lifts our social relations out of the local context", and places it into new ones. So on the one hand, globalisation moves us toward a more abstract world of less context, but on the other, context will always be there, especially in more and more complex situations, since complexity will result in overload, if we do not turn towards more HC style of communication and let context take care of some of the meaning-making.

The notion of modern life being abstract or context-independent has come under criticism. Bruno Latour has even used the statement "we have never been modern" as a title of his book (1993). In other words he claims that we have always been dependent on context. With modernity as a move towards a more abstract world we have not reduced the amount of context, but just turned to a different kind of one. The actor-network theory is meant as a tool to help bring that context back into view and explore it.

1.6 Actor-Networks, Black Boxes and Punctualisation

In order to start seeing the context, ANT proposes that we think of the world as made up of actors, and the relations between them. In contrast to other similar approaches, like Manuel

Castells' network society (1996), the actors do not necessarily have to be human. Actors are simply “entities that do things” – be they humans, animals, artefacts, machines, groups, institutions, etc. According to Latour, the distinction between human and non-humans, embodied or disembodied skills, impersonations or “machination,” are less interesting than the complete chain along which actions are distributed (Latour 1992, 243). The emphasis here in on relations between entities, not entities themselves.

An important aspect of actors is that they consist of a number of elements – a human is made of organs and body parts, knowledge, habits, preferences; a technical system is made of its components and relations. These components can in turn be considered actors. So any actor is simultaneously a network of other actors; and any actor is simultaneously a network of its components. That is the meaning of the term actor-network: the world is made up of collections of components, which in turn are components in bigger collections, bigger networks. Naturally, an actor obtains its essence only in relation to the network it is in. Actors and networks are mutually constitutive.

The next important concept is a black box. The term is derived from cybernetics, where it signifies a piece of machinery or a set of commands that might be very complex but can be substituted by a box because it is regular and stable (Wiener 1948). In studying sociotechnical phenomena, a black box could be a computer, a car, a television or any other object that operates as it should. When this occurs, the complex sociotechnical relationships that constitute it are rendered invisible, or black-boxed. The more a box appears to be closed, the more are the networks it includes assumed to be reliable and stable themselves. "The more automatic and the blacker the box is, the more it has to be accompanied by people" (Latour 1987, 137). Relating to the previous section about context: a black box is an actor-network, a sociotechnical system, that is lifted out of its context, or whose context has been hidden from view. In a sense, it is a high-context unit, context that has been sealed up.

Punctualisation refers to the process by which complex actor-networks are black boxed. The process of punctualisation thus converts an entire network into a single point or node in another network (Callon 1991, 153; Law 1992, 4-5). For example, a university is a network consisting of personnel, technical devices, financial resources and facilities. When seen from the level of a state government, all these actors are punctualised into a singe entity: the university. So punctualisation is the verb which leads to the noun of the black box. Of course,

as we shall see, a black box is not a state, a configuration of things, but more like a process in itself, so to a certain degree these two concepts can be considered synonyms.

1.7 My Methodological Toolbox

In describing the sociotechnical system I am using concepts taken from the actor-network theory. ANT grew out of an environment of high technological impact (science and technology studies) so I find it suitable for studying the social relations around a computer network. ANT is also appropriate for explaining social processes in situations of abrupt change, where sets of concepts have not yet been developed (Latour 2005, 149) or where previously existing concepts and categories like the classical anthropological concepts of kinship, power, magic, tradition or religion, might be misleading.

To summarise my approach: as an anthropologist interpreting my experiences during fieldwork in Namche, I will be concentrating on the sociotechnical system consisting of the internet, computers and people (both Nepali and tourists). Point one: my approach is informed by the distinction between modern and traditional, which in simplified terms is the degree of reliance on context. For characterisation I am using Edward Hall's categories of high-context and low-context. Point two: my approach is also informed by the critique of point one, of the idea of low-context communication, of context-independence, of abstract modernity. For this I rely on the actor-network theory.

2 The Setting

2.1 Nepal, Khumbu and the Sherpas

By going to a “developing country” or “emerging market”, in other words by doing my research in a cultural environment which is different from the one where ICT technologies are being spawned and developed I hope to gain a better insight into the adoption (as opposed to creation) processes. Besides, most of the growth in internet usage now is happening outside the traditional “technologically advanced” geographical areas of the world (which gives reason to question the validity of such a division). According to a report on internet trends by a private venture capital consultation company Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, the fastest growers in the amount of internet users during 2007-2010 were China, India, Nigeria and Russia (Meeker 2011, slide 7). Nepal is located between the two fastest growers, China and India, and can be considered as non-contributing to the ICT sector (China and India contribute by housing factories and software R&D departments of both national and multinational companies). So the internet in Nepal can be considered something purely consumed and not locally produced. This gives me an opportunity to observe an adoption of a totally alien technology.

Nepal is an interesting field for anthropological study. Until 1949 the government of Nepal rigorously excluded foreigners from travelling outside of Kathmandu by rule of the then governing Rana dynasty that closed Nepal to all foreigners (in a successful attempt to protect it from British colonial influence). From then on just a few mountaineering expeditions were granted passage. In the 1950-s came a change of attitude and tourists were welcomed in (According to Stevens 1993, 356 this was in relation to King Mahendra's coronation in 1955; according to Sherry Ortner 1978, 28 this happened in 1952). From then on this previously isolated and technologically stagnant country has seen a growing torrent of tourists, and been heavily affected by it. In a few decades it made a quantum leap from a medieval-like setting to a 20th century life with electricity, internal combustion engine, telephone and now, the computers.

My fieldwork area was in the region of Khumbu, famous as the land of the Sherpas.

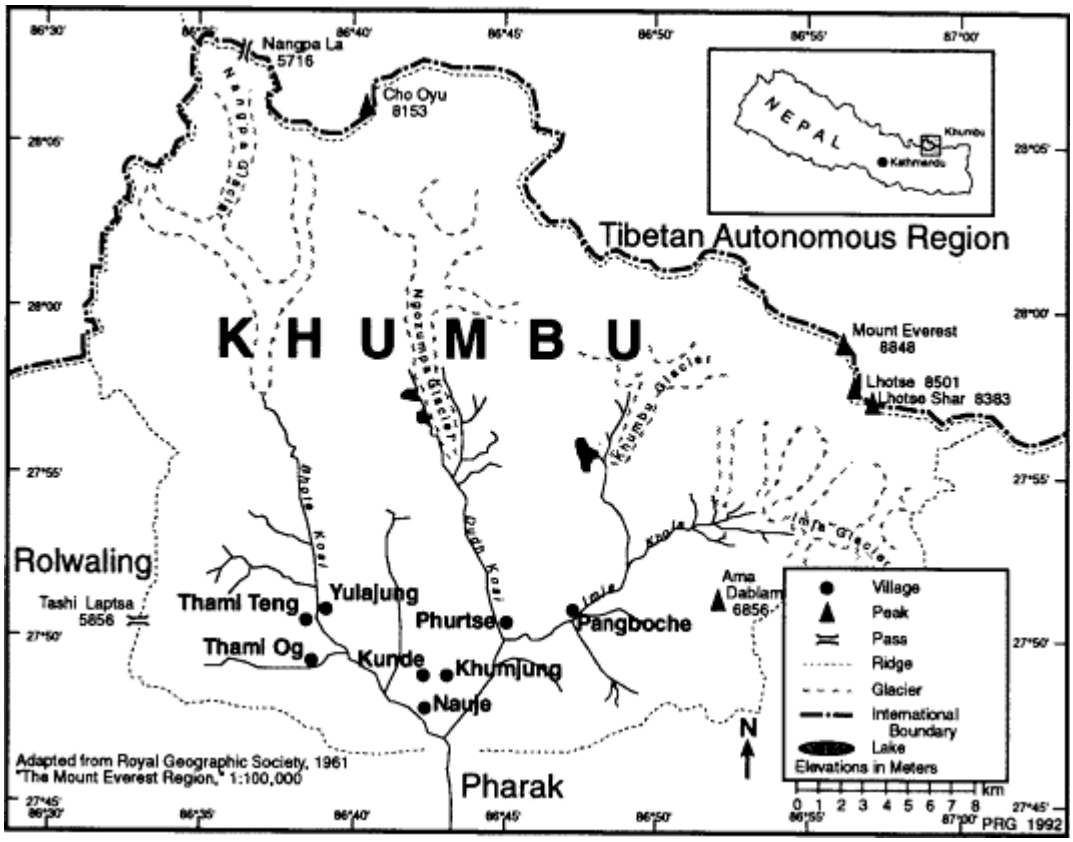

Illustration 2 - Location of Khumbu and Namche (called Nauje on this map). From Stevens 1993, 25.

Khumbu is also the location of Mount Everest that has sparked interest in Europeans ever since they had the social and technological organisation sufficient to cater for such a dangerous and irrational pastime as climbing inaccessible peaks. In the 1950-s when China occupied Tibet and Nepal ended the isolation policy, mountaineering expeditions were launched from Nepal instead of Tibet. The region of Khumbu became a staging ground for the race to "conquer" the world's highest mountain. The local people, the Sherpas, became entangled in that race.

"When men first were drawn to Everest, it was an unknown quantity. It lay between two unknown countries – Tibet and Nepal." This is a quote from the narrator's text in the 1953 UK documentary "The conquest of Everest". This Freudian slip describes the British attitude of the time: the mountaineers were considered the first "men" to arrive at Mount Everest, the local population living there for centuries was something more like a natural resource to be used. Over time the role of Sherpas has, however, came to be more and more recognized and now they enjoy worldwide fame. Both the Sherpas and their land of Khumbu have been researched extensively by anthropologists. The race to the top of Mount Everest and the social

and cultural effects of this and other mountaineering activities are described by anthropologist Sherry Ortner in her excellent study “Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering” (1999). She has also done extensive research on Buddhism – the religion of the Sherpas, and described her findings in “Sherpas Through Their Rituals” (1978) and “High Religion” (1989). Stanley Stevens has done cultural ecological research on the Sherpas, their sustenance (agriculture and pastoralism), and the effects of tourism described in “Claiming the High Ground” (1993). I will also be referring to Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, one of the first anthropological explorers of the region, a man with a very interesting life story. At the breakout of World War II he found himself, a citizen of Austria and the word “Fürer” in his name, trapped in Allied India. Fortunately for anthropology, the British authorities gave him a reasonable amount of freedom and he conducted his fieldwork while being confined to India and Nepal, much like during the previous World War Malinowski was trapped on the Trobriand Islands. He did extensive research among the Sherpas and has written several books about his findings, including: “The Sherpas of Nepal” (1964) and “The Sherpas Transformed” (1984).

2.2 Namche Bazaar and the Role of Tourism

The location of my fieldwork was Namche Bazaar, Nepal. The name is alternatively Namche, Namche Bazaar or Nauje. Sherry Ortner and Stanley Stevens use Nauje, and this is considered to be the Sherpa name. I use the Nepali name Namche, because during all my time there I did not hear anybody refer it to in any other way than that (probably because I communicated in English, not Sherpa).

As mentioned in the introductory section, Namche is physically isolated by mountainous terrain. There is an airfield about one or two day's hike away, at the village of Lukla. There is also a short airstrip just above Namche, but only small Pilatus Porter aircraft and certain helicopters can use it, because of its short length and the fact that is located so high in the thin atmosphere. The usual route, however, is to fly from Kathmandu to Lukla (120 USD for the ticket) and hike from there. Another option is to hike from Jiri, which is the nearest bus stop. This takes about a week, depending on the physical ability of the hiker.

Namche village is located on a hillslope, with the lowest point at 3450 m ASL. It is the main economic hub of the region, with a weekly market on Saturdays. As this is the heart of

Sherpa territory, the inhabitants are mostly Sherpas, with a historic Rai minority. The economic and tourism boom of the recent decades has brought people from many other ethnicities (or castes, as they were rather seen by my informants) to seek jobs there. These people are mostly Rais and Tamangs, but it is possible to find many other peoples as well. Namche is in fact a very multicultural place, even excluding the tourists. The general language of communication is Nepali. Sherpas using their own language among themselves, but are switching more and more to Nepali (since they cannot read and write in Sherpa, but only Nepali, or some of them in English, Tibetan script is taught at the primary school now, so this situation might change in the future). Rais, Tamangs, Chaudharys, etc. all have their own languages, but not all of them are able to speak their indigenous languages, so they also use Nepali. In this paper I will use the term Nepali to denote a Nepali person regardless of the caste/ethnicity.

Namche is on the trail to the Base Camp of Mount Everest. Everest Base Camp is a very popular trekking destination for tourists and is called EBC for short. Most trekkers want to see Mount Everest and be able to say that they have stood at the foot of it. Besides EBC there are other attractions: smaller peaks and high passes for enjoying the views and putting yourself to the test.

There are two tourism seasons in a year: March to May and September to December. Summer is rainy season (with snow in the higher regions) and wintertime is too cold for comfortable trekking. Catering to the flow of trekkers can be considered the main economic activity in Namche. This takes three different forms: offering porter and guide services, keeping a lodge and a restaurant, or running a tourist shop. There is now tens of lodges in Namche, providing accommodation and food for all the trekkers and hikers. According to Stevens (1993, 363-364) these were originally, until the 1970-s, just ordinary Sherpa houses with a sign up front, inviting trekkers in for a meal and a bed. Nowadays, however, lodges are purpose-built houses with separate rooms and have little in common with traditional Sherpa houses (i.e. houses used before the rise of tourism). By the way, it is important to note, that previously Sherpas depended heavily on trade with Tibet as a source of income. In 1967 the Chinese government restricted trade with occupied Tibet, which was a major economic blow for the Sherpas. Fortunately this coincided more or less with the rise in tourism, which provided, after a short period of doubt and transition, an alternative source of income (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, 3). Tourism, just like trade, could be made to fit well with traditional

agricultural and pastoral activities to diversify the sources of income. Now, limited over-the-border trade is again being carried out with Tibet, which has diversified the Sherpa economy even further.

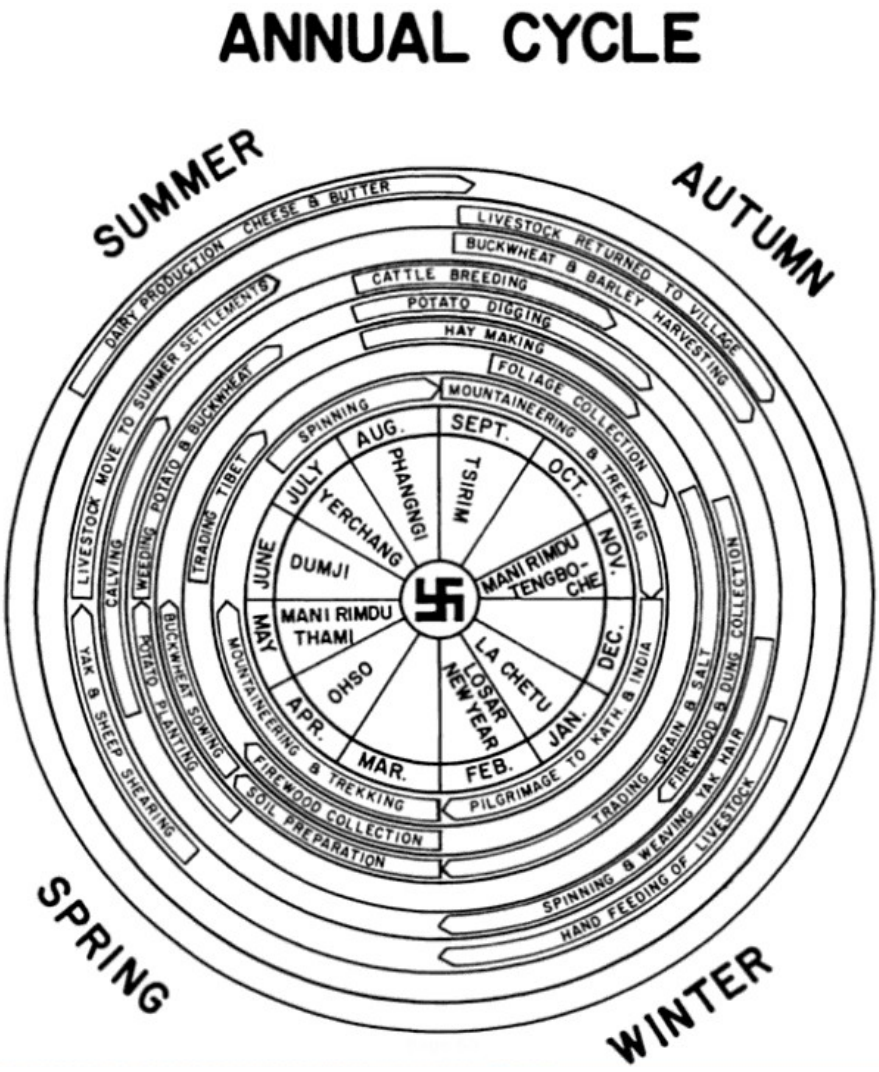

Illustration 3: The position of mountaineering and trekking (Mar-May and Sept-Nov) in the Sherpa Calendar according to Fisher (1990).

According to Stevens, even households which earned most of their income from tourism still continued to grow crops. He estimates that tourism accounts for 90% of monetary income for the Khumbu region, but nevertheless it is a supplementary activity. The Sherpas are aware of tourism's unstable character, its responsiveness to the ebbs and flows of global economy and have stated their readiness to return to agro-pastoralism if tourism loses its attractiveness

(1993, 371). While I did not conduct specific research on this topic, I noticed that my host family was cultivating potato, and all the terraces in Namche were being used for either crops or grazing cattle, so people were involved with agropastoralism at least to some extent.

Nevertheless, to think of this area as a "traditional" culture would be clearly a mistake.

As of now, Namche is visited by thousands of tourists every year (according to a wall chart in the National Park Office in Jorsale, the average tourist count of the last 13 years is about 23 000 per year, excluding the mountaineering expeditions, which probably amounts to a couple of hundred people per year). These tourists come from all over the world (I listed 20 different countries without really concentrating on it) and usually spend around two days in Namche to rest and acclimatize to the high altitude. The local people who speak English have plenty of contact with tourists during the high season. So despite its geographically isolated location it is much more in contact with other countries than most rural Nepali villages. And I haven't even mentioned the internet yet.

2.3 Modernity and Change?

Although due to the history of Nepal, some fifty years ago Namche Bazaar could surely have been considered a pre-modern society, together with concrete relations, memory-based history, personal and oral history and intimate relationships, it would be a grave mistake to still regard it as such. The "pure, untouched" state is described by the early explorers like von Fürer-Haimendorf (1964). He also described with much tragedy the social change resulting from the increasing tourist flow and contact with the money-based impersonal polluting western culture (1984). Whether to regard the social change as a fall from grace or a welcome progress in technology, medical facilities and social organisation remains up to the interpreter. But it is indisputable that the social change has been remarkable.

On the opposite side, it could be argued that the Sherpa society has always experienced change. Stevens describes a widely accepted view (1993, 213-214), according to which the Sherpa agropastoral history can be divided into three relatively static phases: early period of mixed agropastoralism brought from Tibet, the "potato revolution" starting in the mid-1800 (described by von Fürer-Haimendorf as a powerful event, resulting in a population explosion,

settling new and higher areas and a new level of prosperity, including a new number of temples and monasteries being built) and the “tourism period” where reliance on traditional subsistence has decreased and transformed by effects of mountaineering and mass tourism.

This view already would implicate a fair amount of change over the history, but Stevens argues against it and believes the truth to be even more dynamic. His research (1993, 214-215) has showed the local history not to be a static traditional existence with just two periods of rapid change (first potato, then tourists), but as a much more diverse and eventful evolution: “Sherpas do not support this view on their past. Khumbu oral traditions and oral history […] tell a story instead of a more dynamic history of innovation and adaptation.”

While there has been a fair amount of change in the lifeways of the people there, in 1950 the characterisation as “pre-modern” still holds, since none of the change by then can be described as disembedding or lifting the social relations out of local context. There were mountaineering expeditions and job-seeking trips to Darjeeling in India, but the scale of these was small, compared to the onslaught of tourism triggered by the construction of the airstrip in Lukla in 1964 (Ortner 1999, von Fürer-Haimendorf 1984, Fisher 1990). This resulted in an explosion of change (see Illustration 4).

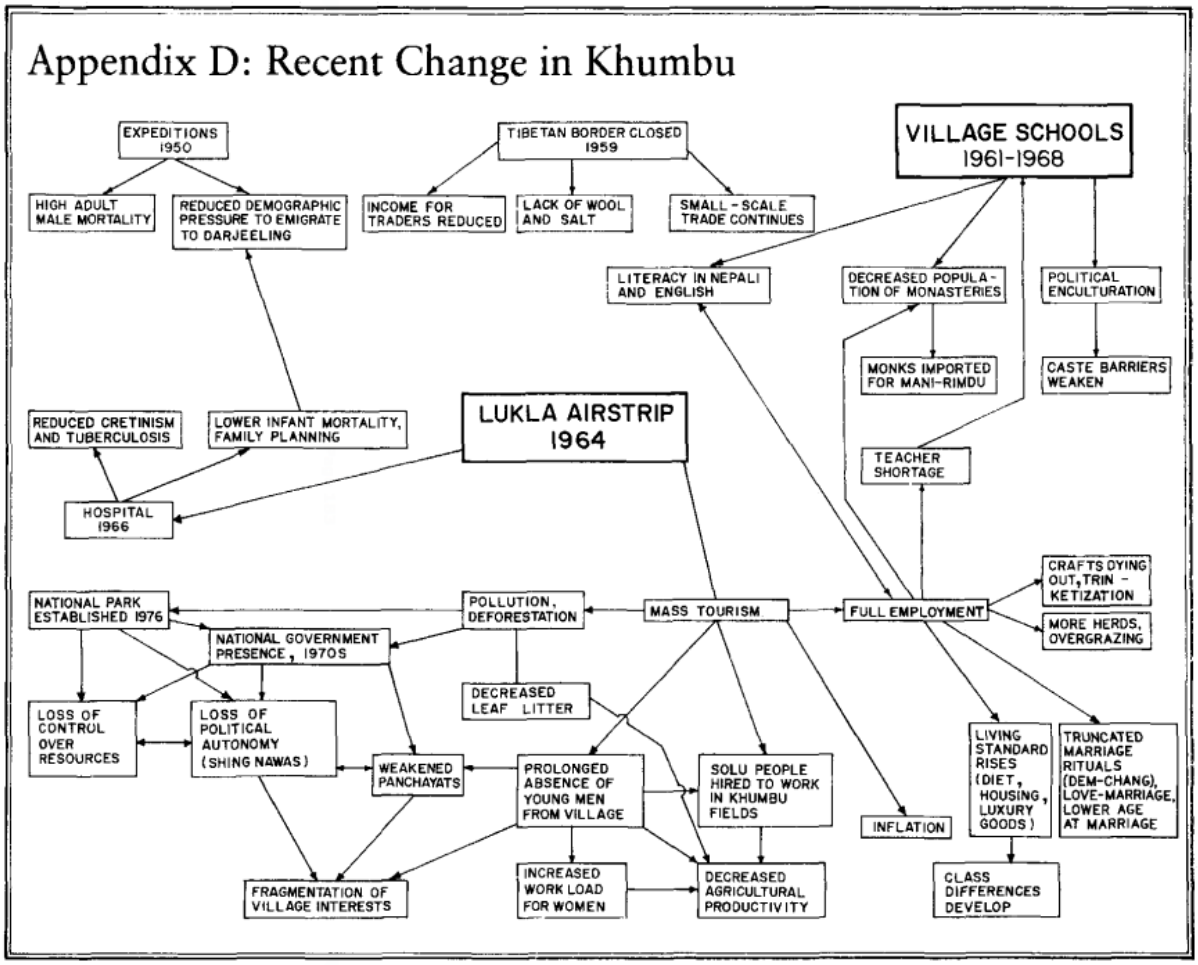

Illustration 4: Change in 1950-1990 in Khumbu (Fisher 1990,183).

While the reason for building the airstrip was to start a school construction project, James Fisher, the anthropologist who was also participating in the school construction programme, later discovered that the construction of the schools had far less impact than one of the by-products of their building: the airstrip itself, which made a rapid increase in tourism possible" (1990, front sleeve). This illustrates the unpredictability of technological change.

It is safe to say that both education and tourism have played a role as modernising agents. I did fieldwork in one of the schools mentioned by Fisher and we will come back to it.

3 Fieldwork in Namche

It is early morning, about 6 o'clock. I have already been to the monastery to see the monks and their early morning chanting. Now I am sitting in front of Khumbu Cybercafe and waiting for my informant, Sameer, to come and open it. The mountain air is crisp and clean, the sun is just about to appear from behind the mountain-tops. A very enjoyable smell of juniper smoke is hanging in the air of the whole village. It is rising from small altars in front of the houses here and there. It is a Sherpa custom to burn juniper branches. It pleases the gods, they say. It certainly pleases me, at least.

The village street is quite empty, I saw one porter carrying some plywood, probably to a construction site somewhere. And then a *dzopkio* – a crossbreed of a yak and a cow. These wander around here on the streets all the time, on their own. I can hear morning village sounds: cocks crowing and somebody working with a saw somewhere. After ten minutes Sameer appears. He is happy to see me. He opens the padlock on the cybercafe door and we go in. Sameer has lots of switches to flip – the lights, all seven computers and monitors, and some extension cables powering the internet switches and wifi routers.

Half an hour later we are sitting behind a computer and surfing around on Facebook. Sameer has been upstairs, in the lodge, to eat breakfast. There is a monitor in the kitchen connected to a CCTV camera in the cybercafe, so he would see if a client appears. But there has been no clients – it is off-season and there is neither tourists nor locals on the move this early. So we are sitting and surfing the Facebook for now. Later some clients appear and I go sit in my usual spot in the corner, take my trusty notebook and start observing.

3.1 Two Months of Yaks, Cables and Cybercafes

To prepare for my project, I contacted an Estonian woman who is doing voluntary work in an orphanage in Kathmandu. She put me in contact with a hotel-owner in Kathmandu, who in turn referred me to a lodge-owner in Namche. The fact that just two people are enough to establish a link between an Estonian student and a Sherpa man in the Himalayas speaks something about the interconnectedness of our world.

I spent a total of ten weeks in Namche, starting in April with the tourist season in full

swing, and ending in June when the rainy season had started, stream of tourists had almost stopped and a significant part of the population of Namche had done the seasonal migration back to their home villages. Namche was half-empty at that time.

My lodgeowner, with whom I stayed, told me that the main man about everything to do with internet here is Nima Gyaltsen Sherpa from Khumbu Lodge: a local business leader, lodgeowner and internet service provider. He is operating a radio link which provides internet connection to Namche Bazaar and some surrounding villages. So I set up an interview with him, and started doing observation at his cybercafe, Khumbu Cyber.

3.2 Khumbu Cyber, Sameer and Rajesh

Khumbu Cyber is where I spent most of my time. It is located in the very center of Namche, on the ground floor of Khumbu Lodge and is a part of Nima's business operation consisting of a lodge, restaurant and a cybercafe, as is very usual here. Khumbu Cybercafe contains seven computers in one room about 10 m x 5 m. There are two small booths, one for international phone calls (VoIP) and another for standard intra-Nepal calls (NTC landline). There is also a copy-machine, a printer, a scanner and recharge cards for pre-paid mobile phones.

Most of my time in Khumbu Cyber I was sitting on a bench in the corner, passively observing and taking notes. Sometimes I had my camera out on a tripod and would point it and start recording, if something of interest was happening. People, tourists from different countries, Sherpas and other Nepali people, came and went, sitting behind computers and browsing the internet, buying recharge cards for mobile phones, making phone calls. Sameer, the clerk, helped anyone who needed assistance, and took care of the payments. He came and talked to me whenever he had a spare moment. I did not understand any of the Nepali dialogues except place names and numbers, so I would often ask him about what had happened earlier – he would explain to me who had said what. Of course, a lot of the information was still lost because of my inability to understand Nepali, but it was during these conversations I got most of the information I learned.

Sameer was one of my main informants. The other one was Rajesh, the other employee of Khumbu Cyber. Whereas Sameer sat in the cybercafe and attended to clients, Rajesh was the technician. He was usually out and about on errands, fixing the cable here and there or taking

care of some equipment. Rajesh is Chaudhary, which is a subset of the Tharu ethnic group (Gautam et al 1994, 328). He himself says that “Tharu is another word for Chaudhary”. His father is the headmaster of a school in a village halfway between Namche and Lukla. Nima knew his father and six years ago, when he needed somebody to take care of the technical side of his internet connection business, he asked around. So Rajesh has been working in Namche for six years now, intermittently also studying in a college in Kathmandu.

Sameer is a friend of Rajesh. They are both from Lahan, in Tarai region of Nepal. One year ago Nima asked Rajesh to invite a friend to work at Khumbu Cyber, they needed more hands. So Sanijv asked Sameer to come.

3.3 Namche Primary School and Dawa

The other important fieldwork arena besides Khumbu Cyber was the village school. The computer/mathematics teacher there, Dawa Sherpa, became my third informant. He was very friendly and gave me permission to film and observe his computer lessons. I attended three 5th grade computer lessons (I chose the 5th grade, because it was the oldest at this school). I also asked the lama teaching at the school for permission to film his lesson, and he agreed. So I also filmed one of his Tibetan language lessons, for comparison. It is quite usual in Nepal for schools to be English, and all subjects except Tibetan and Nepali were taught in English, which of course suited me very well.

3.4 Trips Along the Network

I took two trips with Rajesh, when he was doing his errands. First, it turned out that Khumbu Cyber was also providing internet connection to the school and he needed to go check why it is not working. We spent half a day checking the cable, fixing it here and there and configuring the network to get the connection to work.

On another day we took a hike with Rajesh to the radio link stations. Nima's internet connection works via a radio link between Namche and Udayapur in South Nepal. This is due to the fact that Nima and his associates had worked out how to achieve direct line of sight along a valley all the way from Namche to South-Nepal, where they have subscribed to internet connection from a Nepali ISP called Worldlink. Direct line-of-sight is required for the

radio link to work. The radio link is 120 km long, a fact that Nima is proud of and many people find it hard to believe according to him. This radio link extends the Worldlink connection onwards over the mountains into Namche. There were two of these radio link receiving stations (one for backup) and they were connected to Namche by optical cable. One was just on Namche border, the other about two hours away. I learned a lot about the technical aspects of the internet connection on this trip. From the receiving stations here at Namche another radiolink goes on to Chukkung, another to Imja – remote but popular trekking/mountaineering destinations – so Nima does not provide internet connection only to Namche but also to neighbouring villages.

3.5 Note-taking

For note-taking I used the method described in "Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes" by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). First, I made jottings of keywords, names, figures and mnemonics during conversing/observing or immediately after, which I later converted into expanded fieldnotes (during a break or in the evenings). I also transcribed video interviews and dialogues into text.

In addition to fieldnotes I also wrote analytic texts, based on the method of Developmental Reseach Sequence, described by James P. Spradley in his "Participant Observation" (1980). This included extracting "terms" – words of cultural significance – and combining them into domains and taxonomies – categories of meaning. These domains and taxonomies can then be combined into paradigms by finding out the similarities and differences between the terms included in them. All this analytical work should continuously be checked and backed by observations.

As my fieldwork progressed I tried to follow Spradley's DRS method and keep up with the writing tasks he prescribes. I started out with a lot of enthusiasm which gradually decreased. It seems to me that DRS is more useful in prolonged or more intensive fieldwork situations with more material, in my case the organising potential of DRS did not really become viable, although some of the analytic texts I wrote were useful.

3.6 Video Camera Use

I had the camera with me almost always, but approximately half ot the time I did not take

it out of the bag. Taking out the camera seemed to send a powerful message to the participants that “this now is important” which affected those participants who had not been exposed to the camera often enough to be “immune” to it.

There were two types of camera work – open observation and planned shots. I observed situations that I deemed interesting with a camera, without much thinking about what kind of shots I need, simply pointing the camera's attention where my informants seemed to be pointing theirs. In the cybercafe I often felt like I am intruding the privacy of the internet users, however. So I tried to establish some kind of a eye contact or nod-greeting instead of just starting to shoot a complete stranger (filmmaking is still more about working with people than working with a camera).

Planned shots formed a small part, maybe a tenth, of the shooting and were mostly scenic shots not involving important human activities. I kept a list of shots I needed, adding items into this list in some creative mood sometimes late at night when thinking about my project or reading something (Hampe 2007 gave me ideas often). Then I would sometimes go out with the camera specifically to “get that shot”.

The camera gave me the following abilities:

Comprehend unknown languages. Although my informants spoke some English, a lot of the intricate detail of social situations was being lost due to my lack of Nepali ability. I made a friend in Namche, a trekking guide named Ramesh, with whom I met in Kathmandu after my fieldwork period in Namche was over. We watched through my footage and he made me a rough translation of the Nepali dialogues. So the camera worked as a (delayed, but still) translation device, helping me reveal many important details about what had happened. While it would naturally be better for me to understand the language and hence the situations live, being able to understand foreign language situations is still a wonderful ability afforded to us by technology.

Intricate details of communication – when I observed the communication between participants, I was trying to concentrate on the content of what is being said. Watching the same dialogues from video tape over and over gave me insights about the unspoken communication – proxemics, body language.

As is typical in ethnographic analysis, or rather any analytic work, I used writing as an “extension of the mind”, writing out, formulating, phrasing, rephrasing and analysing my

thoughts in the text editor. I felt the need for a similar ability with video. A need for the ability to review my video material on a big screen and doing some preliminary rough form of editing – which is equivalent to “thinking” in a text editor, only its “thinking” with footage. Lightweight editing software allows this already quite easily and soon it will probably be a standard procedure on visual-anthropological fieldwork.

Metje Postma describes two different, to a certain degree conflicting, audivisual styles in ethnography: description and narrative. The first is concentrated on “descriptive data” and its authority is determined by its representativeness and the precision of its description in relation to the “real event” (2006, 321). It is “technical” footage (not raw or unedited!). The other is an ethnographic documentary, a film with a particularity that lies in cross-cultural representation of the reality of the members of the other community, based on ethnographic understanding (2006, 325). That means a film in the “filmic” sense – with a narrative and characters. The former suits well for depicting cultural actions, the latter for people. Both are beneficial for written ethnography as well. Trying to find stories, concrete narratives presentable in the film also helps to order the knowledge about a cultural situation.

Of the text to follow, most of chapter 5 was discovered through working with the footage for filmmaking purposes, diving the material into scenes and finding narrative elements. Knowledge about dynamic elements of culture are easier to discover through a dynamic medium.

4 High Context Communication at the School

4.1 Computer Lessons at the School

I start describing my findings with the primary school because that really helped me open up the reality in Namche. I started my observation there a few weeks into my fieldwork, after meeting one of the teachers in the library and discovering through casual small-talk that they teach computers there.

The first thing to catch my attention as I entered the classroom was a poster on the wall, hand written on a huge red sheet of paper, with a black marker. The poster consisted of the following text (spelling mistakes in original):

> "COMUTER
> Definitions of "Computer"
> 1) The word Computer is taken from the word "Compute" means to calculate
> 2) A Computer is an electronic machine which can read, write and compute data.
> 3) A Computer is an electronic device which accepts data and instructions, processes them and gives processed output as information.
>
> PARTS OF COMPUTER
> 1)CPU = Central Processing Unit
> 2)Monitor (VDU = Visual Display Unit)
> 3)Keyboard
> 4)Mouse
> 5)CD-ROM Drive
> 6)Floppy Disk Drive
> 7)Printer
> 8)Volt Guard

9)Speaker

More info:
Data = information about something
Instruction= Command, order
Processing= Changing data into useful information
Unit = Component

Produced by: Dawa Sherpa"

This is certainly a very formal approach to the topic of computers. The lesson itself followed a similar pattern of formality in speech. Here is a transcript of the video taken during the lesson:

Teacher: What are the capabilities of a computer. You! Tell me number one.
Pupil A: Storage, reliability... [teacher writing the words on a whiteboard as the pupil reads them]
Teacher: Accuracy... And number four?
Pupil A: Versatility...
Teacher: Number five?
Pupil A: Diligence and speed.
Teacher: And speed. [turns to others] all things are included or not?
Pupils together: Yes.
Teacher: And what do you mean by accuracy?
Pupil A: Accuracy means accurate. And mathematical...
Teacher: I have shown you a very good example in your computer yesterday. Bring your chair [sitting down behind a computer, showing, pupils gather around him] We are going to do mathematical calculation which gives the accurate results. Now we are going to do the mathematical problems operations under the addition, multiplication, subtraction and division in a computer with the help of a computer. Yes or no? [starts a calculator program in Windows] It is?

> Calculator! Yes or no? When we are going to write 5 + 5, it equals 10. It is correct or not? Not correct yes?
> Pupil B: Correct.
> Teacher: Correct, good. That means accurate. Accurate answer or not?
> Pupil B: Yes.
> Teacher: So computer, one of the characteristics of a computer is accuracy. Yes or no?
> Pupils together: Yes.

The rest of the lesson followed a similar pattern of learning abstract knowledge about the topic of computers, not so much about a real concrete computer as a tool or device to be usad in practice. Here is an excerpt from the textbook[1], section "Main Points to Remember" of the chapter being studied during that lesson:

> "A computer is an electronic device that accepts data and instructions, processes them and gives processed output as information.
> Every computer has two types of memory: Primary memory and secondary memory. RAM and ROM represent primary memory. Hard disk, floppy disk, CD ROM are examples of secondary memory."
> (Khanal 2009, 14-15)

This was the first computer lesson at the school that I observed. On the same day I also started observations at one of the cybercafes. Here is an excerpt about the cybercafe for comparison.

> Nima's [the owner's] sister is watching some Hindi music videos from youtube. The band is called Heartbeat. We are sitting with Sameer and chatting about his past. He shows me pictures of Dharan [a town he lived in for a while]. He tells me it is nice and clean, not like Kathmandu. He shows me pictures of several places in Nepal that he has a connection to. He googles "[placename]+pictures" to find photos

1 The textbook is printed in 2009 but it is written in 1996, and while it is very thorough about the computer technology of 1996, it has seen only minor revisions. It still contains information about floppy disks (5¼" and 3½" with sizes in Kb), which have been totally obsolete for years. The textbook even contains a separate chapter on MS-DOS together with a "Practical", where students learn to navigate around in the folders using MS-DOS command prompt commands. The teacher surely has freedom to skip the obsolete parts and Dawa seems to be aware of what is outdated.

> of the places. Quite often (but not always) he double-clicks internet links unnecessarily. Never does he pay any attention to web pages with text. Only photos.

Computer use at the Khumbu Cyber is casual. Nothing about “versatility” and “diligence”. Just Youtube videos and photographs. I see people, both local and tourists, reading their e-mail, chatting on Skype and communicating to their friends on Facebook. No “accuracy” or “speed”. Just interpersonal communication. The computer class and the cybercafe seem to be two different worlds.

I tried to understand why these two worlds are so different. For one, the education setting in Namche in general struck me as quite authoritative. The teacher is addressed by the kids as “sir”, always. Before entering the class, the student asks for permission from the teacher. The schoolday starts with a lineup of all students, some marching exercises, a headcount and a singing of the Nepali anthem. All students must wear a school uniform.

Singing of the anthem every morning reminds us of the fact that the school is very sharply a government setting. It is an establishment conforming to the operational program set by the Nepali Government.

4.2 It's Government Service and Therefore Useless?

> May 31st, we are sitting in Khumbu Cyber. Two young men enter and bring a device with them, that to me looks like a receiver from a radio dish antenna. After a brief chat with them, Rajesh explains to me, that it indeed is the receiver from the NTC mobile phone tower, from the antenna upholding the radio link south from here. Something is wrong with the device and they brought it here to fix it. The two guys turn out to be NTC employees. They chat with Sanijv for about 10 minutes, then leave. The broken device stays here. Rajesh then explains to me, that the mobile phone tower is not working (I check my mobile phone and, indeed, there is no coverage). Rajesh tells me that tomorrow they will fix it. “If this was private company, they would fix it now. But it is government office, so they go tomorrow.”

This sentiment appears to be widespread: if something is government, then it is reason

enough for it to be not good. In an interview with Nima, the owner of Khumbu Cyber, he told me about the two mobile phone operators in Namche. There is Nepali Telecom or NTC, which is a “government” service and therefore “worthless”. And then there is Ncell, which is “private” and “a good service, owned by TeliaSonera, a Swedish company.“

“But it is government office, so they go tomorrow.” This statement seems to legitimise fixing a problem later rather than sooner. A “government service” and “worthless” are not two properties that often appear together. Instead, one property is the cause for the other: being “government” is a cause for being “worthless”.

This generalisation naturally brings to my mind the school. In the previous section we saw that I got a strong impression of the sharp contrast between the computer class and real-life at Khumbu Cyber. The school lessons were something that to me appeared to be quite pointless, as I did not see the kids learning any skills applicable in real-life situations. Obviously the school must be a completely worthless establishment, I thought.

Unless I am missing something.

It turns out I was missing something indeed, and understanding that took me a while. I will present my train of thought from this point on to realising how to interpret the school properly.

During fieldwork I had a talk with Natang, the owner of the lodge where I was staying. He told me that out of the eight teachers working at Shree Himalaya Primary School three teachers are paid by the government and five by the school management committee (meaning donations from the local people and from various international NGOs). The textbooks used in the computer lessons are standard textbooks used all over Nepal. In other words, the study program is fixed on state level, although the teachers make a selection out of that (like Dawa leaving out the outdated parts). According to the foreword of the textbook the computer class is compulsory only starting from class 9 (Khanal 2009, 3), but Namche school has decided to start computer education from class 3 already.

So in the field it seemed that the computer class is a mix of government policy from above and a local initiative (the teacher and the school management committee). I attributed the “uselessness” of the lessons to the “goverment” part of the education system. This is what I wrote in my analytic text straight after fieldwork:

> The computer class at the school is not just another government service that does not work. It is a mix of a "worthless government service" and local initiative. The study program is provided by the government (in the form of a government approved but outdated textbook), and this is why the content of the lesson is in such a sharp contrast with real life internet experience at Khumbu Cyber.

But at the same time I remembered that Natang and Nima speak of the school quite highly and this kept bothering me. Why? Why did they not see it as useless as other government services? What was I missing?

I was missing a perspective to understand how education in Nepal, and to some extent the whole Nepalese culture, works. I found this perspective, during post-field analysis, from an article titled "Understanding Cheating in Nepal" written by a Peace Corps volunteer Chadwick Fleck (Fleck 2000). He, an American science teacher, was volunteering to teach English and science in rural Nepal. During exams he was surprised to see his pupils openly behaving in ways which according to his American perspective was blatant cheating – children were copying answers from each other and discussing questions among each other. This was in spite of him having explained it very clearly that he expects all his pupils to work independently and the children had all seemed to understand and explicitly agreed with that. Apparently Fleck had problems with correctly interpreting the events at a Nepalese school, just as I did. But if in my case it might have resulted just in a misinterpretation (and the writing of a bad master's thesis!), then in his case it resulted in a failure to work. And as so often in ethnography, we learn more from failure than we would learn from success. If Fleck had been able to contain his frustrations and continue working somehow, he might not have come to seeking help with interpretation. But he did seek help, turned to the theory of Edward Hall, and came to a revelation. Using Hall's notion of high-context communication, which I described in section 1.5, our American volunteer teacher was able to gain a better understanding of the Nepalese school and reconcile himself with it:

> Textbook knowledge is not as highly or widely revered as it is in the U.S. Therefore, most people do not see education as valuable in and of itself; instead they believe that it is a means to an end. Education is valuable because of the social status a person gains by reaching higher levels of study. […] More importantly, in Nepal's hierarchical culture,

> education is a measure of social rank rather than knowledge. For example, a girl of the right caste, whose family has a good reputation and who has herself finished X years of schooling, may be a more attractive bride than a girl who has not been to school. Why is that so? Being educated is important not because the girl will become a good match for a boy intellectually, but because society — via the school — has recognized her and respects her. Those village girls who have completed some schooling will earn higher dowries for their families, too.
> (Fleck 2000, 3)

So according to Fleck the school in Nepal is not so much about acquiring explicit coded knowledge as it is about attending formalities, obtaining social rank, building group ties and social relations. But of course, education in Nepal should not be regarded as merely "showing up" at the school. Gregory Bateson (1972) has coined the term "deuterolearning" to denote a certain type of a byproduct of the learning process – a certain kind of "learning to learn". This means acquiring certain kinds of appreciative habits and abstract patterns of though. And certainly a lot of deuterolearning goes on at Namche primary school and other Nepal schools: kids are learning about social hierarchy, authority, group values, etc.

One example from Fleck's account strikes me as particularly relevant:

> During a school day, the average Nepalese teacher spends all of his or her class time lecturing to students — even to first graders — and expects them to sit quietly. Students respond in unison to the teacher's rhetorical questions, usually in the affirmative.
> Male teacher: Nepal is a mountainous country in South Asia. Yes or no?
> Students: Yes, Sir.
> Male teacher: The world's highest peak, Mt. Everest, is in Nepal, isn't it?
> Students: Yes, Sir.
> […] Communication between teachers and students is very limited, and kids learn to say, "Yes, Sir," regardless of their understanding of a statement or agreement with it, or disagreement with it. In a high-

> context culture, the students do not challenge or dispute a teacher's point (Hall, p. 111). Questioning a point that a teacher has made is not seen as inquisitive; rather it is seen as confrontational. Questioning a teacher's ideas publicly may be an even greater offense.
> […] Students do ask questions in school, of course, but there are many unwritten rules for when, where, and how it is appropriate to do so. It depends on the context.
> (Fleck 2000, 4; his reference is to Hall 1976)

Compare this to my account of what happened in the classroom. The similarity is striking!

4.3 Summary

So, I went to the computer class expecting to find something about how the people there see, use or teach computers and internet. I did not learn so much about the specific topic of computers, because the lessons were not implicitly about it. Thus they seemed useless to me. After interpreting my field data through Hall's concept of high-context communication I learned the meaning of these lessons plus a valuable lesson about how the Nepali society works in general: the school lessons seemed useless to me, because I was viewing them from my low-context point of view. In the context of Nepali society they were completely relevant and, through a deuterolearning-style mechanism, served their purpose (which was also the view conveyed to me by my informants): the kids were learning about attending formalities, obtaining social rank, building group ties and social relations.

5 Punctualisation Battle at the Cybercafe

So, during my fieldwork I considered the computer class at the school a somewhat strange phenomenon, a curiosity, something that did not really function as its was meant to. In contrast, I considered the goings on at Khumbu Cyber to be "real life", internet in actual use. After gaining the insight about LC and HC communication styles, I now have an insight about how to interpret the situation at Khumbu Cyber as well.

In this chapter I will analyse the situation in Khumbu Cyber, my second observation arena. Khumbu Cyber is a place of many intersecting interests and influences. Traditional Namche village life meets the internet, tourists meet locals, Namche people meet people in other places over the telephone and internet.

5.1 Mediators to the Cyberworld

When some people, especially of the younger generation, generally speak good enough English and possess the computer skills necessary to function on the internet, then others, need help in navigating this new and alien terrain.

> May 10th, 12:08. A Sherpa girl comes in, talking to Sameer in Nepali. Sameer opens yahoo.com, types the username as the girl dictates it. The girl then types in the password, but it's wrong. She then spells it to Sameer, letter by letter, using English alphabet spelling. Sameer types it in, still unsuccessful. The girl then tries again herself, this time it works, Yahoo mail opens. They proceed to read the e-mails: Sameer reads them to the girl loudly. They proceed through about three e-mails, all of them automated mail messages from Yahoo about administrative matters. The girl then pays to Sameer and leaves. Sameer tells me that she was waiting for a specific letter which had not arrived.

The above describes a more or less typical account of one of Sameer's main activities at the cybercafe – helping the Nepalis who come to the cybercafe to use the internet but do not have the skills for it. Using the internet demands a set of skills – a degree of command of the

English language on the one hand, and experience and knowledge on how the websites and various services work on the other. Sameer acts as an assistant, a mediator for them. There are many references to this function in my fieldnotes: “Sameer and a young man compiling a Nepali document in Word” or “Sameer helps a Sherpa girl fill out a PDF form – the Nepali passport application”. Here is another account:

> June 8th. An old Sherpa man stands next to Sameer who is sitting at a computer. They have the old man's Gmail account open, Sameer has complied an e-mail with several photos from the old man's digital camera attached. As Sameer later explained, they tried to send the photos to somebody in Kathmandu, but the e-mail address was wrong and the e-mail was not delivered. The old man makes a call from the STD phone to ask about the address. They try once more and then give up, the old man leaves. Sameer tells me that probably the first part of the e-mail address was right (the part that comes before the @ sign), but the latter was incorrect (confused gmail.com up with yahoo.com or some other).

Not all assistance efforts work out, but nevertheless the effort is there. Here is how Sameer himself commented on his assisting-mediating function in an interview:

> “Nepali people did first not have idea about internet, they are coming to my cybercafe and they ask how do I send the e-mail. I am here, this computer in my cybercafe, and I am opening, creating accounts: Yahoo, Hotmail, Gmail, and so on. And every week they come here and I give them idea, teach. You can click here, first you can write e-mail id, and subject, and you can write mail and send. So little is one by one is using the internet, the Nepalis.”

So Sameer has, according to his own words and my observations as well, a role of a mediator or an interpreter for the people less skilled in internet use. Although the verb “teach” was used by Sameer here, when I try to elicit the role of a “teacher” in an interview, I meet with opposition:

> Me: So as part of you work at the cybercafe you also work as a teacher? You teach the Nepali people?

Sameer: No no no, not like that. Only if they have a problem, we...
Me: Yeah that's what I mean.
Sameer: Like we show how to send an e-mail. But we are not teacher like...
Me: Yes, I do not mean you are officially like a teacher but I mean teaching is part of your job?
Sameer: No no no we don't.
Rajesh interferes here: There are basic courses sometimes off [the tourism] season by Prashu. And he is teaching.

My awareness of the difference between HC and LC communication styles already pays off here: whereas me, in my LC way meant that anybody who "teaches" other people is a "teacher", for Sameer the word "teacher" has a totally different connotation, one entailing a certain status that has to be earned or attained through an elaborate social process. Therefore he refused to use this term for himself, although he agreed that he does "teach" users at the cybercafe.

Prashu Tamang, mentioned by Rajesh above, is a former employee of Khumbu Cyber who started his own cybercafe – Buddha Communication, a few hundred metres away from Khumbu Cyber – seven years ago. He comes to Khumbu Cyber sometimes and often participates in running Khumbu Cyber either by taking care of the technical matters or working as an attendant when either Sameer or Rajesh are away from Namche. He also runs a basic computer use course for Nepalis (unfortunately, during my time there none took place so I was unable to witness it). Sameer and Rajesh expressed it very strongly, that all the teaching of internet use belongs to Prashu. Apparently his status at the establishment was sufficient (he has been active there for nine years) to bear the title "teacher".

5.2 Actors and Networks

Now let us come to the approach mentioned above: the actor-network theory. According to ANT we should consider the social to be made of actors influencing one another. An actor is something whose influence on other actors leaves a trace and can be seen. Khumbu Cyber can be considered to be an actor, since its influence on other actors can be seen. It draws people to itself, makes people talk about it and use its services. It is continually securing a

supply of needed resources – people, computers, furniture, electrical energy – for itself.

Another feature of the ANT approach is that a network of actors can be punctualised, perceived as a singular actor on another level. Khumbu Cybercafe is seen as a punctualised actor by most tourists – they come in, use the internet and other services provided there, pay and leave. For many local people (actors more closely integrated into the social networks of Namche) however, the components of the cybercafe continue to play independent roles, outside of the punctualised role of the cybercafe. Here is an example from a video transcript of a scene where a Sherpa man has entered Khumbu Cyber and is awaiting an e-mail from somebody. Apparently he has pre-arranged to use Khumbu Cybercafe's common e-mail address and they are checking that e-mail account now.

> The Sherpa man and Sameer are sitting behind the computer, with Sameer operating the computer (meaning he has the keyboard and mouse). Sameer asks: “What was the name?”
>
> Sherpa man: “Lulen.”
>
> Sameer is scanning the list of names in the Inbox. They go throught the list of e-mails that have been received, but the awaited letter is not among them. The Sherpa wants to clarify: “If it comes, will it be stored here?”
>
> Sameer: “Yes.”
>
> “Thank you,” and the Sherpa gets up and starts to walk towards the door.
>
> Sameer, while still looking at the computer, says: “You have to pay for checking e-mails.” Then looks apologetically-smilingly at the Sherpa: “Just 10 rupees.” [For comparison: a bowl of rice costs 200 rupees].
>
> The Sherpa explains, with a smile and extended arms: “Look, sometimes I get from you, sometimes you get from me, so just let it be.”
>
> Sameer explains with a quiet voice mixed with a bit of uncomfortable laughter: “Earlier we had good income from the tourist and it was OK not to pay for using the internet for just 5-10 minutes. But right now there are no tourists and we have to depend on just the

Nepali people...”

The Sherpa says now with a friendly-authorative tone: “In my case it is different, because it wasn't me checking my e-mail. It was you.” Smiling, he backs away toward the door, about to leave. Sameer is unsure what to say, just says “Yes...”

Here we have two competing views: on the one hand, the old Sherpa tried to interpret the situation as simply one person (Sameer) doing a favour to another (him) – one in a long list of back and forth reciprocations (“sometimes I get from you, sometimes you get from me”). Sameer, on the other hand, refused this interpretation and instead provided his own version, where he presented Khumbu Cyber as an establishment that usually lives off of tourists[2], but was temporarily forced to extend the tourists' role onto the Nepali people (“usually the tourists provide income, but now it is off-season so we have to rely on Nepali people”). The clever Sherpa's answer was to show that he did not conform to the role forced onto him (“it was not me reading my e-mail, it was you”). He used the fact that he did not sit behind the computer and surf the web and do all the other things that tourists there do, and thus the role does not apply to him. After all, he was just sitting and watching. He pointed to the context to support his point. This was an example of HC communication, or in other words, the Sherpa's behaviour made sense in a HC way of thinking.

I think it is noteworthy that it is a failure that allows us to explore this situation: a black box is a system that operates as it should. If it does not operate as it should, it will also fail to be a black box. I witnessed many tourists using the internet, paying for it and leaving. In their perception (and also mine, at that moment), Khumbu Cyber was punctualised into a black box – an establishment where one uses the internet and then pays for it. It never occurred to me that it is in fact an effort, a process. It was only due to the fact that Sameer (representing the actor-network, Khumbu Cyber) failed to negotiate the terms in its favour this time, that I noticed this as a significant event, and thus perceived the continuous process, the ongoing effort of punctualisation on behalf of Khumbu Cyber.

In an interview, Nima the owner, mentions “social responsibility”: they are trying to earn

2 For more about tourists as a source of sustenance, see Fisher 1990. On page 123 he mentions an analogy used by Sherpas: “...tourists are like so many cattle, representing highly mobile, productive, and prestigious, but perishable, forms of wealth. Like cattle. tourists give good milk. but only if they are well fed”. The term “cattle”, used by people with such long pastoral traditions, is devoid of any derogatory meaning here.

money from tourists and use it to improve life in Namche. The example above also illustrates that, when Sameer says to the Sherpa that usually they depend on tourists for income but since its off season, he has to charge him for reading e-mail. In other words, explanation is required for charging money for a service offered – this reveals how Khumbu Cyber is still entangled in pre-money economy contexts.

5.3 Summary

We saw two aspects of the cybercafe's operation in Namche: that many Nepali persons need mediators to use the internet and that a "punctualisation battle" is continually waged by Khumbu Cyber in order to continue its existence.

About the mediators – we saw social hierarchy in action, when Sameer and Rajesh refused to let themselves be called "teachers". This is a title, dependent of the social context of the person carrying it, not a job description to be awarded abstractly to anyone who conforms to the verb "to teach". As such the title is reserved only for persons higher up the ladder – like Prashu, the older employee who also had his own cybercafe by now and ran computer courses for the Namche people. This is an instance of the high-context aspect of the society.

About the "punctualisation battle" – the actor-network of Khumbu Cyber has to withstand forces that are trying to demolish it – for example, other actors who try to use its components for their own advantage. We saw that the stability of social structures is not a given, a granted feature. The actor-networks have to continually negotiate their terms of existence, continually align other actors into favourable positions. Here we also witnessed something about "lifting the social relation out of the local context" – Khumbu Cyber, in its attempt to extend the tourist-cybercafe relationship onto a Sherpa man experienced a setback, a failure. In this case it failed, sometimes it succeeds, and as such is illustrative of the battle of turning concrete personal relationships between people into contract relationships between a client and a service establishment, an instance of the "lifting out of social relations from the local context". For the tourists this battle has already been fought, more or less, and in their minds Khumbu Cyber has been black boxed into a service establishment with payment as input and internet service as output.

6 The Internet as an Actor-Network

Khumbu Cyber is not, of course, a lone actor trying to align other actors in Namche Bazaar into a network that suits it. No, it functions only as a part of another, bigger network, a global community of internet users. As a cybercafe, it is attractive and interesting for people only if there are all these other people also using internet all over the world. To see how it functions in relation to this larger actor-network, we will take a look at how internet is used in Khumbu Cyber.

6.1 What Is It Used For

Based on my time spent in Khumbu Cyber, I compiled a cultural domain according to Spradley's DRS method:

Functionalities of the Internet in Namche

Nepalis	**Trekkers, tourists**
1. Interpersonal communication: e-mail, Facebook, Skype. 2. Nepali pop music on Youtube 3. News sites: E-Kantipur, MySansar, Nepalnews 4. Photo services on Facebook, Flickr, Picasa 5. Calendar conversion websites for converting Bikram Sambat to the Gregorian calendar. 6. Government matters: Passport applications, SLC results.	1. Interpersonal communication: e-mail, Facebook, Skype.

From an interview with Prashu:

> Me: So who are the people who are using internet here?
> Prashu: Internet... everyone using it. Especially tourist people... They want to keep in touch with each other and with family, some people doing business, with internet. And every people. Really necessary to

use internet now, yes.

Me: Would you say local people use internet?

Prashu: They use too, yea. They... since nine years ago quite a few people were using, but right now everybody is using. We give them really good knowledge, we teach them, you know, about internet, about the computers. Right now they can use very well, yea. [...] They want internet in any way. Like Facebook and things you know. And keep in touch with family, sending e-mail, getting e-mail, like. Yea. Its really necessary.

So the interest seems to be strong enough in the people, that they come to learn to use computers and internet use, it is not something that Prashu and other cybercafe owners have to advertise. People are willing to pay for the courses which can be just one session or a longer course of several sessions (Prashu: "Depends on the payment, if they want single course or more"). Tourists are travelling, so they used internet mostly just for short communication sessions (e-mail, Facebook). But some Namche people spent longer sessions online and their activities also seemed to be more varied (especially members of Nima's household and other related people who did not have to pay for it or had some special deal). As to with whom they are communicating depended on the person. People who work in the trekking and guiding business naturally develop friendships to their clients from other countries in the line of work, and these tourists and trekkers continue to communicate with their newly acquired Nepali friends after they have returned home. Others have friends and relatives who have gone to other countries to work. This seemed to be a significant amount, according to a discussion with Rajesh. Since long distance phone calls are expensive, the internet provides the only really affordable channel of communication.

Nepali government institutions have also adopted internet for communicating with its population. Rajesh used a government SMS service to find out the SLC results (School Leaving Certificate exam or end of elementary school exam results). The results are announced on a certain day for the whole country, so this is a huge undertaking. Earlier these results were published in a newspaper, but now there are online options. There is a webpage, where you type in the SLC number of the pupil and are supposed to get the result, but instead, somewhat typically for a "worthless government service" an SQL database error is displayed. So Rajesh uses an SMS service instead – he sends the SLC number and, on the second try,

gets the result.

Another example of this is the passport application procedure. In order to apply for a Nepali passport, a person needs to fill out an application form (a PDF on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website), take it to a "government office" who checks it and sends it to Kathmandu. Then, after a certain wait period, if everything works out, the person should go to Kathmandu to collect the passport.

> I went to Khumbu Cyber at around 14 o'clock. A lot of people were there. Apparently a government official had come to Namche and for about one week's time he would be here accepting the passport applications [I later learned that this was an all-Nepal effort to provide people with passports]. Many people are coming to Khumbu Cyber to fill out the form and print it out. Sameer is busy helping them. At the moment he is working with a 20 year old Sherpa girl Dawa. They are filling the application both for her and her sister (Dawa provides the information to fill in for her sister as well). After filling in the blanks they print it out and then she takes it to the government official.

Notice that Sameer is busy working as a mediator here again.

6.2 Accompanying Effects: Language, Alphabet and Calendar

Nepalis in Namche are using English alphabet to write Nepali words. Typing Nepali characters on the computer is technically possible but too complicated for most users for comfortable text input. For short phrases of personal communication (e-mail, text chats and Facebook) English alphabet works fine. Sometimes Sameer types Nepali documents in for someone – this is a service for a fee. The client later comes to collect the printed out text or has it sent to him as a file.

Dawa the computer teacher said there are Sherpa graphic designers in Kathmandu who even use Tibetan fonts to make Sherpa texts and graphics (Sherpa language is very different from Nepali and related to Tibetan), so he says it is possible but he has tried and not found a way to use Tibetan. This is accessible only for professionals, who cannot work without being able to use Sherpa writing.

The onslaught of the English language (and alphabet) is of course a part of a larger process[3]. It seems to be prestige language anyway, with or without the internet. An excerpt from the fieldnotes illustrates this:

> I leave from Khumbu Cyber in the evening and go home to eat supper. My host family is sitting in the common room and watching TV in silence. I see some screen graphics with the contour of Nepal in it, so it must be a Nepalese channel. The TV show consists of two beautiful women, a filmstar and TV show host, walking on a beach somewhere and discussing movies, filmstars, what is it like to live like a filmstar, etc. I understand the conversation because it is in English. I eat my *dal bhat* and start to realise the function of English here as a prestige language.

Laura Kunreuther, who has worked extensively in Kathmandu, says that speaking in a mix of English and Nepali is typical of young educated Nepalis. Her informants said that "English is the international language" (2006, 331). I heard the same categorisation from everybody I talked to about this: Nepali is the national language and English is the international language. Internet is not the only factor enforcing the English language, just one of many.

Another thing enforced by the internet use is the Gregorian calendar. One morning Sameer logged into Facebook and got a birthday greeting from a friend. It was not actually his real birthday, he had just entered a random date when creating his account, because it is required by Facebook. When this date now arrived, his friends had gotten a notification about Sameer's birthday and had sent him greetings. This is an example of the black boxed technology breaking down and revealing something valuable again: the black boxed birthday notification system on Facebook did not work as intended (and thus failed to be a black box) and illustrated the calendar issues that I otherwise might not have thought of.

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3 I compiled a domain of English words used in Nepali speech, which shows mostly words related to computers and mobile phones, but that might be due to my working context. The list of words in random order is: photocopy, recharge (as in a prepaid mobile), charge (as in charge batteries), (tele)phone, network busy (an error message often received on one's mobile), mp3 (emm-pee-three), mobile, card reader, webcam, Facebook, hello, sir, solar battery, inverter, tower (used as a synonym for "mobile network signal"). Numbers are said in English in a phone number context or as a wester calendar year number.

So now I noticed that all the websites and software presume the usage of the Gregorian calendar, which is incomprehensible to someone used to Bikram Sambat, the Hindu calendar in use in Nepal. Of course they will learn it gradually through computer use. Interestingly, spelling the month names and date numbers in English is the norm when talking about Gregorian dates in Nepali, so that “June eleventh” is said as an English expression in the midst of Nepali speech.

So the larger actor-network of the global internet is aligning the local actors in Namche into using English alphabet and even some English expressions, plus the Gregorian calendar. It is mutually reinforcing with other global influences brought by tourists, enforcing English language and calendar. The internet also provides its mediator actors – date converter websites for the calendar conversions and cybercafe clerks like Sameer for typing the text.

6.3 Sameer's Facebook Friendship

Now let's see an example of a human relationship in this new medium. About one month before I started my observations at Khumbu Cyber, Sameer had acquired a friend on Facebook, a girl named Rose from Indonesia. This previously unknown girl had sent a friend request to Sameer, indicating her wish to communicate with him. Sameer accepted the request and they started chatting. I tried to find out about the circumstances of their becoming friends, but Sameer could not offer me any more explanation than that. She had simply requested friendship and then they started chatting. This ease with which they started an online relationship reminds me of Laura Kunreuther's account of spontaneous friendships started over the phone network in Kathmandu (2006, 336):

> During the mid-1990s, youths began using the phone to connect with otherwise inaccessible acquaintances through what is colloquially known as a *blaf kal* (bluff call). The friendships that develop through these bluff calls are often between two people who have been introduced by a mutual friend, or they are the result of a misdialed or randomly dialed number. A 23-year-old daughter of a family I frequently visited often invited a young man to the house and to family events. […] One evening I asked him how he and Sarjana had met. He replied matter of factly, “On the phone.” He had apparently

> misdialed his friend's number and reached Sarjana instead. They began to talk and quickly became regular "phone friends." Only after a year or so of this phone relationship did they begin to meet each other in person.

Kunreuther then refers to Joshua Barker's work from Indonesia. It turns out the bluff call or similar phenomenon is also known there (Barker 2002, 166). These bluff calls have one common characteristic both in Indonesia and Nepal: they are used by young people to get away from the traditional social control of the community. Barker on Indonesia:

> The disciplines normally brought to bear on public and domestic spheres (by way of overhearing and seeing, for example) became far less effective in controlling communication (Barker 2002, 166).

And Kunreuther on Nepal:

> Relationships that develop over the phone in these bluff calls are powerful because they appear to be unentangled and circumvent the usual pressures of family and social control. […] The ability to connect over the phone becomes a context that many young people in Kathmandu describe in subjective terms as a "freer" and "more real" emotional attachment (Kunreuther 2006, 336).

Although Kunreuther draws parallels between the bluff call phenomenon and the internet chats (2006, 349) in that both are characterised by intimate conversations among strangers, we cannot simply draw a parallel to Sameer's Facebook friendship. Telephones were anonymous (at least before the caller ID function became ubiquitous on mobile phones), and so were the internet chat-rooms popular during Kunreuther's research, but Facebook is different because everything a person says carries his/her name and can be seen by that person's friends (since I am on Sameer's friend list I gained access to their conversation). So while a Facebook relationship might be freer and unentangled from usual family and social control, it just as well might not be. Depends who else is watching. By the time their relationship dwindled to a stop in July (because Sameer left Namche for a seasonal trip to Kathmandu and did not spend that much time behind a computer any more), Sameer had acquired six Indonesians from Rose's friends list and Rose in turn had acquired four Nepalis from Sameer's list. This indicates that their relationship was in no way private, and was of interest to their friends. Yes, Facebook users in Nepal are mostly young people, as probably in many places in the world,

so even if there are other people watching, the nature of social control can be very different, but since it remains a very implicit phenomena, it is hard to explore.

We can explore the relationship of communication to context, however. An excerpt from my fieldnotes:

> We are sitting in Khumbu Cyber again with Sameer, passing time on Facebook. Sameer sent a joke message to Rose about having sent her a box of candy, he ran this message through Google Translate from English into Indonesian. Now Rose replied in Indonesian. Google Translate translates it into something to the effect of "Thanks, next time send me real ones hahaha".

This actually is an exception in the sense that usually their conversations proceeded in English. But here the box of candy, although HC communication, certainly works.

The excerpt continues:

> Sameer starts telling me: "I don't like Muslims [referring to the fact that Indonesia is a Muslim country]. They are naughty, they want to make their own community. In Gaighat [Sameer's hometown] there is many of them. They are always on the mic [the call to prayer from the loudspeakers]. Its a headache for me. They are dirty, always bargaining."

So the fact that Indonesians are Muslims was ran through Sameer's local context, attributing certain characteristics to them. But still he entertains the following thought, and speaks it in front of my camera:

> "She is already married [according to her Facebook profile]. Too bad for me. I don't want to meet her. Maybe she has a baby."

While it is possible to communicate with any person from any country, relations on the internet are still bound by the offline ties – Sameer mostly converses with people he knows also outside of the internet.

6.4 Monks and Nuns

Another important fact is the relation to an older hierarchical system: that of the Sherpa

Buddhist religion. There was a monastery in Namche which was inhabited by monks and nuns seasonally (during certain events and ceremonies). These monks and nuns would come to Khumbu Cyber but only to buy recharge cards for their mobile phones. Only once during my whole fieldwork did I see someone from the religious establishement using the internet.

When monks and nuns did come into the cybercafe, they were being treated a little like children – spoken to with simple sentences, asked several times the same question, etc. They seemed to be living in their own world, a parallel system, and the internet apparently had nothing to offer them, internet has failed to align them, at least for now.

6.5 Chronological View

To understand the situation thoroughly we will now look at the historical development of internet at Namche as well. Rajesh says in an interview:

> At first it was the tourists, coming here and asking where is the internet. Nepali people then see the tourist, how they use internet, how to use mail, how to send pictures. So now is good, little by little the Nepalis is similarly using the internet now.

I interviewed Nima, Sameer and Rajesh about the history of internet in Namche. According to them it were the tourists who first brought the demand for the internet. Internet connection was then provided by Sherpa entrepreneurs and lodgeowners to cater to tourists but also to the Nepalis who had contacts with tourists and became friends with them (this usually means porters, trekking guides and lodgeowners). Tourists transfer the knowledge of how to use the internet to these Nepalis. So in a way, tourists bring with them both a need (by becoming friends with Nepalis and wanting to communicate with them) and the means to satisfy that need (teaching the computer skills needed to use the internet).

Since the opportunity was then already established, the Nepalis also communicate with each-other, including Nepalis working in other countries. Nepalis often had another rate than tourists. (At the time of my research in Khumbu Cyber the “local price” was half of the “tourist price”). Therefore Nepalis used the internet mainly for interpersonal communication (Facebook, e-mail), just like the tourists on their travels. During early times internet connection worked via a satellite link and thus was quite expensive, so tourists did not spend a long time online. Typical usage was a quick session, quickly going through your e-mail and

sending a few “I am okay, its wonderful here!” e-mails to friends. Now the prices have gone down and tourists take longer sessions, but since they are on the move it is still the locals who are using internet more extensively and have also developed more elaborate uses for internet than tourists.

Now as revealed by fieldwork, together with the internet (and tourism) came the adoption of other things: English alphabet also for communication between the Nepalis on the internet (as the Nepali alphabet is more difficult to learn and use on a computer), Gregorian calendar (as all the websites and most tourists use this calendar as opposed to the Bikram Sambat) and English terms and concepts (memory card, printer, camera, etc) that are working its way into everyday Nepali language.

Also internet has started to replace other communication channels not originally meant to be affected: people now avoid making long distance phone calls to friends and relatives abroad, and instead use internet chat or voice programs. Also newspapers are no longer carried to Namche since this takes many days due to the physical isolation. People prefer to read the online versions instead of two days old news on paper.

Recently NTC started offering its cheaper but also less reliable ADSL connection in Namche, so there is now even competition between the internet connection providers. There is a large number of cybercafes in Namche. Some of them still rent a part of the radio link connection from Khumbu Cyber, but some of use the NTC connection now. The bandwidth that Nima is using for his radio link used to be 3 MB/s, but is now reduced to 2 MB/s (according to Rajesh). This reflects the decreasing number of clients (dropped from 26 to 15). Rajesh says this is a result of NTC offering its cheaper, although less reliable (NTC is, after all, a government owned company) ADSL connection in Namche.

6.6 Discussion

We learned that the demand for internet was brought by tourists, who wanted to use the internet during their visit, and wanted to communicate to their newly made friends in Namche after they went back. Then, since the internet was already there, it quickly found other uses: Nepalis started to use it for communication among each other, and with friends and relatives abroad. It also came to replace newspapers and to some extent the telephone. The Nepali government is also using the internet to communicate with its population now. Government is

endorsing computer education at the schools. Real life development and use of internet is happening at cybercafes, though. Some people need help with using internet, and mediating the cyberworld to these users is also part of the job of cybercafe clerks like Sameer.

This history makes sense. Since actors and networks are mutually constitutive, no network can form by itself out of thin air. There were actors that were already aligned into using the internet – tourists, their digital cameras, friends and family back home. Their existence resulted in a local actor-network – the Khumbu Cyber – being formed out of local and imported actors (hardware, people, etc.). Khumbu Cyber in turn started affecting other local actors and aligning them into its network (except some, like the religious establishment, which is offering resitance). Now there are other actors that are making use of these already aligned actors – the people of Namche are already used to the internet, thanks to Khumbu Cyber. NTC has started offering its ADSL connection, Nepali government is making some of its adminsitrative services available online, etc.

Other effects are being felt as well – the bigger, global actor-network of internet is aligning the actors in Namche into using English language and Latin alphabet – succeeding only partially since Nepalis use Latin alphabet but mostly still Nepali language. Gregorian calendar is enforced on most websites. Mediator actors are used for this – convertor websites and cybercafe employees.

New kind of human relations develop online, in a different social control environment disembedded from the village setting – it is different people who are watching, therefore participants try to conform to different rules. It is possible to talk to people from all over the world but most conversations naturally happen between people who know each other outside of the internet as well.

7 Conclusion

My aim with this paper was to explore how internet is adapted into an environment culturally different from the one where it was spawned. For this purpose I borrowed the actor-network theory taken from science and technology studies, and followed how actor-networks are created and maintained. I also needed the concept of high-context and low-context communication in order to make sense of the cultural processes.

Internet used to be seen as a monolithic placeless cyberspace which would make us all similar to each other. My main finding is that this is not always the case. It is a collection of different people doing different things while embedded in their social contexts. Here is how I came to understand that.

First I observed the computer lessons at the Namche primary school, which seemed very useless to me, children did not seem to actually learn much about computers or their use. At the cybercafe, an arena of “real life and hands on” computer and internet use, completely different things were going on. Cybercafe clerks were acting, for clients less skilled in the internet use, as mediators to the cyber world, as guides to people who did not know how to behave in this new cyberenvironment, both technically (setting up e-mail accounts, teaching where to click, etc.) and culturally (with the English language and Gregorian calendar), creating a new role for themselves in the Namche society. In spite of that they denied their role as a “teacher”.

The explanation for both these two findings is that the society in Namche works in a more high-context way than I was used to. A teacher is not simply someone who teaches but someone who has gone through the necessary social processes and has earned the title of “teacher”. Similarly, the purpose of attending school is not only to obtain knowledge, but to learn a lot more through deuterolearning: about formalities, social rank, group ties. The meaning of the pupils' going to the school is not derived only from the explicit knowledge they learn at the school, but more from the fact of going to the school itself, and from learning to behave in certain ways and interacting with certain people. Context is also why Sameer and Rajesh do not agree to let themselves be referred to as teachers – although they do transfer knowledge and skills to clients in the cybercafe they lack the necessary context that a person

with the title of “a teacher” needs to have. They are simply cybercafe clerks who help their clients. Prashu, on the other hand, has the necessary “level” to be honoured with this title.

With my awareness honed to this high-context style, I turned to the cybercafe. I found that it is not simply a business establishment in a low context sense – its meaning is not simply to provide a service and charge a fee for that. It had to continually fight “a punctualisation battle” in order to exist as an actor-network, and not be demolished into component actors.

The cybercafe is, of course, not a lone actor, but is in turn a part of a larger actor-network, the global internet, which on the one hand gives meaning to the cybercafe and on the other hand enforces certain effects – English language, Latin alphabet and Gregorian calendar.

Networks do not form out of thin air – they form there where actors are already present and trying to do something. Nima established Khumbu Cybercafe because there were tourists already present. Nima and his radio link connection have accustomed the people of Namche to the internet, and now other actors are coming in to take advantage of this. Another service provider is entering Namche to take its share of the client base. And the Nepali government is also using the internet to communicate to its population.

These shifting alignments and alliances between actors bring about new social hierarchies and roles. Sameer, Rajeesh and Prashu have the role of mediators or gatekeepers to the cyberworld. It is them – relatively young men, teaching old men, a somewhat of a reversal of usual social roles. This new cultural practise brings along a cultural power shift, arise of a new powerful skillset: proficiency in English plus skills of computer usage.

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