

The places and spaces of cyberspace

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In the August 2000 edition of the Atlantic Monthly, Jonathan Koppell writes an article entitled "[No 'there' there: Why cyberspace isn't anyplace](#)" in which he defends the non-existence of a cyberspace 'place'. I write to refute this position, arguing that, in fact, the 'place' metaphor is an adequate way of creating awareness to the fragile nature of the Internet.

Koppell analyses 'place' in two different ways. In the first he rejects the use of 'place' as appropriate because it contradicts a traditional geographical approach. He argues that because cyberspace cannot be seen on any map, it should not be considered a place. And while some would argue vehemently that there are maps of cyberspace [1], in fact, someone even wrote a book entirely dedicated to the mapping cyberspace [2]. What Koppell is really confusing here are the words 'place' and 'space'. Cyberspace is a space and, contrary to the common understanding of 'place', spaces are not necessarily physical. For example, we commonly say 'I need some space'. Does that mean we need to have 1 meter around us? Or that this space should be mapped down? Perhaps, but usually it refers to having some mental freedom, some independence for ourselves. Seen in this way, space is an environment with certain embedded sets of values that allow one to act in a certain way. CyberSPACE seems to fit well into this category for it does "offer alternative ways of living" [3].

In the second line of critique he argues that this metaphor is a potential danger to the "wise management of the Internet". Koppell defends that seeing cyberspace as a "pure state beyond ordinary society" makes it seem as if "the introduction of law would not so much bring order as corrupt utopia". This increases the uneasiness felt by both courts and legislatures to regulating this place.

However, Koppell overlooks two important facts. The first is that specific laws have been made to regulate environments other than that in which we live our everyday life. We have, for example, a law of the sea. Thus, that should not be an impediment for the creation of regulation.

The second point that Koppell misses is that arguing that cyberspace is a place, does

not imply that it is a self-ordering, pure space, as Koppell seems to believe. Koppell cites Lessig's *Code and other laws of cyberspace* to reinforce this argument citing the fear to corrupt a pristine land as the justification for the lack of action of courts and legislature. However, he fails to acknowledge that the main point of Lessig's argument is that "cyberspace will not take care of itself" [4] and there is a need for more legislative action.

I do agree with Koppell's argument that many times the metaphor is used merely as a marketing tool, as an exploration of the need to be part of the 'cool' place. I also agree that cyberspace is not a "pristine and untamed land" that will be corrupted by the existence of law. However, these arguments do not invalidate the use of the place (I prefer space) descriptive. In fact, describing cyberspace as a place may be beneficial, for people are -used to fighting for the preservation of places/spaces they cherish. It may be useful to create awareness and the need for action, rather the passivity that describing it as a simple carrier or medium would imply.

References:

[1] See for example www.cybergeography.com or www.telegeography.com.

[2] <http://www.mappingcyberspace.com>

[3] Lawrence Lessig. (1999). *Code and other laws of cyberspace*, p. 191.

[4] Lessig, p. 61.