Chapter Two  |  Everyday Cyborgs: Technosocial as resisting the Universal

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Chapter Two | Everyday Cyborgs: Technosocial as resisting the Universal

The different sites and modes of engagements that were reviewed in the first chapter gesture towards a range of anxieties or crises in the human-technology interaction. But nowhere else is this anxiety more visible than in talking about the body, the self, the physiological and the material and how it is shaped by the increased interaction with ubiquitous and immersive digital technologies. Within the new discourse around the digital that looks at the emergence and rise of internet technologies, the focus is marked by a ‘newness’. The newness refers to the new users of digital technologies that are created in the process of bridging the digital divide. It also refers to the extraordinary scale of innovation and computational development that is leapfrogging generations into new modes of behaviour and sociality at an accelerated pace. It is used to reference a particular kind of subjectivity, and concerns of regulation and administration that these technology-mediated practices lead to. However, the existing focus is on usage and adoption of technologies, reducing the human-technology interaction to an actor-network model, where all interactions are reduced to traces and transactions.

This chapter seeks to unpack this newness as a universalising and homoegeneous principle that marks the emergence and rise of digital technologies in emerging information societies like India. By positing the idea of an Everyday Technosocial Subjects, it critically examines the discourse around cyborgs, which, despite its multi-disciplinary location, presumes that the cyborg is necessarily outside of history, geography and cultural specificity. It shows the blind spot of this discourse that presumes that technology is benign and hence, everybody interacting with these technologies, irrespective of their location and history, are cyborgs in the same way. It proposes that one way of escaping this universal cyborg model might be to
look at an everyday cyborg in order to refigure our understanding of the Technosocial Subject in emerging Information Societies.

1. OF CYBORGs

The cyborg, a combination of hardware, software and wetware, stands as one of the most visible figures of the cybernetic age. A portmanteau of two words: cybernetic and organism, the term cyborg refers to a biological being with a kinetic state that can be transferred with ease from one environment to another, able to adapt to changing environments through technological augmentation. The first living Cyborg that stands at the roots of the technologised genealogies was a rat. Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, two astrophysicists, in 1960, thought of a ‘hybrid - organism’ system (a rat with an osmotic pump) that provided biological stability to an organism in response to its constantly changing environments. In their paper in *Astronautics* they wrote:

> For the exogenously extended organizational complex…we propose the term ‘cyborg.’ The Cyborg deliberately incorporates exogenous components extending the self - regulating control function of the organism in order to adapt it to new environments.

> (Clyne and Kline, 1960:1)

This definition notwithstanding, the cyborg is most commonly thought of in a futuristic vein, escaping the confines of the physical body and recreated through various digital enhancements and imaginations.

While it is not the intention of this chapter to map the ever-growing field of Cyborg Studies, there are a few texts which have helped frame the concepts and ideas that are analysed in my
argument. Fiona Hovenden et al in their edited reader on *The Gendred Cyborg* were the first to look at the engendering of everyday bodies through digital technologies. Looking at a range of questions from the site of the female body as an inspiration for feminised representations of monstrous technology to the axes of discrimination that emerge in women’s access to technologies of production and reproduction, Hovenden et al help locate the cyborg as a lived reality rather than a conjecture of the future. Robbie Davis-Floyd and Joseph Dumit, in their edited anthology *Cyborg Babies: From Techno-Sex to Techno Tots*, produce a new context for the cyborg. They look at cyborgification, not as an agential interaction between a person and the technology apparatus around them, but as a condition of technologisation which forms the very ideas of our being human. Essays in the collection examine how young children anthropomorphise gadgets they play with and internalise their behaviour as their own; how medical interventions at the level of eugenics and reproductive health shape certain imaginations of life as mediated by technology; and how the very processes of sexual intercourse and conception are regulated, shaped and proscribed by the technologies that we live with.

In Robert Mitchell and Philip Turtle’s edited collection *Data Made Flesh* (2004), are the first explorations of destabilise the human-machine hierarchy by looking at data realities and data subjects – accounts of how the use of data create and mediate our experiences and life. They showed how production, regulation and proliferation of databases inform our understanding of our biological, social, economic and political transactions. Chris Gray’s work on *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (2002) is one of the first inquiries into the challenges that the cyborg as a citizen would posit to forms of governance, politics and regulation in the future. In his *Cyborg Handbook* (1995) he delineates the various practices of cyborg beings, marking points of departure from earlier accepted forms of behaviour and transactions which
get complicated with the emergence of the cyborg. Gregory Benford and Elisabeth Malartre, in their path-breaking work on *Beyond Human: Living with Robots and Cyborgs* (2007), marry some of the concerns within robotics with the questions from Social Sciences, to look at what it means to co-habit spaces with machines and robots. Their work draws from speculative fantasy as well as innovations within Robotics to see how we need to understand our often hidden transactions and relationships with machines and technologies that serve us and facilitate our daily interactions. All these works have added to the debates that this chapter addresses. However, they do not particularly tackle the questions at hand and hence, while I owe intellectual debt to them for understanding cyborg behaviour and contexts, I do not engage in a more detailed dialogue with them.

With the emergence of the World Wide Web, the cyborg has strategically evolved in our imaginations as a metaphor of our times. We are already in the age where the ‘first living cyborg’ (Warwick, 2000: 15) has announced his arrival. In his autobiography *I, Cyborg*, Stephen Warwick, a professor of cybernetics and robotics, unveils how he became the first human cyborg through a series of path-breaking experiments. He begins his narrative by saying, ‘I was born human. But this was an accident of fate - a condition of time and place. I believe it’s something we have the power to change’ (Warwick, 2000:5). Cyberculture theorist David Bell, in his preface to *The Cyberculture Reader*, locates the cyborg in ‘the crucial mechanics of urban survival’ (Bell, 2000: xxi) that produce everyday cyborgs through digital transactions and technologically augmented practices. Sherry Turkle, looking at the experiments in genetic engineering and reproductive practices, traces the processes of ‘cyborgification’ in the production of ‘techno-tots’ (Turkle, 1998: 154) - a new generation of designer babies who have been augmented by technology to have the perfect genetic composition. Because of the emphasis of the physical-biological body and its centrality to the
process of cyborgification, the disciplines like genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, biotechnology and medical life sciences have contributed greatly to the imagination and formulation of the cyborg. Questions of ethics, patents, medical experiments, and resources to create new forms of organisms – clones, hybrids, cybrids; organisms that are, in their very genetic construction and DNA modification, inflected and designed by technology – have raged across popular and academic discourses in the last three decades.

We have many instances of cyborgs produced at different stages of evolution, ranging from the embryos created through genetic experiments to people with pacemakers installed in their bodies, being theorised as different variants of the imagined cyborg identity. While these interventions have been interesting, I go back to Escobar’s understanding of the ‘techno-bio-cultural’ environments, to examine the lopsided theorisation and emphasis in the discourse around cyborgs, where the technical and the biological are under close and often glorified scrutiny, while the cultural and the social configurations of the cyborg identity (what we have been exploring as technosocial Subjectivity) are scarce and underrepresented. This section looks at some of the seminal theorists who have managed to rescue the cyborg from the realms of fictional representation and bodily mutations and experiments, and focused on the technosocial identities, cultural practices and material implications of what it means to be a cyborg. The chapter shall also look at influential material practices online – with a specific focus on co-creation of knowledge also known as user generated content – to see why the cyborg discourse needs to move into talking about the technosocial. The section draws from academic scholarship, science fiction narratives and physical practices look at the ways in which internet technologies and cyberspace platforms become an integral part of peoples’ subjectivities, thus locating everyday cyborgs in contemporary times – cyborgs who are
available in technosocial contexts rather than as fictional characters existing only in science fiction and futuristic imagination.

1.1 The Real Body and The Cyborg

The cyborg, as fashioned by science fiction narratives, cinema and cartoons, conjures images of human - machine hybrids and the physical merging of flesh and electronic circuitry. Different representations of the cyborg abound science fiction narratives in print, film, animation and games, from reengineered human bodies showcasing fin de millenium nostalgia for large robotic machines of power and strength to sleek and suave microchip implanted silicon integrated human beings who work in their artificially mutated enhancements. The cyborg has covered a wide imaginative range from looking at a happy human - machine synthesis to a degenerate human body made grotesque by machinistic implants⁠¹ to a rise of a potent cyborg community that threatens to overcome the human world of biological certainty and mortality: Some of the most famous instances of cyborgs in popular narratives illustrate this wide spectrum; from anthropomorphised robots like Maria in Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927) to digital avatars that precede the physical body like Lara Croft in the The Tomb Raider series (Toby Gard, 1996); from users craving for the hyper-reality of cyberspace like Case in William Gibson’s Neuromancer to people awakening to their reality as a fiction produced by technology like Neo in The Matrix Trilogy (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999 - 2003); from heroes straddling the digital and the virtual world simultaneously like the cartoon character Johnny Quest (Hannah - Barbara Cartoons, 1996 - 97) in the eponymous animated series to

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¹ It is interesting that almost all the imaginations of cyborgs in sci-fi have been imaginations of a broken or a failed cyborg. The cyborg, though heroic in nature, was also tragic in some way. This leads to interesting possibilities of tracing cyborgs in everyday world. Instead of looking at the immediate consumers of internet and globalization – the urban elite, it might be fruitful to also look at the cyborg in unexpected places – in city scapes of slums, in urban rural and underground communities that the city houses, and in the migrant labour populations that get internally dislocated with the building of IT Cities.
everyday digital avatars created on social networking sites and MMORPGs\(^2\) like Second Life. The diverse range of subjects identified as ‘cyborgs’ is demonstrative of the ambiguity and the ambivalence that surrounds this category. While it is possible to identify these different examples as nuanced forms of technology-human interactions like Android, Bionic people, etc. it is interesting that they have severally been looked at as cyborgs within popular and scholarly discourse alike

Arjun Appadurai (1996), in his formulation of ‘post – electronic’ modernity, explores how electronic media offer new everyday resources and disciplines for the imagination of the self and the world. Appadurai writes,

Thus, to put it summarily, electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination. Together, they create specific irregularities because both viewers and images are in simultaneous circulation. Neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound within local, national, or regional spaces. (Appadurai 1996; 4)

He argues that the individual body and its ownership are wedded to the logic of capitalism and the notion of ownership that characterised most of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Appadurai suggests that the body becomes a site of critical inquiry and contestation because a capitalist state grants the individual the rights to his/her body and the choice to fashion that body through consumption patterns. Looking at patterns of immigration and the ways in which the mobile and stationary bodies of immigration react to the mass-mediated world, he argues,

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\(^2\) MMORPG – Massively Multiple Online Role - Playing Game is a genre of gaming in which a large number of players interact with one another in a virtual world. The MUDs that Sherry Turkle studied can be looked upon as the direct antecedents to MMORPGs like Second Life and War of Warcraft – two of the most popular gaming platforms in current times.
There is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general agency. Terrorists modeling themselves on Rambo-like figures (who have themselves generated a host of non-Western counterparts); housewives reading romances and soap operas as part of their efforts to construct their own lives; Muslim family gatherings listening to speeches by Islamic leaders on cassette tapes; domestic servants in South India taking packaged tours to Kashmir: these are all examples of the active way in which media are appropriated by people throughout the world. T-shirts billboards, and graffiti as well as rap music, street dancing, and slum housing all show that the images of the media are quickly moved into local repertoires of irony, anger, humor, and resistance (Appadurai 1996, 7).

When talking of Technoscapes, Appadurai suggests that ‘Technoscapes are the landscapes of technology. They refer to technology as both high and low, informational and mechanical, and the speed at which it travels between previously impassible boundaries’ (23). Appadurai uses the idea of Technoscape to imagine a fluid and transmittable topography of technology, where the ‘different transactions and the identities formed online, have material consequences in economic flows and societal formations’ (38). In such a landscape, Appadurai suggests that ‘identities are no longer solid, but become fractured, in that we no longer have to choose the identities or accept the ideas of the local community. We are actively choosing our programming based on that which is available to us’ (49). This becomes an interesting way of dealing with the cyborg in an information technology space. While the cyborg may choose to act in a manner most appropriate or relative to the cultures and geographies it is embedded within, that is no longer the only programming option available to it and thus it can look beyond immediate cultural arenas.
Appadurai posits the idea of a technologically enhanced sphere of activities and identity formation that defy the processes of capitalism and produce new instabilities in our understanding of subjectivity. For Appadurai, life in the 20th Century had become highly deterritorialized due to the increased movement of people, things and information. Subjectivities thus produced become ‘more virtualized as well as schizophrenic in that people are continually jumping across time and space, bound but unbound to any one place, moment, or register’ (78).

Cyberspace has become such a site where the individual body, marked in its being (genetically, biologically, socially, and culturally) and circumscribed (by the physical, reluctant, and cumbersome), can free itself from the relentless materiality of a capitalist set of reference points, to create a truly global self and a universally accessible space. Katie Hafner and Matthew Lyon, in their comprehensive history of the origins of the web, mention how, in 1968 Joseph Carl Robnett Licklider and Robert Taylor, who were research directors of the United States of America’s Department of Defence’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and who also set in place the first online community (ARPANET), prophesied that online interactive communities

will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually. They will be communities not of common location but of common interest (Hafner 1996, 44).

This prophesy was realised by the end of the twentieth century, as scholars announced the construction of the ‘discontinuous, global agoras’ (Mitchell, 1996, 27) and the arrival of ‘the new commons’ (Liang, 2005) shaped within the technoscapes of the internet. They posited
the imagination of the internet as the new public sphere of communication, interaction and collaboration where the cyborg requires different skills to materially exist on the intersections of various domains. With the popularisation and democratisation of new digital technologies of information and communication (ICTs), we see a certain evolutionary production of the cyborg as an increasing number of people interact with digital spaces and sites and adopt mobile gadgets of computation and information dissemination as an extension of their bodies. The cyborg, as it is conceived with the presence of cyberspace in our everyday experience of urban life, is different from the more hyper-real, hyper-visible constructs within the fictional narratives.

1.2 MAKING OF A CYBORG

The range of human-machine relationships has been diverse and varied. We might not be complete cyborgs but we do deal with ‘intimate machines’ (Turkle, 1996), we live in ‘cyborg societies’ (Haraway, 1991, 12). The cities that we live in constantly remind us of the machinations that we are dependent on; sometimes using this to blind us of our dependence on the technology, sometimes to make it starkly visible. Military and space technologies are using new forms of organism-technology to produce unprecedented forms of cyborgs in our daily lives. We deploy technologies that frame our daily survival at the flick of casual buttons and switches, clicks and thoughts.

Such a view of naturalisation of the cyborg as an intricate but simple coupling of organism and machine is where the idea of technosociality comes prominently into play. With the emphasis on the practical production of cyborg bodies, very little attention has been given to the cyborgification of life and the kind of complex and crucial socio-political contexts of cyborg subjectivities. Katherine Hayles (1991), in her essay ‘Life of Cyborgs: Writing the
Posthuman’ in Chris Gray’s edited anthology The Cyborg Handbook (1995), makes an argument about the rampant proliferation of technologisation in the USA. Hayles is particularly interested in the health care practices that increasingly perform corrective surgeries, implanting the human body with prostheses or other accessories that improve the quality of life and are often cosmetic in nature. Hayles treats this condition as a step towards the evolution of a post-human world. For Hayles, the ability of the new medical sciences, to imagine the human body, not as the sacred Renaissance reified structure but as a system that needs to be operated upon, bettered, fighting ‘nature’ with ‘science/culture’, is a continuing story of human evolution towards a futuristic world. As she observes,

Cyborgs actually do exist; about 10% of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin. A much higher percentage participates in occupations that make them into metaphoric cyborgs, including the computer keyboarder joined in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided by fiber optic microscopy during an operation, and the teen gamerplayer in the local videogame arcade. "Terminal identity" Scott Bukatman has named this condition, calling it an "unmistakably doubled articulation" that signals the end of traditional concepts of identity even as it points toward the cybernetic loop that generates a new kind of subjectivity. (Hayles, 322)

Hayles’ formulation of this kind of cyborg is more nuanced than the list that Bell or Hables produce. She indicates that the construction of the posthuman (however problematic that category might be) is at least not a solipsistic self-referencing identity but that it is authored by various different players who are often legitimised and enabled by technologised processes, to collaborate in the construction of a cyborg. However, she doesn’t recognise the possibility of a technosocial Subjectivity, which would have offered her a cyborg that is more
located and embodied. Instead, she tries to posit the story of the post human but ends up in only re-emphasising the centrality of the human and the biological, ignoring either the material practices or epistemological positions that the cyborg has to offer. The anxiety of resolving the crisis – this time not only mapped on body/mind but also on the binaries of biological/technological – does not allow Hayles to examine the cyborg as residing, as Haraway suggests, ‘on the edge’ (1991, 15).

This section seeks to moves away from the broad generalisation and application of this cybernetic metaphor which produces a trivial sense of the human-machine synthesis to a more nuanced and complex understanding of the mechanics of cyborgification and the crises it entails. The kind of cyborg activities that David Bell formulates in his conception of the cyborg:

Do we become cyborgs when we board a bus? When we switch on a tube-light? When we wake up to a preset alarm clock that screeches early morning to get us to work? When we absently surf channels through a remote control on TV? (Bell 2000; xxi)

Andy Clark, in his conception of Natural Born Cyborgs (2003) would dissuade us from believing so. Clark looks at two forms of technologies – Machine centred technologies and human centred technologies, to start analysing the cyborg figure. For Clark, the human mind is a part of a larger adaptative system of producing knowledge and action. Instead of looking upon the human mind as a an object within which data can be sorted, he looks upon it as data itself, in a much larger pattern of cognition and consciousness Clark suggests that the mind engages with human centred ‘transparent’ technologies to quickly adapt to them and internalise them as a part of a larger system of thought and behaviour. This produces ‘human-
centred products (that) wear their functionality on their sleeve and exploit the natural strengths of human brains and bodies’ (Clark, 2003, 38). The internalisation of these technologies requires a ‘delicate and temporally extended process of co-evolution’ (Clark, 2003, 43). He looks upon all dominant technological products as being human-centred and hence leading to a transparency that comes with ‘temporal co-evolution.’ He considers the matrix of the cyberspace as a similar human-centred technology that allows us to become agents of a larger system. Drawing from popular science fiction, Clark quotes an example from Bradley Rhodes’ ‘Wearable Rememberance Agent’ (RA):

Say the wearer of the RA system is a student headed to a history class. When she enters the classroom, note files that had previously been entered in that same classroom at the same time of day will start to appear…when she starts to take notes on Egyptian hieroglyphics, the text of her notes will trigger suggestions pointing to other readings and not files…when she later gets out of class and runs into a fellow student, the identity of the student is either entered explicitly or conveyed through an active badge system or automatic face recognition. The RA starts to bring up suggestions pointing to notes entered while around this person, including an idea for a project proposal that both students were working on. Finally, the internal clock of the wearable gets close to the time of a calendar entry reminding the wearer of a meeting…’ (Rhodes, 1999 in Clark, 2003 Emphasis Mine)

Clark is here no longer looking at a cyborg that is simply marked by the insertion of the physical or biological aides into his/her body. He invokes Rhodes’ notion of the Rememberance Agent to illustrate how, the immersion of the body in conditions of technology and a seamless synthesis between the two, produces new forms of identity and practices which reconceptualise radically, our notions of history, time, memory and
recollection. The Natural Born Cyborg appears as a response to many other earlier conceptions of cyborgs which were increasingly being located in the realms of man-machine coupling or corrective (often medically prescribed) devices that augment the daily functioning of the individual. Hence, Hayles argues, that the new cyborgs are not ‘creatures of fiction and irony’ (Haraway, 1991) but people who are just like us, surrounding us, creating a technologised network that is not even often visible.

This merging of the evolved and the developed, this integration of the constructor and the constructed, these systems of dying flesh and undead circuits, and of living and artificial cells have been called many things: bionic systems, vital machines, cyborgs. They are a central figure of the late Twentieth Century ... But the story of cyborgs is not just a tale told around the glow of the televised fire. There are many actual cyborgs among us in society. Anyone with an artificial organ, limb or supplement (like a pacemaker), anyone reprogrammed to resist disease (immunized) or drugged to think/behave/feel better (psychopharmacology) is technically a cyborg. The range of these intimate human-machine relationships is mind-boggling. It's not just Robocop, it is our grandmother with a pacemaker (Emphasis Mine) (1995, 322).

While it has been necessary for certain disciplines, especially the disciplines of biotechnology, medical sciences, artificial intelligence, and cognitive theory, to bank upon the proliferation and naturalisation of such a cyborg identity, it is obvious that Clark’s notion of a cyborg is more than what is only ‘technically a cyborg’. Hayles, in this technically correct positing of the cyborg, ‘our grandmother with a pacemaker’ as a cyborg, robs the cyborg of any kind of participative value, agency or the ability to evolve with the mechanical prostheses.
Clark emphasises that the Natural Born Cyborg is not the hyper-visible cyborg augmented by prostheses or pacemakers or even gadgets that serve as extensions of the human body. For Clark, the cyborg resides more at a conceptual level where the synthesis of the mind and technologies that shape our sense of the self, produce new ways of looking at our body and its practices. He looks at the significant change in the material practices of people interacting with new digital technologies; the internalisation of not only the skills but also the aesthetics of memory, of remembrance and most importantly, of comprehension, that the technologies produce. For Clark, the machines that sculpt the bodies in gymnasiums - thus creating what Anne Balsamo (1996, 22) would call ‘Hyperactivated bodies’ - are on a system lower than the technologies that shape the consciousness to make it into a part of the process of eroding boundaries and creating universal knowledge systems (Clark, 2001, 242). He suggests that with our capacity and plasticity to adapt to different technologies and to learn to extend them as a part of our neural circuit – the pen and paper, a musician fiddling with her violin, the blind man with his cane, the turning of the wrist watch to get the time – are all example of how we are Natural Born Cyborgs.

Whether or not Clark’s response to the frightened reactions against artificial intelligence, post biological trans-human conditions, and mechanistic societies holds true or not is not of importance to the argument in the chapter. Clark’s formulation of the Natural Born Cyborg becomes significant because it encompasses the two dominant ways of looking at cyborgs outside of the lens of biological and life sciences. It foregrounds the material and cultural practices of a technologised identity that is neither restricted to the digital circuits nor can be located in the physical bodies of the users. Clark writes,

As identity becomes fluid, embodiment multiple, and presence negotiable, it is the perfect time to take a new look at who, what, and where we are. New kinds of human-
machine symbiosis will, without a doubt, alter the way we see ourselves, our machines, and the world (Clark 2003; 179)

More importantly, it allows the cyborg to emerge as an enabling subjectivity that evolves with technology rather than a latent identity that is forced into new shapes and avatars through the technologised conditions it might be inserted into.

2. THE CASE OF THE CYBORG

The first of the models that Clark reinforces in his imagination of the Natural Born Cyborg is the Gibsonian conception of the cyborg. William Gibson, the man who is most often attributed for the imagination and coining of the word ‘cyberspace’ was also one of the most influential formulators of a cyborg identity. In the same novel – Neuromancer - where he introduces the term cyberspace, Gibson also posits a cyborg identity that Clark re-invokes, in order to rescue the cyborg from the trivialisation that has entered contemporary discourse around the cyborg.

Case, the protagonist in William Gibson’s Neuromancer is one of the many kinds of cyborgs that appear in the novel. Set in a futuristic trans-continental geography that is mapped only through the digital traffic and regimes of software and biological control, Neuromancer paints a picture of dystopia that gets embodied in the sheer meat-machine divide that has emerged with the advent of technologised living conditions. Bodies, in Neuromancer, are marked with the easy reshaping and sculpting that new technologies make available; it is an age of affordable beauty, where technology can not only sculpt the perfect body but also intervene successfully in the DNA restructuration and genetic engineering of the living, so
that they can live, almost forever. Logging on is not only into the simstim\textsuperscript{3} Matrix but also into each others’ sensory data, creating new forms of intimacy and knowledge which were otherwise not possible. Prostheses are invoked only as a nostalgic reference to a century old technology and most implants are sleek and looked upon as an extension or an augmentation of the existing biological senses\textsuperscript{4}. The cyberspace, as the novel explains, is also a simplified imagination of the human sensorium, providing a way of extending beyond the biological or the ‘meat’ that is held in contempt by almost all the characters in the book.

Case, the protagonist of the novel, is a cyborg. Case exhibits the excess that a cyborg is characteristically marked with - The physical manifestations of cyborgs have always been on the side of the grotesque, the mechanical, the impossible. There is a certain gothic charm to the figure of the human being in synergy with the machines that creates a tension between the two improbable systems. In the case of Case, however, the notion of being a cyborg is inverted. When the novel begins, we actually realise that Case was once a cyborg, a cyber-cowboy surfing the cyberspace, pirating and dealing in expensive information for the big powers. However, in an incident where Case tried to cheat the employers, he was rendered incapable of ever again entering cyberspace by the introduction of neuro-toxins that would kill him if he ever tried to log-in again. The novel begins with Case playing the fallen angel, trying to find his way back to the promised Garden of Eden and is helped in his efforts by Armitage and his hired help Molly, who offer him corrective surgery in return for his old

\textsuperscript{3} The Simstim refers to Stimulation of the brain and nervous system of one person using a recording (or live broadcast) of another person’s experience. Case shows how the simstim which focuses on usage is below a cyber-cowboy like him because it doesn’t really allow him to engage with technologies in the way he does when he is hacking or surfing. ‘Cowboys didn’t get into simstim, he thought, because it was basically a meat toy. He knew that ... the cyberspace matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium, at least in terms of presentation, but simstim itself struck him as a gratuitous multiplication of flesh input.’ (18)

\textsuperscript{4} Case’s observations about age and body and the integration of medical science, biotechnology and cyberspace are abundantly scattered throughout the novel. ‘He was very beautiful; Case assumed the features were the work of a Chiba surgeon. A subtle job, nothing like Armitage’s blandly handsome blend of pop faces. (97)’ or ‘Case peered at them and saw that their youth was counterfeit, marked by a certain telltale corrugation at the knuckles, something that the surgeons were unable to erase’ (152).
skills. What is interesting about the novel is the model of cyborg that Gibson presents to us in the form of Case and the strains of cyborg identity and practices that we can take from it.

Case is not a cyborg simply because of his interactions with the technological tools and environments that surround him. His presence within conditions of surveillance, the biotechnological implants in his body, his interaction with hallucinogenic drugs or the presence of technological extensions might indeed be looked upon as interesting points where the meat-machine synthesis can be observed. However, Case’s cyborg identity is actually within the practices of technological synthesis that he performs within the matrix of the cyberspace. David Bell’s litany of mechanics of urban survival that he looks as practices of the cyborg or Hables’ glorification of the grandmother with the pacemaker as the new cyborg are both countered by Gibson’s earlier imagination of what it means to be a cyborg. While it would be interesting to study how the engagement with one system – the digital labyrinth of cyberspaces – affects the notion of the body in another – the realm of the physical and the sordid, what is more important is the notion of a participatory consciousness that Gibson invests in the figuring of the cyborg.

For Gibson, the cyborg is intrinsically linked to the spaces which s/he occupies and the way in which the organism deploys the technology in order to create a sense of the self. As Gibson sets out to define Case’s activities and his perceptions of his own self, the extraneous implants and prosthetics only become a certain kind of accessories to mark the familiarity with another system. The cyborg, like Molly – Case’s girlfriend in the novel - resides not in the mere prostheses but in the interactive spaces between the human characters and the technologies that they deploy. Gibson allows us to think of cyborgification as located, not in the man-machine synthesis, but as in a brain-technology symbiosis of sorts. The contempt for
the meat or the biological body arises from the fact that despite the advanced technologised couplings, the notion of the self, in *Neuromancer* has the body at its centre. Even though the novel makes a distinction between brain-dead (biological death) and ice-death (death within the matrix of the cyberspace), there is an overwhelming sense of mortality that governs almost all of its characters into different directions.

What Gibson infuses in the notion of the cyborg is the very agency to produce one’s self as a cyborg. The mere existence within technologised conditions or synthesis with technology – like Molly’s modified lenses or retractable steel claws in her fingers – does not produce a cyborg identity. Gibson recognises that we have been interacting with several different technologies. Instead of making an argument about the novelty of the new technologies, Gibson looks at the fundamental way in which our engagement with the technology has changed. He doesn’t base it on newness but makes a strong case for historical continuity. Both Gibson and Clark are interested in a pre-history of the cyborg, looking at the digital cyborg as one in a long range of human-technology identities and produced in the very transactions with technologies. For both Gibson and Clark, the production of the cyborg identity is in the production of a conscious digitised representation of the self which in turn are mapped on to the physical body that is implicated or invoked in the production of this identity. The text reinforces the idea of the cyborg as an agential being and distributed across multiple systems.

This condition of cyborgification is peculiar; On the one hand, we have a biological body that enters into conditions of technologisation. However, this immersion in technologised conditions does not lead to the cyborgification. It simply provides a platform where the body is extended into different circuits, constructed as a database of objects that can be translated
from one system to another’ imaged as a node within a network, recognised as an archive of several practices through which the extensions and digital representation are created. On the other hand, these imagined identities gain currency and have tactile and material consequences which are mapped on to the body of the cyborg. The cyborg, then, resides neither in the biological body nor in the digital representations but in the practices by which these two separate, self-referencing, often overlapping entities are reconciled to exist, each mapped on to the other.

With cyberspaces, where information transactions form the digital world, the cyborg gets formed through the practices of data production which can then interact with different data streams as well as authority structures of regulation and control. It is this notion of the cyborg as the ‘subject’ that comes into being in the process of data production that I am exploring rather than one characterised by prosthetic couplings. This cyborg as a producer of information and production of its subjectivity in the process of information production, straddling multiple systems of meaning and producing itself in the very processes of authorship and inter-referencing meaning, might be better illustrated through specific examples of contemporary interactions within cyberspaces.

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5 Lev Manovich in his work on “Database as a Symbolic Form” suggests that the human selves, in the database complex ‘ do not tell stories; they don't have beginning or end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise which would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other.’ Available at http://transcriptions.english.ucsb.edu/archive/courses/warner/english197/Schedule_files/Manovich/Database_as_symbolic_form.htm
2.1 The Cyborg in Cyberspace

Within cyberspaces, Social Networking Systems, Blogs, MMORPGs, Multiple User Dungeons (MUD), Discussion Boards, Media sharing platforms, p2p networks⁶, etc. all create different conditions within which the physical users, through their digital avatars, interact with each other and form complex models of social networking and personal narratives. In this section I look at this cyborg as an information producer, embedded in different cyberspaces, feeding different data streams. For examples, I turn to sites of co-creation and content production that is often referred to as User Generated Content within the interactive social web. This section looks at the relationship between the user and the information doubles that are created thereof, in order to see how we can think of the contemporary online user, in a combination with the avatar, a subject that cannot be explained by the cyborg models and needs the explanatory framework of technosociality.

Through a metonymic process, the digital profile – the avatar– comes to stand in for the bodies of the users who not only create the translated self but also mark it with desires and aspirations. The avatar is largely under the control of the physical body. Like in Dibbell’s narration, the loss of control of the physical body over the avatar was a new form of violence. Similarly, Turkle demonstrated that the ability of the body to experience the interactions of the avatar is a new way of looking at this relationship. However, it is also now becoming increasingly clear, for anybody who has created digital profiles on networks of social interaction, that the body is not only secondary to the experiences of the avatar, but is in many ways does not have the presumed authorship/ownership of that avatar.

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⁶ P2P Networks – Peer-to-Peer networks inherit the cyberspatial aesthetics of decentralized networks; of nodes being distributed across the circuits of the internet and talking to each other, collaborating in projects, sharing information, and exchanging digital material. The p2p networks have been the focus of scrutiny because they allow for unmonitored piracy and exchange of information.
Within Orkut, the profile of the person is bound to the physical body of the user behind the profile. While it is of course necessary to invoke a virtual avatar, because of the nature of social networking with people one already knows or has known, there is a certain disinvestment of fantasy within Orkut. Several users select pseudonyms which allow them to remain totally anonymous, but most of them have a visible face which tries to approximate their real life persona online. Unlike the circuits of blogging or role playing games, Orkut emphasises the need to be a ‘real’ person, thus validating its unique feature of ‘scrapping’. This dialectic offers an interesting approach to looking at the self-avatar relationship that is central to the discussions both of the technosocial subject as well as the Cyborg. On the one hand, it is the physical body of the user that produces the information which constitutes the digital self and presence, and hence it should be looked upon as the primary or the authentic text. On the other hand, the interactions that happen within the social networking system are interactions of the information rather than the producer of the information; that is to say that the avatar is the point of contact and response and is greater than the information produced by the individual that the avatar is usually attributed to. The responses that the profile receives, the way in which the self is represented, the techniques used to engage with more people or invite strangers to communicate, are all the practices of the digital avatar.

In the processes of simulation that construct the avatar, there is a certain way by which the biological person who claims the avatar is not always in control of or responsible for the actions of the avatar. The most illustrative example is the case of blogging. Within a blog, the person has a certain ownership over the blog and the contents that are published therein. However, the value of a blog post is not only in the original authorship of the content. The comments, the responses, the debates, the cross-references and hyperlinks, the sharing and dissemination of the content, is visibly beyond the control of the original author. Which is
why, the publisher of the blog is never solely and exclusively responsible for the contents of the blog. This loss of control does not have to be necessarily perceived as violent or traumatic, but a necessary condition of the production of this avatar. This approach at understanding the avatar as not merely a representation of the authorial will and intent but as shaped by and in conversation with multiple stakeholders and contexts is a valuable contribution to understanding the digital cyborg. In this case, I am proposing that the cyborg is not the avatar, nor the person who is behind it, but is a combination of the two, each augmenting the capacities and the capabilities of the other.

This new form of social design and context within which the Technosocial subject is shaped is examined by Clay Shirky in his book *Here Comes Everybody* (2008). Shirky writes, ‘Communications tools don’t get socially interesting until they get technologically boring’ (Shirky 2008, 105). It is precisely because we are at such a ‘boring’ moment that it becomes interesting for me to start unravelling the ways in which technosocial Subjectivities are formed. Shirky’s book also gives us some important clues as to what are these new kind of changes that are shaping technology mediated practices and identities. Shirky argues that the social hierarchies we associate with large modern corporations emerged as a way to reduce the complexity of large-scale social action. The structure of such hierarchies is reproduced in a typical ‘org chart’: ‘an inverted tree of boxes and arrows’ with lines connecting the ‘head of the organization’ at the top with the various layers of management and workers down below (39). Shirky tells us that such structures emerged with the rise of large railroads in the mid 1800s, spanning the width of the United States. Whereas ‘a small railroad could function with ad hoc management,’ large-scale networks saw their ‘management challenges grow faster than organizational size’ resulting in unfortunate accidents (41). The creation of large management bureaucracies reduced the ‘transaction costs of running a railroad’ by clarifying
chains of command and areas of responsibility (42). However, while businesses profit and remain competitive by making small reductions in transaction costs, the necessity of such large management bureaucracies makes it unprofitable to use the power of such structures for activities which generate little profit (46). Traditionally only very strong bonds, such as those of family, church, political ideology, etc. could motivate people to overcome the difficulty of organizing collective action, but Shirky argues that, by reducing the transaction costs to close to zero, the internet makes such social action trivially easy, even for ‘loosely structured groups, operating without managerial direction and outside the profit motive’ (47).

Shirky suggests an ascending scale, or ladder, of group action facilitated by online social tools, ordered in terms of increasing difficulty: ‘sharing, cooperation, and collective action’ (49). Each step up the ladder requires exponentially more effort on the behalf of the participants. Forwarding a joke via e-mail is a good example of sharing. New social tools improve upon this by being able to aggregate millions of individual acts of sharing, whether it is photos, links, or movie ratings, and delivering them back to users in a structured format. In fact, as Shirky points out, Google works by ranking ‘the linking preferences of hundreds of millions of internet users’ (49). Cooperation involves more work as it requires people to coordinate their actions with other users. Wikipedia is famously a collaborative endeavour, although (as we will see) not all users contribute to an equal degree. Finally there is collective action. This is particularly difficult because it requires that even those who might be unhappy with some group decisions to remain committed to the goals and activities of the group as a whole, and to take personal action to further those goals (53). This gets reflected in the production of the avatar as well. Shirky’s work gives us an insight into how, the digital representations that have always been looked upon as agential reproductions are collaborative in nature and subject to hierarchies which might not always please the individual user behind
the avatar. The distance between the ambition and the execution is often great and many avatars can fall prey to the design of others – what in LambdaMOO was recognised as a rape in cyberspace.

The avatar is not constituted solely by the information produced by the physical user. In its very distributed-consolidated mode, it acquires and feeds off information of data streams that are outside of the control of the physical user. For example, Orkut has a feature of testimonials where the people in the networks of the translated self, also author opinions, observations and endorsements for the profile. The public nature of communication and the archiving of this, add to the meaning and the functioning of this translated self. This production of the meta-data introjects the avatar into a circuit of meaning making and producing narratives that is beyond the scope of the physical body. This is a new context within which the avatar acquires ‘value’ or reputation which is distinctly different from the reputation circuits that the biological body behind the avatar inhabits. The slippage between the avatar and the user is where the cyborg can be located - Neither the physical body nor the translated digital self. It resides in the interface between the two, each constantly referring to the other, creating an interminable loop of dependence. The cyborg, because it is produced by the very technologies of the two systems that it is straddling, makes these techniques or the technologisation of the self synonymous with the processes of producing the narratives or making meaning.

A look at many other similar sites like blogging communities on ‘Livejournal’, or dating communities like ‘Friendster’, can give us an idea that the first stage in authoring a cyborg rests in creating these profiles, or avatars. Users spend a lot of time trying to create for themselves the best avatars, which will be continued projections of the self. These tend to
rely mainly on the visual component, as in games like ‘Second Life’ and chatting platforms like ‘Yahoo!’, but they can also rely on a combination of visual and verbal elements. This process by which the body and avatar are distilled into data sets is what I understand as a process of cyborgification. The first step of cyborgification – the translation of the physical body into the digital avatar – is already a complex one, where it is not as if the cyborg exists ex nihilo and then projects from one system to the other but that the cyborg, gets created in this negotiation between the avatar and the self. The texts of the avatar – the narrative that produces the avatar as well as the narratives produced by the avatar - are not the sole authorship of the cyborg. It has other players, who are a part of either of the systems, adding meanings and layers to the text. I shall explore this multi-stakeholder ecology of the digital cyborg in last section of this chapter, trying to look at the different actors involved in the making of this imaginary cyborg figure.

The second step in this process or cyborgification is a reverse mapping or an un-disembodiment. Even within role playing games, where the alienation of the avatar from the body reaches its highest levels, there is an effort on the part of the gamer to provide physical and material contexts to the imagined bodies which they have created. Mizuki Ito (1992), in her work about online gamers, looks at how, with an increased investment in the digital lives, users tend to shape their own physical selves around their projected avatars. Many chronic users of cyberspaces have their language, their social interaction and even the way they dress and behave affected by their practices online. Sherry Turkle, in her analysis of the MUD world in Life on the Screen (1996), points out that an increasing number of users start looking upon their screen lives as a constitutive part of their reality rather than an escape from it. She sees computer technologies as providing us with new ‘objects to think with’ which become the framework for our perception of ourselves and others.
In “Computational Technologies” (1997), Turkle goes on to say that the ‘multiplicity and heterogeneity’ of the distributed environments are mapped on to our own notions of the self, thus beginning a process of reverse embodiment where the elements of the virtual world become a part of our constitutive reality. She says,

What I am saying is that the many manifestations of multiplicity in our culture, including the adoption of multiple on-line personae, are contributing to a general reconsideration of traditional, unitary notions of identity. On-line experiences with ‘parallel lives’ are part of the cultural context that supports new theorizations about multiple selves. (Turkle, 1997, 64)

Turkle also argues in “Ghosts in the Machine”, when she sets up philosophical questions which she does not set out to answer, but definitely hint at the second level of cyborgification where the distinction between the physical body and the virtual self are broken down. Turkle sees the new ‘virtual worlds’ of electronic communication as giving us new latitudes in theorizing reality itself:

In a virtual world, where both humans and computer programs adopt personas, where intelligence and personality are reduced to words on a screen, what does it mean to say that one character is more real than another? (Turkle, 1995, 35)

This process of reverse embodiment entails a mapping of the translated avatar on to the physical body of the users, often leading to the users abandoning their avatars, cutting down on their public presence or sometimes actually committing ‘digital suicides’, killing their own selves to start new identities and networks. Turkle’s work draws attention to the idea that the relationship between the biological self and the avatar is not unilateral. As she writes, ‘In
sum, MUDs blur the boundaries between self and game, self and role, self and simulation...One player says, 'You are what you pretend to be...you are what you play' (97).

Julian Dibbell re-reinforced the dynamics of this reverse mapping or un-disembodiment as well. Dibbell does not allow for a linear notion of the physical body being translated into a digital avatar but insisted that the translated avatar is always, because of the users’ emotional involvement but also because of the practices that the avatar initiates, mapped back on to the body of the physical user. This is a process of reverse embodiment where the presumed ‘original’ is now re-shaped and re-configured to suit the imaginations and narratives of the avatar. Such a phenomenon is perhaps possible only in the domains of the cyberspace. Also, the cyborg, generally presumed as residing in the physical body, is now relocated in this two-way process, at the borders where it not only facilitates meaning but also realises itself in the process of facilitation. While the metaphor of the flow has often been used to try and describe this relationship, a network, perhaps is a better way of understanding this transactional relationship. The avatar becomes a set of digital attributes – structured as well as unstructured; scripted as well as non-scripted – that can now each travel through different trajectories of personal extension and inter-personal interaction. Different processes, desires or interests of the self draw distributed representations, each mapping back upon the biological body to change and reshape the practices of the body.

The avatar becomes not simply a way of referencing and invoking the original/biological body but also a collaborator in authorship of other avatars that it interacts with. It becomes a position of meaning making not only for itself but also for the other avatars it comes into contact with. There is a dynamic exchange of information so that the avatar becomes a point of reference for the development and sustenance of the network. The avatar is not simply a
projection or a representation but an active partner in the process of cyborgification, where the avatar becomes an epistemological position through which the world – biological as well as the digital – makes new meaning, leading to new material practices. Thus, if the material and cultural practices of the cyborg have to be located, they cannot be in the processes of technologisation – the installation of a pacemaker, the swiping of a credit card, the extensive use of cell-phones and cyberspatial activities – but in the material and cultural consequences of these technologies.

This is a viewpoint that Doheny-Farina (1998) argues for in his book *The Wired Neighbourhood*. Doheny-Farina questions the early euphoria and embracing of digital technologies, especially cyberspace, as building new forms of social and personal interactions and subjectivities. He suggests that we cannot rely on electronic democracy and civility to form merely because computers and computer networks. He acknowledges that a ‘wired communitarian movement’ (4) that values the people who live in it and is sensitive to their interactions is not an easy thing to create and sustain. He writes,

> I do not doubt that virtual experimentations with the self and with the relations of that self can be liberating. But I can’t help feeling that the situations that call for these benefits reflect deficiencies in our geophysical communities. The institutions, the families, and the social relations of our offline lives are unable to include and celebrate those who are different, to care for and heal those who are hurting. If the net becomes the only recourse, then our geophysical communities are lost (32)

Doheny-Farina brings back the question of Technosocial Spaces and Subjectivities, as he indicates how the containment of the cyborg only in fictions or in digital spaces leads to a loss of the Technosocial Space. He argues
The hope that the incredible powers of global computer networks can create new virtual communities, more useful and healthier than the old geographic ones, is thus misplaced. The net seduces us and further removes us from our localities—unless we take charge of it with specific, community-based, local agendas. These agendas are currently under development in many communities through the community network movement. If we do not, as communities, as a society, support this movement, we risk the further disappearance of local communities within globalized virtual collectives of alienated and entertained individuals (37).

For Doheny-Farina, the community, the context, the geography and the production of the local are essential in understanding the ways in which individual Technosocial subjects are realised. In turn, Technosocial subjects cannot be defined or understood because the only Reality (as Sorkin had pointed out) that these digital spaces allow for is contained in the digital realms. Doheny-Farina insists that ‘that the net, in connecting everyone, furthers our isolation by abstracting us from place and virtualizing human relations (123)’. The production of these selves, of these digital avatars, leads to the idea of the cyborg as not simply a synthesis—a site upon which the synthesis happens—but as a dynamic situation in which all subjects participate, producing and supporting its own identity. The material cyborg asserts the need for the body as central to their imagination. The bounded cyborg is also subject to the territories that it resides within. This then, is the first notion of the cyborg that leads to the culmination of Clark’s model. The cyborg as a willing participatory actor in the synthesis of organism and technology; the cyborg as an identity that is bound in context by the space and time within which the cyborg is framed the cyborg as not formulated in the conditions of technologisation but in conditions of cyborgification, produced, not as a fixed definitive identity but in the very processes of authoring of avatars and embracing un-disembodied identities. The cyborgs are not in the matrix, the cyborg is not simply the person...
behind the keyboard; the cyborg is everyday but it is no longer trivial or natural. It is a producer - agential, participatory, conscious – and a site that becomes central to new practices of meaning making, spatial reorganisation and regulation.

2.2 CYBORG MAKERS

The second model of cyborg-identity is perhaps best captured in Donna Haraway’s work on the production – or, to use her own word, generation – of cyborgs. Gibson and Clark’s everyday cyborgs were not concerned with the processes by which the cyborgs came into being. Both in Gibson’s character Case and in Clark’s reference to the ‘first monkey who used a stick for its protection’, offer a model where cyborgs are ‘naturally born’ and transact with their environments through the technologies that they engage with. Haraway’s cyborg is more interested in looking at how the cyborg comes into being, unpacking the mechanics and politics of human-technology relationships. Haraway’s postulating of the cyborg has animated scholarship in gender and sexuality studies, but my own interest is to look at how she is able to dismantle the taken-for-granted nature of cyborgs in existing discourse and emphasise historical and intellectual legacies of monsters and freaks in understanding cyborgification.

In her essay, “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others” (1992), Haraway posits the figure of the Monster (also the Coyote and the Trickster), as an allegorical other to the Goddess that has been produced as the mythical proto-woman or the feminine mystique. The monster, according to Haraway, is an artifactualism – a construct of fictions and facts, straddling both of them together, blurring the boundaries of the biological and the cultural, imploding the boundaries of the masculine and the feminine, thus produced as a ‘creature of irony’ (295).
Haraway writes,

[A]rtifactualism means that nature for us is made both, as both fiction and fact. If organisms are natural objects, it is crucial to remember that organisms are not born; they are made in world-changing technoscientific practices by particular collective actors in particular times and places. (Haraway, 1992, 297)

Haraway suggests that artifactualism is an effective lens to study the ‘effects of connection, of embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere’ (298). This ‘elsewhere’ is not the technologised nowhere – a place that one travels to, like tourists on an excursion, capturing the essence of a space and taking it back with them; the Disneylands of the mind (Appadurai, 1996) – but ‘a topos, a place, in the sense of a rhetorician's place or topic for consideration of common themes; nature is, strictly, a commonplace’ (296). This notion of the ‘Commonplace’ resonates with the descriptions of the technosocial spaces discussed in the earlier chapter. The Commonplace serves as the entry point into talking about the relationship between technology and the conditions of producing nature. Haraway argues against the popular imagination of technologised production as denaturing our existence. She suggests that a ‘technological decontextualisation’ is a common experience for millions of organisms and people around the world and that the demonised technologised denaturing, more than denaturing, is actually a specialised production of nature (301).

Just like the commonplace, the organisms inhabiting the commonplace are also not born but are discursively constructed; ‘they are made in world-changing technoscientific practices by particular collective actors in particular times and places’ (297). She explores this process of construction further by looking at the ‘apparatus of bodily production’ (298) to question the very existence of the body – the biological, the original, the authentic – and the construction
of its boundaries. Haraway suggests that just as nature does not pre-exist, bodies do not also pre-exist and are not a given; in fact bodies find their boundaries in social and cultural interactions with other bodies, and that Nature or the Biological only become discursive forces which significantly produce the biological bodies (304).

What the cyberspaces and digital forms of cultural expression have enabled is a protean diversity for the body that we had taken for granted for a significant period of human-technology history. Even within the radical models posited by Gibson, in his science fiction narratives, the body is still the discursive site which produces the imagined or the digital – what we identified as the avatar in the earlier section – rather than being reproduced in its very production of the avatar. For Haraway, this is the beginning point of understanding the cyborg as residing within the technological interactions. It is not restricted to the practices enabled by technologies but inhabits the larger topos of social, cultural and biological expansion of space and identity that the new technologies have to offer. She also suggests, that in looking at processes of cyborgification, we need to move away from the vocabulary of reproduction which reinforces the idea of technology as an invasive practice upon the human self. Instead, the cyborg or the technologised demon – part human, part machine, part imagination, part fantasy – should be defined and traced in conditions and processes of regeneration and embodiment, thus establishing new relationships between the human and the technological.

Haraway moves away from the visions of androids or bionic humans to look at the cyborg as residing in the ‘optical illusion between social reality and science fiction’ (1991, 141). She makes a relational connection in a quadrant where we have a relationship between the discursively produced nature and the imaginary outer space on the one hand and a...
transactional relationship between science fiction narratives and the advent of biomedical sciences of reproduction and health care on the other. In each one of these disciplines and approaches, Haraway demonstrates how ‘the authorship rests with the representer, even as he claims independent object status for the represented’ (1992, 314)

In her more celebrated essay on cyborgs, ‘A cyborg manifesto’, Haraway (1991) defines her cyborg as a node which extends into the ‘system’ (the combination of the technological and the physical) to change the system and be changed by it. She writes,

> It is no accident that the symbolic system of the family of man - and so the essence of woman - breaks up at the same moment that networks of connection among people on the planet are unprecedentedly multiple, pregnant, and complex... In the 'Western' sense, the end of man is at stake. It is no accident that woman disintegrates into women in our time. (1991, 160)

The fractured identity of the cyborg, the constant struggle that the cyborg faces in realising itself between the mechanical and the organic, gives it certain autonomy over creating its own self and the surroundings. As Haraway would put it,

> The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. (1991, 151)

Haraway’s contributions to the imagination and formulation of cyborgs has been extraordinary, because not only did she dissolve the earlier mind-body, biology-technology divides but she also envisioned the cyborg as embodying a position of power and political resistance. She hints at the centrality of the narrative powers of the cyborgs, the conditions
within which the cyborg generates itself in its interactions with technology and the promise that this non-human protean identity has for further politics of production, gender and materialism. She further postulates that the cyborg is a contextual creature, circumscribed by the reality within which it is produced and hence cannot be celebrated as a universal monolithic structure.

Gibson and Haraway’s cyborgs, even as they get incorporated within Clark’s Natural Born Cyborg, still remain theoretical abstractions. Though Haraway herself proposes that theory is never abstract and that it is always embodied by the subjectivities and the processes that are in the orbit of the theoretical (as opposed to ideological) formulations, her own analysis was in a time before the cyberspace had come of age. Their cyborgs are more an indication of the everydayness of the cyborg without robbing it of the agency, the tensions, the conflicts and the participatory processes which is often the case with a large section of Cybercultures. The theoretical formulations miss out on the material making and practices of the cyborg.

I use the Cyborg as a conceptual category to engage with the idea that the postmodern body is an amalgam of biological processes, regulatory practices, and technological prostheses. It is thus a contextual being that is circumscribed not only by the technologies but also the geophysical conditions within which it is located. I offer the framework of the Technosocial to think of a lived, embodied, everyday cyborg that critically reflects on its conditions of cyborgification as well as embeds it within processes of regulation and social transactions in particular geo-political locations.
2.3 The Social Cyborg

Anne Balsamo, the cultural theorist, in her formulation of the technosocial cyborg – a cyborg that is ‘an organism embedded in a cybernetic system’ (1996; 46), presents a much more interesting idea that both the cybernetic system and the cyborg are so intricately connected that it is difficult to determine or define either of them without the other. She writes,

Cyborgs are the postmodern icon. From children’s plastic action figures to Robocop’s titanium exoskeleton, cyborg-ian artifacts will endure as relics of an age obsessed with replication...[O]ur technological imagination imbues cyborgs with ancient anxieties about human difference (Balsamo 2000, 149).

For Balsamo, the cyborg is a node within the cybernetic information networks, where it becomes a part of a larger system of interactive cyborgs. She revisits the process of cyborgification as referring to the building of a system, rather than just an individual, that has components that are artificial and natural, living and dead, evolved and invented. She quotes the cultural theorist Gregory Bateson (1969) to argue that the cyborg body ‘is not bound by the skin but includes all external pathways along which information can travel’ (154).

The cyberspace can be looked upon as one such cybernetic system – not simply a network or a collection of databases or a technological form – where the technologised identities are a part of the cyberspace and essential to the sustenance and development of cyberspace. Within the cyberspaces, as Turkle mentions, the self gets created within ‘screen worlds’ so that we experience ‘reality’ as mediated by technology. The cyborg exists in union with the space it occupies and can be located largely through its material practices. The cyborg thus informs
the technosocial subject as a system that synthesize the organic, the technological, and the spatial in its functioning.

Experimenters like Kevin Warwick have contributed significantly to the production and the imagination of a certain kind of physical, embodied cyborg that exists among us. Warwick, in his autobiography, *I Cyborg* (2002), posits two ways of looking at the human-technology interaction. He looks at ‘accessorial technologies’ and ‘integral technologies’ (23) as two different ways in which to engage with technologies to think of a cyborg. Warwick’s categories resonate very strongly with the distinctions that Clark had made in his work on *Natural Born Cyborgs*. However, Warwick is more interested in looking at these technologies as forming an interactive environment within which the cyborg resides rather than looking at prostheses (physical or imaginary). As he reflects in his autobiography,

> My own definition of a cyborg is something that is part-animal, part-machine, and whose capabilities are extended beyond normal limits. … it allows for metal upgrades as well as physical upgrades and allows the extension to go beyond the normal limits of either the animal or the machine. (pg. 61)

For Warwick, the ability of the physical body to stimulate the mechanical components which in turn are in sync with a wide array of elements in his environment inform these categories. His focus was on the building of such an environment, where through technologies he would be able to interact with the machines around him. He writes,

> As a result of the experiment, I received several communications from companies, government bodies, military and police forces about … what it might mean for the future. Would we as a society want implants like this to be generally available? Who would control the situation? The technology was now available, so such questions had
to be raised, rather than just discussed as a mere futuristic concept that might never happen. (Warwick 2000, 89)

From spectacles used to enhance sight to spectacles with a mini computer projecting data on the lenses; from a cane that helps you support your weight to a cane that protects you from threat and can be used as a weapon; from shoes that cover your feet to shoes with microcomputers built into them in order to adjust the pressure as you walk; no matter how fantastic or technologically augmented these particular gadgets might be, Warwick looks upon such wearable technologies, as accessorial in nature. For Warwick, such forms of technology, though they do enhance the normal capability of an individual within a spatio-temporal context, they do not enhance his/her capabilities to determine who they are or how they perform in certain other environments. He articulates this as the guiding principle behind his experiments on his body:

My own definition is that a cyborg is something that is part-animal, part-machine, and whose capabilities are extended beyond normal limits. This is much more general than other definitions and includes creatures other than humans. It allows for mental upgrades as well physical upgrades and allows the extension to go beyond the normal limits of either the animal of the machine. I can’t really see that it includes wearing a wristwatch, a pair of glasses, or riding a bicycle – to me that’s a cybernetic system. (61)

Warwick proposes that such an accessorial use of technology is the formation of a ‘cybernetic system’. Drawing upon the origins of the word ‘cybernetique’ or ‘cybernetic’ meaning mobile or disposable or temporary Warwick argues that the deployment or employment of technology does not constitute a cyborg – a cybernetic organism – but adds to the understanding and development of a cybernetic system. This kind of formulation immediately
refutes the everyday cyborg that Bell or Gray were trying to posit. The conditions of technology – or what Warwick calls the production of a cybernetic system – are necessary for the formulation of a cyborg.

The cyborg, which Warwick himself is interested in – not only in imagining but also in becoming – is a cyborg that is an ‘augmented human being.’ For Warwick, the cyborg is an individual who is not merely a node in the networked neighbourhood of interactive technologies but an organism that has internalised technology so that it becomes a part of its neuro-sensory circuits, thus producing an identity that more intelligently and effectively interacts with its immediate environment. Warwick’s cyborg destabilises the human-machine divide or privilege and instead brings about a symbiotic relationship between the two. Warwick’s own experiments in cybernetics foreground the body, the biological self above the technological modifications.

Warwick’s experiments draw from two ends of the cybernetic spectrum - on the one hand he has been developing robots with artificial intelligence that replicate human processes of learning and cognisance and aim at enhancing the communication patterns, going beyond speech to more enhanced, undistorted digital communication. On the other, in his experiments with his own body, he has been developing prostheses – not the large grotesque accessorial prostheses of an industrial era, but small, bio-integrable devices that harmoniously fit into the human body to produce new ways of interacting with the surrounding environment that is sensitive to such implants. Thus, Warwick defined the cyborg as a tenuous identity. It was an identity that was willingly produced. It was an identity that he willed himself to acquire or at other times to experience. As he very interestingly puts it,
I don’t know that I felt any different in myself, other than the fact that I now had the potential to be different: I had an array connected into my nervous system, wires running up my arm and a terminal-connector pad waiting to be plugged in. It was as though I was still a human but with a cyborg socket. (217)

Warwick’s experiments also extended beyond his body through a relay of information across the internet channels. Warwick imagines the cyberspaces as an extension of the individual body. While he remains interested in how the physical body, through extendable prostheses or implanted chips manages to communicate using the electronic circuits, it is possible to take this idea and think of the millions of people who are increasingly populate cyberspaces and extending their notion of the self, their private lives, their activities and relationships on to the digital matrices. Warwick’s cyborg, though it also posits an embodied cyborg that can be traced in its materiality, still recognizes the cyborg as a willing and an empowered entity. Warwick, because he is as much interested in documenting the processes of producing the figure of the cyborg, also leads to further possibilities of imagining the social cyborg as a willing, conscious participant in the conditions of cyborgification.

Clark’s notions of the Natural Born Cyborg also include this particular strain of thought borrowing from Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Theory that looks at the cyborg as in conditions of authorship, perception, communication and interaction. One of the ways by which such a cyborg can be accessed – and also revealed to be circumscribed by its context – is in the digital cyberspaces and the popular networks that the social cyborgs inhabit. In the earlier sections, the figure of the cyborg as found in social networking systems, was still to talk about the relationship of the cyborg and the narratives that it produces.
3. Everyday Cyborg as the Technosocial Subject

The cyborg models that have been discussed in this chapter so far are not merely theories. They have practical implications in how they influence our understanding of technology development, policy, practice and regulation. As has been shown, in almost all the models from Haraway to Clark, there is an imagination of the cyborg as possessing supreme agency that enables the production of a cyborg identity. The cyborg, thus imagined, does not take into account either the idea of a reluctantly formed cyborg. It takes the agential cyborg as an epistemological truth and concentrates more on its practices rather than its complex relationships with questions of truth, meaning making and authority. It also fails to look at other conditions of authors and authorities that contribute to the cyborg-making process. I present the Technosocial subject as addressing these knowledge gaps in the technology-human discourse that comes through the cyborg narrative.

The technosocial subject may choose to be called so and transform him/herself in the process to actively become one. However, like the cyborg, there are many different ‘authors’ who write and produce this subjectivity. As the technology ecologies within which these subjectivities find meaning and anchoring, grow large, diverse, the conditions of being technosocial become more complex and increasingly out of the control of the physical body that seems to anchor it in the material world. The Everyday Cyborg is an attempt to revisit the cyborg debates through the frameworks of technosociality. It proposes that the cyborg discourse, while it does revisit the ideas of the body, and what it means to have technology mediated selves, does not offer any critical reflections on the nature of the technology. The technologies, in most of the cultural studies and social sciences are imagined as neutral and homogeneous. This is as true for the kind of philosophical fantasies that Haraway writes, as it is for the interactions that theorists like Hayles and Clark have forwarded. There is an implicit
understanding that these technologies function in the same way no matter where they are deployed and who uses them, and thus produces universal models of being cyborg, which follow the larger legacies of looking at the West and developed information societies as the norms which would also operate on the emerging information societies in the East and the Global South.

This section wants to see how the Technosocial subject, that does not privilege the physical over the technological, or the body over the avatar, can offer a new way of thinking about these questions. The Technosocial subject hopes to be more than merely a symbolic signification of the body-technology synthesis, and instead allows us to think of ourselves as cyborgs within a ‘larger database of living’ (Mitchell 1998, 45), as defined by and producing transferable sets of data which we have authored, and able to mobilize our virtual self across different networks to enhance our sense of social networking and being. Instead, the technosocial subject proposes that an everyday cyborg – not in the sense of usage that Hales and Bell were listing – and an examination of their quotidian practices online, might offer us a new way of looking at the human-technology interactions. Looking at the vast arena of user generated content, that has emerged as the dominant mode of cultural production and engagement in emerging information societies, the section offers a way of reconceptualising the cyborg as grounded in material practices, which it shapes and is shaped by, thus producing complex technosocial subjectivities which also need to be contextualized within geo-political spaces as well as regulatory mechanisms within the country. The first instance looks at the crisis of information overload and authority that accompanies the celebrated accounts of co-creation, collaboration and democratic cultural production online, specifically focusing on Wikipedia as the site of engagement. The second instance is more located in the cultural politics in East Asia, looking at the crisis of meaning making when specific lifestyles
and politics of the local do not adhere to the rhetoric of globalised access and intelligibility that marks cultural production and identity online.

3.1 Everyday Cyborg: History, Technology and Subjectivity

One of the most vocal concerns in emerging information societies has been about the new subjects who form themselves on the interfaces of their digital devices, slipping under the radar of traditional forms of knowledge production and consumption. The interface that Turkle celebrated as leading to new ways of expressions and understanding self, has come under a severe critique as producing subjects who are shallow, fractured and scattered, much like the technologies they embrace. Mark Bauerlein, in his book *The Dumbest Generation* (2008), looks at the recreational, leisure, learning and consumption patterns of the Generation Y in USA to proclaim that the dumbest generation in the history of mankind is the one that is growing up on the interface. He begins his lament by questioning the very forms and ways of accessing knowledge and information that the digital technologies have ushered in. Bauerlein writes, ‘to replace the book with the screen is to remove a 2,500-year-old cornerstone of civilization and insert an altogether dissimilar building block (23).’ He looks at the screen as responsible for a decline in reading habits, for a disinterest in history, for producing self contained bubbles of infotainment which leave the Technosocial users disconnected from their immediate environments and contexts. Producing statistics and numbers to suggest that the Digital Natives are essentially ignorant and uncaring, Bauerlein observes that

[their] ignorance is hard to believe... It isn’t enough to say that these young people are uninterested in world realities. They are actively cut off from them...They are encased in more immediate realities that shout out conditions beyond – friends, work, clothes, cars, pop music, sitcoms, Facebook.(55)
Bauerlein’s lament, however betrays his own preference for ‘high culture’ and his inability to realise the potentials and the creative cultures that are a part of the pedagogy and learning processes online. He reduces all online communication to an exercise in self gratification, where ‘in an average young person’s online experience, the senses may be stimulated and the ego touched, but vocabulary doesn’t expand, memory doesn’t improve, analytic talents don’t develop, and erudition doesn’t ensue (109).’ He looks at different technologies of documentation, archiving and knowledge production as producing relevant Technosocial Subjects of their times, who used these technologies to further the cause of human civilization. Bauerlein is of the opinion that every technology of mass production and dissemination has created new Technosocial Subjects who have emerged as sharp thinkers, responsible citizens and careful consumers in their interactions with those technologies. Furthering this romantic vision (comparing the reading habits of teenagers in American schools with those of John Stuart Mill and Walt Whitman when they were young readers), he concludes, ‘for most young users, it is clear, the Web hasn’t made them better writers and readers, sharper interpreters and more discerning critics, more knowledgeable citizens and tasteful consumers (110).’

While Bauerlein’s work is more to be seen as a lament from a generation that is not yet ready to accommodate the rapid changes that the digital era has brought in, he is not the only one to denounce the activities of the Digital Natives. There is an outcry and a growing amount of anxiety of literature that understands Digital Natives as being in a state of constant distraction, powered by multitasking and gadgets that demand their attention. Teachers, parents, policy makers and practitioners produce narratives of the ‘Generation Wii’ as lazy, interested only in entertainment oriented consumption and de-skilled at core competence that is required to run the world. Psychiatrist Edward Hallowell (2009) has suggested that an increasing number of young users of technology, because of their scattered engagement with
multi-tasking gadgets, exhibit symptoms similar to patients suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder. Within the academia, teachers have long voiced the anxiety about ‘Copy-Paste Cultures’ where students refuse to read, write or even think on their own (Bennett et al, 2008). The ‘Wikipedia Culture’ of ready information access and lack of traditional research practice and dialogue seems to put these Technosocial Subjects in conditions of what Bauerlein calls ‘indiscriminate ignorance’ (115).

Almost in response to Bauerlein’s scathing critique of the digital natives, Dan Tapscott (2008) identifies the ‘Net Generation’ as changing the world and producing exuberant transformations in the process. Tapscott describes eight characteristics (‘norms’) of the Net Generation in the book to argue that the despair and the lament that marks the Bauerlein line of thinking are misplaced. He writes, that ‘as the first global generation ever, the Net Geners are smarter, quicker and more tolerant of diversity than their predecessors (6).’ Tapscott forwards a line of thinking that different technologies have produced life styles, learning patterns and subjects which go through a transition every few generations and that we are witnessing this transition with the Net Generation for whom ‘using the new technology is as natural as breathing (18).’ In order to build his case, he brings in scholarship from neuroscience and cognitive psychology to proclaim, ‘Evidence is mounting that Net Geners process information and behave differently because they have indeed developed brains that are functionally different from those of their parents (29).’ From there on, Tapscott paints a rosy picture where all that is good and wonderful is attributed to this new generation that live their life their own way, which is not subject to the expectations or the protocols established by their predecessors. He argues that these ‘Screenagers’ are far from being dumb consumers.

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7Tapscott identifies the following norms as the distinguishing factors of his Net Genners: they want freedom; they love to personalize; they scrutinize; demand corporate integrity and openness as customers and employees; they want entertainment and play in work life and everything they do; they are collaboration and relationship oriented; they need speed; they innovate.
Tapscott observes that they ‘want to learn, but they want to learn only when they have to learn, and they want to learn in a style that is best for them (130).’

The debates between Bauerlein and Tapscott have led to the formation of warring camps that are clearly drawn and very vocal, but have a few common threads that bind them together. To begin with, for both the camps, the Technosocial Subject (Digital Native, Generation Y, Net Generation et al) is essentially a subject that is deeply implicated in the production and consumption of information and knowledge. Thus Bauerlein will treat them as ‘plagiarists’ who remain ignorant whereas Tapscott will glorify them as ‘remixers’ who produce new cultural objects. On both sides of the debate, the common anxiety of trust and authenticity runs as an undercurrent in the dialogue. For Bauerlein and his supporters, online sources and processes of knowledge production are inherently flawed and cannot compare with the long standing traditions of the publishing industry. Bauerlein’s call for concern at the loss of ‘cornerstones of ancient civilization’ is also a concern about veracity of information and the legitimacy of the people authoring that information. Similarly, while Tapscott, who devoted an entire book to the ‘Wiki Way’ of producing knowledge through collaborations, also explores the question of authenticity online. Immersed in the celebratory approaches of Wiki-like digital spaces, Tapscott is unable to find a resolution and instead celebrates the loss of indicators that belonged to an’ older generation of trust design (178).’

These concerns get compounded by the fact that the Technosocial Subjects live in conditions of an ‘information overload’ (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008, 12). The Web 2.0 explosion which uses the availability of easy-to-use, inexpensive and personally owned digital modes of production and participation to provide immersive and interactive environments to users has resulted in an unprecedented increase in the amount of information that is documented and disseminated in digital worlds. A report conducted by the research firm at International Data
Corporation (IDC)\(^8\) concludes that in 2007, alone, 161 billion gigabytes of data was created, shared and distributed online; websites, personal home pages, social networking systems, file sharing networks, peer to peer groups, blogs, news portals, podcasts, online financial transactions, news sites, etc. contributed to data, which, if it were in books, would have led to a creation of 12 stacks of books reaching from the Earth to the Sun. The report, to put the information into perspective, records that this data

\[\text{is six tons of books for every living person on the planet. It is 3 million times the amount of information in all the books ever written in all the languages in time. It would require 2 billion of the highest-capacity iPods to store all of that information.}\]

In 2003, researchers estimated the world’s information production to be around 5 billion gigabytes. Current reports predict that the world will generate 988 billion gigabytes of information in 2010 (2007)

Every year, the mount of digital information grows even more rapidly than in the year before.

These gigabytes are a product of the billions of webpages and sites run by millions of companies, nongovernmental organisations, governments, universities, groups and ordinary people. Google, for instance, had indexed more than 6 billion items on the Web by 2006, including over 2.5 billion Web pages, 1.3 billion images, and over 1 Billion Usenet messages\(^9\). Blog search engine Technorati\(^10\) is currently tracking 105.6 million blogs – roughly 120,000 new ones are created worldwide each day – and more than 2.50 million pieces of tagged social media on platforms such as Flickr and Youtube. The amount of information available on the World Wide Web is staggering, and potentially debilitating. It is almost impossible to sift through all the information, and even more difficult to actually

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\(^9\) Data available at [http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~zives/cis555/slides/I-Crawlers-Sync.ppt](http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~zives/cis555/slides/I-Crawlers-Sync.ppt)

\(^10\) Data available at [http://www.Technorati.com](http://www.Technorati.com)
determine what constitutes knowledge, who are the legitimate producers of knowledge, and how indeed, do we determine the quality, the accuracy or authenticity of such an information explosion. As we move from an information revolution to an information overload, there are certain anxieties of authenticity and trust that repeatedly resurface.

The questions of who gets to produce knowledge, who has access to it, what are the technological and social politics of visibility of such knowledge, and at the end of the day, what are the filters through which we approach knowledge online, are raging in contemporary discourse about the Technosocial Subject. Perhaps, one of the most influential and telling examples is that of Wikipedia. The massive growth of Wikipedia as a collaborative encyclopaedia, which can be edited by anyone, has been at the centre of many discussions. These range from teachers who feel that it has become far easier for their students to do assignments via the helpful tool of copy and paste, to scholars and academics who are worried about the accuracy and reliability of the information available on Wikipedia, to users who have doubts about the authority of knowledge in a collaborative encyclopaedia, to people who have complained of a lack of control over their own representations and identity laundering.

Lawrence Liang (2010), in his essay exploring questions of authenticity, authority and knowledge on Wikipedia, points out that the world of cyberspace can be roughly divided into two camps: “those who swear by Wikipedia and those who swear at it (2010, 51).” The camps have arisen, mainly because of differences of opinion on the trustworthiness of Wikipedia. The critics of Wikipedia argue that the task of creating an encyclopaedia should be left to experts, and that Wikipedia is nothing more than a collection of articles written by amateurs, which at its best can be informative, and at its worst, dangerous. The most commonly invoked comparison is the comparison between the sacred cow of knowledge, the
Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Wikipedia. Critics argue that while the encyclopaedia Britannica is a source that has developed over centuries, with various experts contributing to it, the Wikipedia is a new kid on the knowledge block, which should be immediately punished.

The critics of Wikipedia often invoke the now popular case of the hoax biography of the well-known U.S. writer and journalist John Seigenthaler, Sr. On May 26, 2005, someone added the following text to Seigenthaler’s biography on the Wikipedia:

> John Seigenthaler Sr. was the assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy in the early 1960s. For a short time, he was thought to have been directly involved in the Kennedy assassinations of both John, and his brother Bobby Nothing was ever proven.

> John Seigenthaler moved to the Soviet Union in 1972, and returned to the United States in 1984. He started one of the country’s largest public relations firm shortly thereafter.

>(in Gasser and Palfrey, 2007, 155)

For four months, these paragraphs remained on the Wikipedia until one of his friends discovered the entry. Seigenthaler was outraged to read that someone had accused him of possibly being involved in the Kennedy assassinations and decided to fight back, using the mainstream media that he understood so well, as a means of repairing his damaged reputation. In doing so, he started an avalanche. While the false accusations were quickly removed from Wikipedia, following his complaint, a long public controversy ensued. The author of that false information was located and he later apologised for posting the information as ‘a sort of a joke’. However, the controversy continued, and it was not about
Seigenthaler but about the accuracy of Wikipedia. The online encyclopaedia could inform or misinform; it allowed anybody who wanted to, to tell the stories of their choice, even if they were falsehoods. After this incident, Wikipedia has undertaken many steps to prevent a recurrence of such nature, including barring unregistered users from creating new pages and introducing the Neutral Point of View (NPOV) as the only accepted tone of the entries.

The strident criticism of Wikipedia and other such user generated content sites, was quickly snipped when the well respected scientific journal *Nature* conducted an experiment in 2005 to answer the questions of which of the two modes – adopted differently by the Wikipedia that relies on the wisdom of crowds and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* that puts its trust in a small body of renowned experts – produces more accurate results. The researchers assembled a team of people considered as experts in their own areas and had them examine entries on science-related topics in both Wikipedia and the online version of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

*Nature’s* team found inaccuracies in both encyclopaedias. Although the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*’s entries tended to have fewer errors than those of Wikipedia, the difference was not as significant as many had expected. In fact, the experiment suggested that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had almost as many errors as Wikipedia. Of 42 entries checked, the investigators deemed that the average entry in Wikipedia contained about 4 errors, whereas the average *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article had about 3\(^{11}\). The team also found that there were only 8 ‘serious errors’ among the 42 articles, 4 within each encyclopaedia. As for factual misrepresentations, ‘omissions’, or ‘misleading statements’, the examiners determined that the Wikipedia entries contained 162 such errors, whereas the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* articles contained 123 (Giles, 2005).

While this particular experiment might have increased the faith of users in an online peer reviewed and produced content generation site like Wikipedia or indeed, increased the anxiety of the zealous defenders of the monopoly of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* over knowledge production\(^\text{12}\), there is one thing that remains constant and unresolved – the idea that there is a sacred Authentic which remains fixed and can be objectively verified. Throughout these discussions and debates, there is a set of inherent assumptions about the stability of the book as an object of knowledge, the authority of knowledge production as a neutral and a-historical condition, and the author as singular, identifiable body, outside of the industries of knowledge production. However, a brief look at the history of reading and the emergence of the book as we understand it today – the bearer of unconditional and absolute knowledge – tells us that the concerns around Wikipedia, are more to do with the role of the author, the text of cyberspace and the participative processes of the readers in a Web 2.0 revolution. It would hence be useful to locate authenticity and verification, not ‘as inherent qualities but as transitive ones’ (Liang 2010; 64), and additionally located in specific technological changes.

When we postulate the question of authenticity in absolute terms, we tend to flatten out many distinguishing factors that are inherent to the debate; and one of them is the temporal framework. A positing of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the Wikipedia as mutual contenders for the monopoly of knowledge production, for example, makes us forget that the domain of collaborative online production of knowledge is a relatively young field. It may be

\(^{12}\) Britannica contested the findings of the experiment conducted by *Nature*, and suggested that the experiment was poorly carried out and highly inaccurate in its findings. In an essay titled ‘Fatally Flawed’, they claimed that ‘Almost everything about the journal’s investigation, from the criteria for identifying inaccuracies to the discrepancy between the article text and its headline, was wrong and misleading... Dozens of inaccuracies attributed to the *Britannica* were not inaccuracies at all, and a number of the articles *Nature* examined were not even in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.’ This article, available at [http://corporate.britannica.com/britannica_nature_response.pdf](http://corporate.britannica.com/britannica_nature_response.pdf) was further responded to by *Nature* and published online at [http://www.nature.com/nature/britannica/eb_advert_response_final.pdf](http://www.nature.com/nature/britannica/eb_advert_response_final.pdf). The discussions and the arguments about which one is more accurate as a model of knowledge production, continue. However, as the arguments in this chapter suggest, the notion of what is authentic and who we trust online remains uncontested in any of these debates.
more useful to think of the contemporary as an extremely fluid and ambiguous period, undoubtedly marked by immense possibilities, but we have not reached any settled phase yet. So if we are to make comparisons, then it is more useful to compare the contemporary period with another moment in history, which was marked by an equal fluidity.

The question of the text and the role of the authors (disguised, I would posit, as concerns of authenticity and knowledge production), had emerged in a much earlier history of print. It is my contention, that a brief examination of the conditions under which authenticity came to be established, and text became identified as bound within a book, may help us locate the anxieties that Cyberculture theory is concerned about, as symptomatic of emergence of technology mediated identity which goes un-addressed because it does not get articulated in the heated debates that surround objects like Wikipedia.

In the introduction to his essay, Liang writes,

There is a certain self assuredness in the claim that the book makes upon the domain of knowledge. Most of us for instance know what a book is and can recognize its attributes when we see one, and we generally see it as an object of knowledge. We may disagree with specific books, and whether they satisfy the criteria of qualifying as knowledge but as an artifact, there is no disagreement on the idea of the book as a stable object of knowledge per se (2010, 66)

Liang further points out how this was not always the case and certainly not the case that books were considered to be naturally reliable sources of authority. He reconstructs the various contest and battles over the emergence of the book as a reliable source of knowledge, so that we get a glimpse into the historical contours of the debate on the authority of knowledge. The pre print period and the mode of reproduction of manuscripts are usually
characterized as being full of mistakes and incredibly unreliable. This absence of certainty in early history of the book was attributed to the mistakes made by scribes who had to copy by hand over many hours and were prone to making mistakes, since there was no fool proof method of ensuring the accuracy of the scribes methods.

Dennis Brachter, in his essay ‘Sacred Words? Or Words of the Sacred?’, goes on to suggest ‘Scribal errors’ are generically used to describe mistakes that are common to human beings, the same kinds of mistakes that we all make in writing or typing. Given the tediousness of copying thousands of words and lines of texts over periods of years, we should not be surprised that some mistakes would creep into the copying process in spite of the best intentions of the scribes (2005, 8)

Brachter’s dissertation supports the fact that the typographical fixity that is attributed to the books was not always there. In the first 100 years of print culture, errors were rife in printed books, Papal edicts against ‘faulty bibles’ were issued, forgeries were rampant, and manuscripts were pirated or counterfeited. Print, in fact, opened up the floodgates of diversity and conflict and at the same time threw up questions of authority of knowledge which could not easily be addressed.

A look at the history of print also makes us aware that the notion of a bound text was closely related to the question of authority and what kind of roles and identities emerge in the peoples’ relationship with the text. Schoff Rebecca Lynn (2004) in her remarkable history of forms of reading and writing practices in medieval England argues that

[T]he benefits readers derived from the press, in terms of better access to authorized texts, were countered by a profound loss of opportunity for inventive forms of reception. Before the growth of the printing industry, medieval readers enjoyed the
liberties they were free to take with the texts they recopied. Manuscript culture encouraged readers to edit or adapt freely any text they wrote out, or to re-shape the texts they read with annotations that would take the same form as the scribe’s initial work on the manuscript. The assumption that texts are mutable and available for adaptation by anyone is the basis, not only for this quotidian functioning of the average reader, but also for the composition of the great canonical works of the period. (2004, 95)

Lynn’s observations could be directly transplanted to the Wikipedia and they would more or less hold true.

According to Mark Rose (1995), in his book *Authors and Owners: The invention of Copyright*, where he traces the history of the manuscript culture, in the Middle Ages, the owner of a manuscript was understood to possess the right to grant permission to copy it, and this was a right that could be exploited, as it was, for example, by those monasteries that regularly charged a fee for permission to copy one of their books (Puntham in Rose 1995, 10). This was somewhat similar to copyright royalty with the crucial difference that the book owner’s property was not a right in the text as such but in the manuscript as a physical object made of ink and parchment. The value provided by the monastery and the reason for their charging for their copy fee did not emerge just from the existence of the copy alone, but also in the fact that each monastery also had their unique elements in the form of the annotations, the commentary, corrections, which only the particular monastery’s copy might contain (21). The very act of copying and possession made you the author of that text and also the owner of the book. The notion of the author was not only as a reclusive solitary figure that coins the first word but the various scribes, writers, annotators and litterateurs who offered changes, and responded to it, as well as helped in distribution and copying. Rose writes,
In the seventeenth century, then, there may have been some feeling that authors should have the right to control the first publications of their writing. But in England, at any rate, no clearly defined set of authorial rights existed, and English authors had no obvious form of redress if books were published without their permission. Indeed, the very concept of ‘author’ was still incompletely developed. Not only was the modern notion of the author as an autonomous creator, the producer and first proprietor of original works, not yet formed, but even the Renaissance notion of the author as an individuated authority was often problematic. (Rose 1995, 25)

So, while the popular account of preprint cultures is of slavish copying by scribes, the story turns out to be slightly more complicated. Acting as annotators, compilers, and correctors, medieval book owners and scribes actively shaped the texts they read. Scribes and readers responded to Chaucer, Langland, and others, not by slavishly copying, canonizing, or passively receiving their texts, but by reworking them as creative readers. In doing so, they continue and contribute to the great layers of intertextual conversation that made the work of these now canonical authors relevant, interesting, and, fundamentally, possible. Similarly, the editors, readers, annotators and contributors to the Wikipedia can also be looked upon as existing in these fluid identities which do not look upon knowledge as fixed and are not bound by pre-defined roles that surround earlier forms of knowledge and cultural production like books, movies, paintings etc.

Thus, rather than speaking about Authenticity as something that is intrinsic to knowledge production, or inherently available to certain kinds of cultural products, it helps to locate it as a part of the technology apparatus that marks a text, and determines the role of the author and subsequently the scope of reading practices. In the case for the history of the book, it was clear that the establishment of authenticity – both for the text and the author - depended on
the arrangements, classifications and kinds of assemblage that make it possible to maintain it as well as critique it. The conventions, for instance, by which the title and author of a work are identified play very specific functions in preparing for knowledge, as do the several kinds of documentation, attribution, citation and copyright.

Accordingly, the history of the technology apparatus includes, in every era, instances of false attribution, misquotation, plagiarism of many kinds, and spurious appeals to authority. Nevertheless, without the technology apparatus, which constitutes the means by which authenticity is determined, evolved and mutated, there would be no author. The preconditions for authenticity cannot easily be made into the object that we identify as author. It is a matter of making evident (making known) the structures of authenticity which emerge in ways that provide definitive proof of the imperfectability and ambiguity of the authorial position. To speak of the productive nature of conflicts over authenticity and trust is then to recognize that any author – either exalted or dismissed - is constructed in a condition of potential collaboration and revision. Moreover, it is a reiteration of the fact that the authorial positions that we attribute to cultural producers are constructed within technological choices and conditions. With the interactive cyberspaces that transform every person into a potential author, producing information, the author becomes a Technosocial Subject and indeed, authorship becomes the most contested condition within which the cultures of fear and expectations operate in discussions of technosociality.

This brings us back to the debates around Wikipedia. What is at stake in the Nature experiment is not really whether the Wikipedia or the Encyclopaedia Britannica are accurate or not. The concerns are not really about where the expertise lies or who the legitimate producers of knowledge are. More important then, are the unarticulated questions of what kind of identities and subjectivities these new technologised forms are producing. The
question of accuracy and expertise invokes, with almost a theological devotion, the perpetuity of an exalted idea of author, without a consideration of the technological apparatus that was established to construct those early print identities, which have, indeed, gained currency across different technologised cultural productions. What the Wikipedia constantly reinforces for us is that the author is a transient person – the ‘work’ is subject to many changes, and indeed, to many editions. Instead of thinking of the author as the omniscient producer of his or her stories, it is more fruitful to map the author on to a large body of collaborators who, over time, produce knowledge. This notion of authorship, of course challenges the many questions of ownership, possession, distribution, copyright, fairness etc. All of these issues, and especially the questions of piracy shall be discussed in subsequent chapters, that explore the creation of ‘illegal identities’ as mediated by technologies.

The further point that user generated and collaborative content websites reinstate, is that even when we do have a single, identifiable author, the way we think of authenticity and verification has to differ quite substantially. When the author is not producing external objective knowledge as in the case of Wikipedia, or producing fictions as in the case of Chaucer; when the content generated by the user is textually as much a cultural product as a means of personal expression, the relationship that we have established between the author and his/her cultural product, also needs a radical rethinking. The author is a technology-mediated subjectivity – even though we no longer think of print or writing as technologies, because they are so integral to our everyday practices. The production of the author is a process of cyborgification by which the individual’s interactions with the print technologies, define him/herself as either a producer or a consumer of that technology.

The Wikipedia, and the history of print in progress, show us that the notions of authorship and the authority of knowledge production exist within a much wider ambit of a knowledge
apparatus. Rather than taking the claims of authorship and authority at face value – a trap that many discussions of access, accuracy, legitimacy and originality fall into – we should learn from the history of preprint and early print cultures to recognize that there may exist a much wider world of production, and collaborative practices which can neither be contained nor exhausted by the demands of authenticity.

I give this historical analogy and analysis in order to see how the debates around technosociality and the specific anxieties mapped around the emergence of a Technosocial subject are often misplaced because they are taken out of the larger technology-subject legacies. The need for historicity is something that has to be emphasised in the talk about the Technosocial. In all the Cyberculture debate, there is very little importance or acknowledgement given to the fact that while the digital technologies might be bringing in radical changes, different technologies in human history have produced various instances of the Technosocial Subject. It is necessary, hence, to look at the Technosocial as not entirely a new phenomenon and the Technosocial Subject as not an ontologically new subject. Instead, the digital Technosocial which is at the heart of this dissertation needs to be historically located in order to give it an intelligibility and meaning without falling into the usual trappings provided by cultures of fear and expectations. And the everyday cyborg, then, not as a universally understandable category, but as emerging from quotidian interactions with the digital technologies, is one way of framing the technosocial subject.

Historicity is only one of the contextual locations of technosociality, and while it offers a rich potential for dialogue around the emergence of the Technosocial Subject in information societies, it is also necessary to look at the notion of geographical and cultural specificity in making sense of this emerging subject. The rhetoric of the internet as a universal technology makes an easy case for the Technosocial subject as being the same around the world. Just like
in the cyborg models, where the presumed neutrality of science and technology produce cyborgs who are exactly like each other, the technosocial subject can also be easily (and falsely) represented as homogeneous. The availability of similar technology platforms, interface and gadgets that manage to give a simulation of a global network that makes ideas, people, and cultural productions intelligible, accessible, and legible within a digital social network, needs to be greatly challenged, to move away from the universal cyborg discourse.

3.2 EVERYDAY CYBORG: RESISTING THE UNIVERSAL

The case of ‘10 legendary obscene beasts of China’ is perhaps most illustrative of how the historical, geographical and cultural contexts and specificity are crucially important to make sense of these everyday Technosocial practices. Siva Vaidhyanathan (2008), in his social anthropology of Google, looks at how in China, where the government exerts great control over regulating online information, Wikipedia had a different set of debates which would not feature in the more liberal countries – the debates were around what would be made accessible to a Wikipedia user from China and what information would be blanked out to fit China’s policy of making information that is ‘seditious ‘and disrespectful’, invisible (25-34).. After the skirmishes with Google, where the search engine company gave in to China’s demands and offered a more censored search engine that filtered away results based on sensitive key-words and issues, Wikipedia was the next in line to offer a controlled internet knowledge base to users in China (52-58).

However, another user-generated knowledge site, more popular locally and with more stringent self-regulating rules than Wikipedia, became the space for political commentary, satire, protest and demonstration against the draconian censorship regimes that China is
trying to impose on its young users. The website Baidu Baike (pinyin for Baidu Encyclopaedia), became popular in 2005 and was offered by the Chinese internet search company Baidu. With more than 1.5 million Chinese language articles, Baidu has become a space for much debate and discussion with the Digital Natives in China. Offered as a home-grown response to Wikipedia, Baidu implements heavy ‘self-censorship to avoid displeasing the Chinese Government’ (BBC; 2006) and remains dedicated to removing ‘offensive’ material (with a special emphasis on pornographic and political events) from its shared space.

It is in this restrictive regime of information sharing and knowledge production, that the Digital Natives in China, introduced the “10 legendary obscene beasts” meme which became extremely popular on Baidu. Manipulating the Baidu Baike’s potential for users to share their knowledge, protestors of China’s censorship policy and Baidu’s compliance to it, vandalised contributions by creating humorous pages describing fictitious creatures, with names vaguely referring to Chinese profanities, with homophones and characters using different tones.

The most famous of these creations was Cao Ni Ma (Chinese: 草泥马), literally “Grass Mud Horse”, which uses the same consonants and vowels with different tones for the Chinese language profanity which translates into “Fuck Your Mother” cào nǐ mā (肏你妈). This mythical animal belonging to the Alpaca race had dire enemies called héxiè (河蟹), literally translated as “river crabs”, very close to the word héxié (和谐) meaning harmony, referring to the government’s declared ambition of creating a “harmonious society” through censorship. As Steven Lesser (2008) points out, the Cao Ni Ma, has now become a popular icon appearing in videos distributed on Youtube, in fake documentaries, in popular Chinese internet productions, and even in themed toys and plushies which all serve as mobilising points against censorship and control that the Chinese government is trying to control.
The reaction from those who do not understand the entire context is, predictably, bordering on the incredulous. Most respondents on different blogs and meme sites, think of these as mere puns and word-plays and juvenile acts of vandalism (Webster, 2009). The Chinese monitoring agencies themselves failed to recognise the profane and the political intent of these productions and hence they survived on Baidupedia, to become inspiring and iconic symbols of the slow and steady protest against censorship in China.

What is discarded or overlooked as jest or harmless pranks, are actually symptomatic of a new generation using digital tools and spaces to revisit what it means to be politically active and engaged. The 10 obscene legendary creatures, can be easily read as juvenile fun and the actions of a youth that is quickly losing its connection with the immediate contemporary questions. However, as can be seen from the comments on Webster’s blog, a contextual reading can lead to a better understanding of the new aesthetic of social transformation and political participation – one which is embed. ‘Comeonbibi’ says, ‘hah, nowadays almost every chinese netizen knows the meaning of the foreigners' comments ,but few of the foreigners knows chinese comments, say nothing of the traditional chinese or the classical chinese language...’

The point is driven home more strongly when we look at another story that is not as political as the ‘10 Obscene Legendary Beasts’ which was, at the end of the day, dealing with the very treacherous landscape of information censorship, governance, and political subversion. The second story starts in China and ends in Taiwan. It is about a group of young university students who shot into great fame and acclaim as the ‘BackDorm Boys’. BackDorm Boys were three graduate students, two of whom – Huang Yi Xin and Wei Wei - from the

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13 The comments following Webster’s reporting of the meme reflect this and can be accessed at http://www.danwei.org/humor/baidu_baike_fake_entries.php
Guangzhu Academy of Fine Arts in China, shot to instant fame when, in a state of boredom, they made a lip-sync cover version of popular Backstreet Boys singles, using nothing more than cheap digital cameras on their computers, in the restrictive space of their dormitories, and distributing them through video sharing spaces like Youtube, MySpace and other blogs (The Full Plate, 2008). These weren’t, at a first glance, very different from the ‘funny’ videos that one encounters online all the time – cheaply produced, shot with a webcam mounted on the screen, an almost unedited, uninterrupted full frontal frame, and an exaggerated attempt creating a certain Kitsch video that have gained popularity in the past.

The three students in the videos were not the hyper eroticised masculinities that the boy bands like Backstreet Boys have embodied in popular cultures. These were also not students who were particularly talented at singing. In fact, they were not singing at all, they were lip synching the songs in their videos. The videos did not involve any attempts at shooting but were in the full-frontal, almost pornographic frames of spectacle where the camera was mounted over the screen and the two performers were being caught in that frame. Dressed in identical clothes, the two main performers sang with extraordinary histrionics, the otherwise mellow and slightly cliché ridden love ballads that the Backstreet Boys had made their signature. In the background, one of their other dorm mates, played a video game 14 called Quaker throughout the video He occasionally simulated the actions of a music mixer or a DJ or sometimes helped them with props. 15

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14 Quaker belongs to a growing genre of Japanese gaming where it is impossible to go beyond a certain level in the game and the users celebrate the impossible and failure built into it.

15 A full list of their videos is available to view and download at http://twochineseboys.blogspot.com/
There was, at the first glance, nothing spectacular about the BackDorm Boys. As one of the responders on a blog dedicated to the BackDorm Boys very succinctly puts it:

Let’s face it: it doesn’t take a lot of talent to make faces. They didn’t write the song, didn’t sing the song, didn’t play any musical instructions, etc. Their sole accomplishment is they made faces at a camera. That’s not talent, man!!! And if they weren’t Chinese—i.e., didn’t have the freak factor of Chinese boys lip-synching to Backstreet Boys songs—NOBODY will notice this. (Da Xiangchang, 2005)

And yet, the BackDorm Boys, apart from cults developing around them and various internet memes devoted to them\(^\text{16}\), were featured live on NBC and both dropped out of their academic programmes to become hugely successful brand ambassadors and spokespersons for some of the largest mass media brands in China. They have both acquired a celebrity status and are role models and now popular media persons on TV channels, hosting their own shows. The question of quality and value keep on resurfacing in the question: where is the talent? Several

\[^{16}\text{A quick glimpse of their popularity can be obtained on fan and internet monitoring sites like http://www.milkandcookies.com/tag/backdormboys/ and http://www.tian.cc/2005/10/asian-backstreet-boys.html}\]
respondents, including Da Xiangchang pointed out that ‘it takes very little talent to make a fool out of yourselves.’

This making a ‘fool out of yourself’ is something that a lot of internet production is categorised as. However, in the case of the BackDorm Boys, it becomes a certain political position embodied in the aesthetic called ‘Kuso’. Kuso, a relatively new term, is highly popular in describing the new cybercultural forms that emerged with the proliferation of the internet/s. Anime fans are familiar with Kuso as an expletive or an interjection, used as the English equivalent of ‘Shit!’ Though Japanese in origin, it was made popular as a word, an aesthetic and a lifestyle in Taiwan around 2000, subsequently spreading to Hong Kong and China. Now, Kuso, along with other North East. Asian products like Hentai17, and Manga, is a popular way of identifying cybercultural forms. The Wikipedia entry on Kuso mentions that

[t]he roots of Taiwanese “Kuso’ was Kuso-ge’s from Japan. The word Kuso-ge is a portmanteau of Kuso and game, which means, quite literally, “shitty games.” The introduction of such a category is to teach gamers how to appreciate and enjoy a game of poor quality – such as appreciating the games’ outrageous flaws instead of getting frustrated at them. (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuso, retrieved 4th June, 2006)

It was an attempt to not only identify or locate flaws but to celebrate them and encourage an active production of them. Kuso, for the younger generation in Taiwan (and the thousands of

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17 In A short History of Hentai, Mark Mcellland, defines Hentai as follows: “Hentai is a Sino-Japanese compound term widely used in modern Japanese to designate a person, action or state that is considered queer or perverse, particularly in a sexual sense. Unlike the English term ‘queer’, however, hentai does not have predominantly homosexual connotations but can be used to describe any sexual acts or motivations other than what might be termed ‘normal’ sexual relations. Indeed the loanword nōmaru (normal) is sometimes used as an antonym for hentai. Apart from this general use of the term hentai, it can also be used to designate a specific genre of Japanese manga and animation that features extreme or perverse sexual content and it is in this sense that hentai has become well-known among western fans of Japanese popular culture.”
fans all around the world, who subscribe to Kuso Bulletin Boards and discussion forums) is not just a cursory form of parody but a lifestyle. A Taiwanese artist, Yeh Yi-Li, in her solo exhibition, seems to suggest that as well. Her introduction to her exhibition titled ‘KUSO – Red, Spring Snow, Orange Flower’ says

In Taiwan’s pop culture, internet subculture and video gamers’ communities, it (Kuso) became a trendy term that suggests “making fun of anything, playing practical jokes on everything.” KUSO subverts conventional values and turns things into garbage. It has no limits, history, agendas or logic. Like an amoeba, it is a subculture phenomenon that has no rules. (Yi-Li, 2006)

Making a list of characteristics of what might be Kuso is futile. As Yi-Li seems to suggest, on the surface, Kuso is located in the pretext of fun and hilarity of an object. It started as a subculture phenomenon but is now highly popular in mainstream cultures – on reality TV on youth oriented channels like MTV and Channel V, in local performances and spectacles, and in Stephen Chow movies. While Yi-Li might look upon Kuso as without ‘limits, history, agendas or logic’, she forgets that Kuso has been the way for organising political protests, flash mobs and social awareness collectives in many part of Asia

In her Kuso exhibition, Yi-Li created the ‘Worm-man’ that

   drags its body and slithers in the ever-changing world. In different kinds of worlds, the Worm-man develops into different phases. As phenomena are happening, it is also transforming. The Worm-man has multiple possibilities, multiple personalities and multiple identities. (Yi-Li, 2006)

While Kuso is often understood as parody, trash culture or camp humour, and is even attributed to MTV style movies by enthusiasts, for the large section of Kuso consumers, it is the governing principle for social interaction, dressing and appearance, hair and accessories, consumption of products and modes of expression. Kuso seems to be a way in which they
produce themselves as parodic forms of themselves – producing themselves in conditions of constant transformation with ‘multiple possibilities, multiple personalities and multiple identities.’ Kuso, as Ye-Li understands it, actually resides in the processes of subversion and resistance. Kuso not only makes ‘things into garbage’ but also, by logical corollary, turns ‘garbage into things’.

In this context, the interesting question to ask of the BackDorm Boys would be the question that Yi-Li asked in her exhibition: ‘How does Kuso manage to make garbage out of things?’ and further, is it possible to read into Kuso, a new politics which guises itself in pranks and jests. An uncontextualised reading of the BackDorm Boys videos – a reading that would treat it as trivial and a prank – thus fails to understand why these slightly clownish characters would become imitable heroes for a particular generation. I propose, in my reading of the BackDorm Boys through the tropes of Kuso that a revisiting of the Technosocial is necessary in order to look at the questions of geo-politics and the physical contexts while talking about Techosocial Subjects. In the discourse of technosociality so far, there has been a lack of attention given to the physical space that the users of technologies occupy. This physical location - the space - not only provides the context but also offers ways of making meaning when it comes to understanding the Techosocial Subject and their practices.

Given the highly polarized nature of political orientations in Taiwan, it has been the despair of many educators and practitioners that the young users, which are the largest subscriber base to Kuso, has no apparent interest in politics. In Taiwan, this young generation of digital natives born between 1981 and 1991 is also called The Strawberry Generation. Despite its suggestions in English, carries negative connotations with it. The two most popular characteristics of the Strawberry generation – a phrase that has huge currency in popular
media – have been severally explained. Rachel, who writes on the National Central University’s (Taiwan) website, explains:

In Taiwan, the Strawberry Generation refers to those who were born between 1981 and 1991, ranging from the 22-year-old university students to the 12-year-old junior high school students. This generation is labeled as “strawberry” due to two reasons: first, this generation of youth was raised in a better environment, as strawberries grown and nourished in a greenhouse, than the earlier generation. Second, strawberries are known for their beauty, delicacy and high price, suggesting that the young people can not withstand pressure, difficulties, and frustration as they grew up in a nice and comfortable environment and are able to get almost whatever they ask for. (Rachel, 2008).

Henrry (sic) (2006), a student who also belongs to the Strawberry Generation, writes in his classroom assignment, ‘People of this generation are said to be fragile when facing pressure, just like the strawberries.’ He further goes on to suggest that the problems of the Strawberry Generation are largely economic in nature and might lead to serious problems for Taiwan’s economy. Myr Lim (2006) also looks at the economic and political instability of this generation and describes them as ‘Like the fruit, they look extremely good and sinfully juicy, who wouldn’t want one? But they have a very limited shelf life.’ Built into this criticism is also the understanding that the Strawberry Generation is also in a state of political disavowal.

And it is to answer this question that we go back to the Technosocial Subjects in Taiwan. The Strawberry Generation in Taiwan was not merely marked by economic transitions and infidelity. It is also a generation that has seen a severely politicised state of nationalism and national identity in Taiwan. The younger generation that grew up after the removal of the
martial law has engaged in serious consumerism as a part of their national identity. As Kuan Hsing Chen (2010) points out, ‘From 1994 onwards…the cultural atmosphere was mediated through commodity structures (47).’ Chen further goes on to explain how the political economy and the question of the national are intrinsically linked. Given the hegemonic presence of the West in the cultural galaxy of Taiwan and the constant negotiations between the political position vis-à-vis China as well as the cultural imperialism of Japan, the Taiwanese Strawberry Generation finds itself without a particular model of national identity to follow. Along with these are the allegations of widespread corruption and the complete disinterest of the current political parties in the ill-effects of liberalisation (Asian Economic News, 2007) which contribute to a high rate of mental ill-health and suicides in the Strawberry Generation (The China Post, 2008). Given such a murky situation, the Strawberry Generation has indeed withdrawn from active political participation of fighting in the streets and has taken to new forms of expression, which, outside of the context, appear as solipsistic or merely for fun.

Kuso, thus emerges as a set of practices that can celebrate flawed heroism, simultaneously mocking the ubiquitous presence of the pop-culture from the West and inability of the local context to produce spaces for political negotiation for the younger generations. This is different from making a claim about how the internet creates a new public sphere. Instead, it is about understanding that the digital is deeply rooted in the local contexts and needs to be understood within those spaces. Which is why, even the attacks and defence of these Kuso videos remain contained in a vocabulary of talent and creativity, rather than understanding them as cultural and political artefacts. On the discussions on the Sinosplice blog, one of the most vocal defenders, John, who starts with calling this condition, a ‘rare talent’ goes on to say,
Have you ever tried to make a funny video? It’s much harder than you give these boys credit for. The fact that they were able to do it merely by lip synching is testament to their talent. If they’re using certain cultural expectations for humorous effect, then that’s further evidence of talent. (John, Sinossplice, 2005)

However, John’s idea of ‘playing with cultural expectation’ remains a solitary voice. The other discussants go on to talk about how this particular series is only interesting because of the ‘freak value’ of the videos. Karen, another participant who introduces herself as a student in the West, writes

I have to reluctantly admit, as politically incorrect and offensive (sic) some of the comments may be, they are mostly valid in my opinion. I’m not saying that the “Back Dormitory Boys” talent doesn’t play a part in why it’s so funny but the fact that they’re Chinese with no doubt plays a huge role in the humour that you could easily find elsewhere. How hard is it to find a few college students making goofball videos and putting them on the internet? (Karen, Sinossplice, 2005)

The opinions that Karen and XiangChang express, resonate with the general perception of the BackDorm boys on many different discussion groups and media talks around the world. As they gained more popularity and exposure, there were more and more people exclaiming at why these antics were being heralded as heroic.

For me, a rich way of thinking about Kuso is to make a connection with what Josephine Ho, in her presentation at the Annual Cultural Studies Conference in HongKong, 2010 calls Shanzai – the art of counterfeit re-production of high end technology gadgets that Chinese markets specialise in. For Ho, the usual criticism of parody, piracy and imitation, which accompanies this particular art of producing value-for-money gadgets that dominate markets by sucking on the aura of the original branded gadget, while maintaining a creative economic
and cultural process of production, goes hand in hand with the Kuso antics that the BackDorm Boys embody. She translates Shanzai as ‘innovative copy-cattting’ as not merely economic pragmatism but as constructing a Chinese psyche of ‘rebellious heroism’ of building up ‘rivalling alternatives to the establishment’. Like in the case of Kuso, Ho offers Shanzai as more than mere copying or a space of cultural production. She suggests that this is a space for re-appropriating globalisation and challenging the existing tastes, dominant aesthetics and economic trends through non-conformation and resistance. Both Kuso and Shanzai, when taken out of their original-imitation framework that the proponents of Intellectual Property Rights and canonical cultural production reduce them to, offer new ways by which the interactions of technology and subject can be explored.

This is the first step in thinking about ways in which one can formulate a Technosocial identity which does not presume a homogenised community online. It takes into account the physical bodies and their locations and contexts as integral to the production of these narratives. It allows to shift the focus from discussions that confine them to the realms of performance or solipsism and look at the larger potential they have in creating new conditions of political engagement. For Taiwan’s Strawberry Generation, Kuso is a lifestyle, by which they are able to establish discursive and subversive relationships with the very actions and practices which subject them to sever criticism. And they provide us with a way of looking at pranksters and jesters online as contextual interlocutors in their politics and their contexts.

4. BUILDING THE BASE

This second chapter wanted to incorporate literature, theorisation and practices from cyborg studies into the growing model of technosociality that the dissertation is building. It showed, in the light of the discussions around Technsocial Space and subject in the preceding
chapters, that the bodies implicated in these discourses are not just matters of fiction or imagination. The technosocial subject and Space are both materially grounded and produced in their local environments and contexts. They do not only consume the technologies or on technologised platforms but undergo a significant transformation in the way they are, because of their interactions with digital and internet technologies. I also wanted to draw from cyborg studies because the social sciences and cultural studies scholarship otherwise gets contained in the physical-virtual binary or dialectic and keeps the notion of technosociality at the level of abstractions. This results in a gap between the theoretical interventions and the material practices in the field of Technology and Society studies.

The chapter started with discussions around the cyborg and demonstrated how the cyborg is not located only in exceptional environments or in imaginary representations. It further saw that the cyborg studies – scattered across science fiction writing, social sciences, feminism and technology studies – suffers from certain presumptions that are contested in Cyberculture discourse. Conversely, the presence of the cyborg and the way in which it is materially produced and identified, helps to rescue the technosocial subject from being confined only to the physical-virtual debates and allows us to explore the various complexities in the environments and ecologies within which these technosocialities are produced and located. It ended by offering two different approaches of technosociality – history and cultural specificity – which move away from the universalizing principle of being cyborg and resists the universalizing and homogenizing principle of technology-body discourse. It further suggests that the everyday practices of digital technologies, might help us think of an everyday cyborg that has to be understood both in its geo-political context and governance, as well as in the cultural specificities which will be discussed in the next two chapters.