

“From Global to Local” Panel Ignites Debate about Significance of Virtual Worlds for Public Diplomacy Efforts

On September 10, 2007, the USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School for Communication convened a panel called “From the Global to the Local: Virtual Worlds, Migration, and Linguistic Diaspora” that stimulated brisk debate about the geopolitical usefulness of virtual worlds like There.com and Second Life.

The panel, which was part of Interdependence Day V, took place at Tec de Monterrey in Mexico City and was simulcast to the USC Annenberg Public Diplomacy Island in Second Life, with panelists participating in real life from Mexico City and remotely via Second Life.

Joshua Fouts, Director of the Center on Public Diplomacy at the USC Annenberg School of Communications, chaired the panel and launched the discussion by noting that Second Life has 9 million registered users, only 20 percent of which are from the United States, making the platform a remarkable tool for inter-cultural dialogue.

“It behooves us to pay attention to how technology is changing the way people are meeting each other,” Fouts said, adding that the panel was convened as a counterpoint to how the media covers virtual worlds. U.S. media, Fouts said, tend to either “trivialize or demonize” virtual worlds.

Mark Wallace, a journalist who covers virtual worlds and a panelist, noted that three dimensional online environments are “much more than a game or a fantasy place or a place where you can dress up as anything you want. They’re actually a fairly powerful medium for transmitting information.” Particularly for young people, he added, online communications are as important as offline ones.

Panelist Peter Marx, formerly Chief Technology Officer for Vivendi Games, creator of World of Warcraft, one of the most popular virtual worlds in the gaming sector, and now a consultant, showcased “Laguna Beach,” an MTV initiative in the virtual world There.com that allows fans of the network’s show “Laguna Beach” to interact in a digital version of the southern California city after which the show is named.

“The great thing about virtual worlds is that because they’re such a leveler socially, people can interact regardless of their location in the world, regardless of their language,” Marx said.

As Prokofy Neva, a well known Second Life personality and commentator, commented in chat during the panel, “Basically, the question is whether the channels of communication in a 3-D world is really the most effective vehicle for formal public diplomacy,” adding that now, with people of multiple nationalities doing business and socializing in Second Life, they are coming into contact with people from other countries. “This is all churning now with unknowable results,” she wrote in chat.

Jose Murilo, Manager of Strategic Information for the Ministry of Culture in Brazil and also a panelist emphasized his government's commitment to virtual worlds with [video](#) comments from Gilberto Gil, Minister of Culture. "There are languages, world visions, archives, cultural collections that migrated, that left their original places and were dispersed through the world. Re-connectability is one of the most important elements of this new electronic world," he said. "It's a new planet."

But during the panel, political theorist Benjamin Barber, founder of Interdependence Day, made clear his position as a detractor of the geopolitical importance of virtual worlds.

"Ninety-nine percent of people [in Second Life] couldn't care less about the things being talked about [at this panel]," he said. "The idea that this is currently available as a civic tool, a political tool, is just absurd and is a kind of salesmanship done by people who are primarily in it to make money."

Barber's comments ignited debate among the audience in Mexico City, a group that included Princeton University Professor of Religion Cornel West and PBS personality Tavis Smiley. They also spawned lively dialogue amongst Second Life audience members as well as bloggers who covered the event.

"For some ideologues, SL and other virtual worlds are distracting from real-world problems like poverty and war and merely gratifying the affluent; for other ideologues virtuality is going to lift young people from Third-World poverty and harness the entertainment-driven masses to Do Good and change the world," Neva wrote on his blog [The Second Life Record](#). "The truth is probably not somewhere in between, but something completely different that we don't understand yet."

Second Life blogger Rik Riel also took issue with Barber's perspective. "There are people everyday using Second Life as a serious civic and political tool, from voter registration drives to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to cancer survivor's support groups to 9/11 memorials," he wrote on his blog [The Click Heard Round the World](#). "To poo-poo all this activity and talk about virtual sex paraphenalia is just insulting to the hundreds of people doing good work using the medium," he wrote.

The event was also covered by Second Life video journalist Draxtor Despres with a [report](#) posted on YouTube.

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