Astrology and Cyberspace: The Impact of the Internet on Modern Western Astrology

Track: Historical & Research
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Manual Castells

‘The Internet weaves the fabric of our lives. It is to the information age what the electrical engine was to the industrial age. We live in, on, and by the Internet, in work, business, education, health, governance, entertainment, culture, politics, social movements, war and peace, and friends and family.'
‘With over six billion subscribers of wireless devices, humanity is almost fully connected...in this network of computer networks that has become the backbone of all activities in all domains.’
Manual Castells

‘It has made possible the constitution of a new social structure, the network society, that has subsumed the industrial society that characterized the world in the last two centuries.’
Manual Castells

‘Social networking sites on the Internet...have become the social spaces where people meet, socialize, retrieve information, express themselves, work, shop, create, imagine, participate, fight, and shape their experience.’
Manual Castells

‘There is little understanding of the social implications of the Internet in the public mind.’

Castells calls for more study of the effects of the Internet
Academic Study of Astrology

• History and role in earlier cultures
• Twenty-first Century
  • PhD theses by Alie Bird, Nick Campion, Bernadette Brady, James Brockbank
  • MPhil by Lindsay Radermacher
• No academic study of astrology and the Internet
Methodology

• Questionnaires
  • 2009
  • Social Media
  • 2012
• Interviews
  • 2012-2014
• 65 professional astrologers
The Internet and Cyberspace
The Internet

‘The network of computers, modems, communication links, nodes and pathways that connect users into something (or some things) like the Internet, the World Wide Web, the information superhighway and so on’

David Bell, *Cyberculture Reader*, p. 2.

Cyberspace

‘Where the act of connectivity and interactivity takes place’

The Internet

Early Internet
• 1969 – First message sent across the network
• 1983 – Released to the public
• 1991 – The World Wide Web
• 2014 – 3 billion Internet users
• 2018 – Over 4 billion Internet users
• Permeates every area of life in developed world

21st Century – Web 2.0
• Social Media
• Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram
• Facebook - 1.4 billion daily active users
• Networks of people with shared interests
• Rely on user-created content
The Internet

Web 3.0
- Semantic Web
- Connections among pieces of content
- A giant database
- Example: Tagging a friend in Facebook

Augmented Reality
- Computer generated information overlaid onto the real world
- Example: Pokemon Go

‘Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts . . . A graphic Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding ...’

- The Matrix
- Jack in
- Lost to the physical world
- Case
- Console Cowboy

Cyberspace
The Cyberspace Literature

- Cyberpunk Genre
- ‘A combination of low-life and high-tech’
  - Bruce Sterling
- William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, Neal Stephenson
- Blade Runner
- Dystopian future
The Cyberspace Literature

• Academic Literature
• A large body of literature on the concept of cyberspace
• The human relationship with cyberspace
• 1990
  • First academic conference on cyberspace
  • John Perry Barlow, ‘Crime and Puzzlement’
Themes

• Dualism
  • Superior to offline world
  • Claims untested
• Challenge to Authority
• Community
• Trivialisation
Cosmological Dualism

Contrasts two levels of existence: the earthly and the heavenly

Anthropological Dualism

Contrasts two parts of the individual: the body and the soul

Cosmological Dualism and Anthropological Dualism are closely associated.

- The body belongs to the earthly level.
- The soul belongs to the heavenly or spiritual level.

A Separate Non-Physical World

‘Cyberspace: A new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers and communication lines’

Michael Benedikt, Cyberspace: First Steps (1991), pp. 3-4
Likened to other non-physical worlds

‘On the other side of our data gloves we become creatures of coloured light in motion, pulsing with golden particles. We will all become angels, and for eternity. Cyberspace will feel like Paradise, a space for collective restoration of the habit of perfection.’

'The attraction of cyberspace is that it is a re-packaging of the Christian Heaven in a secular and technologically sanctioned format'.

A World of Information Associated with the Mind

The cybernaut seated before us strapped into sensory input devices, appears to be, and is indeed, lost to this world. Suspended in computer space, the cybernaut leaves the prison of the body, and emerges in the world of digital sensation.

‘For Case, who’d lived for the bodiless exultation of cyberspace, it was the Fall. In the bars he’d frequented as a cowboy hotshot, the elite stance involved a certain relaxed contempt for the flesh. The body was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh’

Neuromancer, p. 12
Dualism

Gibsonian Cyberspace

‘A technology very nearly achieved’
‘a full-blown, public, consensual virtual reality that will indeed be cyberspace’
Michael Benedikt (1991)
‘That wonderful, phantasmagoric threedimensional alternative reality imagined by William Gibson did not, shape itself online as he and many others thought it surely would’

Michael Benedikt (2003)
The Second Wave of Internet Research

‘The Death of Cyberspace’

‘Online Life’ – Cyberspace as an extension of our offline lives

‘I fundamentally think this digital dualism is a fallacy. Instead, I want to argue that the digital and physical are increasingly meshed and want to call this … augmented reality’

Nathan Jurgenson
The Third Wave
Social media research
Full circle

Dualism
Challenge to Authority

‘We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us.’

Challenge to Authority

‘We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts. We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before.’

John Perry Barlow, ‘A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’
Religious Authority

Alternative new religions
Sects within established religions

‘Doctrines and teachings that were once centralized and controlled can now be openly challenged, contradicted, or ignored through a medium that is accessed by hundreds of millions of people every day’

Christopher Helland, ‘Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven’
Astrological Authority

A vernacular religion

Is the authority of astrological organisations and astrological schools challenged by the Internet?

Is astrology itself challenged?
Online Communities

‘Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’.

Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*

• Do they merit the name ‘community’?
  • Based on communication alone
  • Members in different geographic locations
  • People can leave at the click of a mouse
Trivialisation

‘In fact many of the worlds we'll have the opportunity to jack into will more than likely resemble some unholy combination of theme park, bookstore, and mall. The banal fate of our culture may be to simulate the astral realms inside our machines, and then blanket them with Planet Hollywood, Donkey Kong miniature-golf courses, and Lexis-Nexis fast-food data franchises’

Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*
Question: ‘If someone from the 1950s suddenly appeared today, what would be the most difficult thing to explain to them about life today?’

Answer: ‘I possess a device, in my pocket, that is capable of accessing the entirety of information known to man. I use it to look at pictures of cats and get in arguments with strangers’

Askreddit (2013)
In April 2017, Mark Zuckerberg announced that Facebook were launching an augmented reality app using the Facebook camera, that was capable of identifying any object in the environment along with its location, such as the Eiffel Tower or Stonehenge, and allowing the user to access information about that object, or edit that information.
Precise Location
Simultaneous localization and mapping (SLAM)
Astrologers and Cyberspace

Results of the Research
• Astrologers were among the first Internet users
• Astrology websites were the earliest websites following the development of the WWW
• Erik Davis, *Techgnosis*
Astrologers and Dualism

Non-physical world

- Particularly attractive to:
  - Religious
  - Spiritual
  - Magic-workers
  - Astrologers?

- Dualism in Astrology
  - Bernadette Brady
  - 46% had a dualistic view of astrology
Astrologers and Dualism

Internet Use

- Greater use of the Internet among astrologers compared to general population
- Astrologers use it more often
- Use by astrologers does not decline with age
- Greater increase in use of social media by astrologers
Astrologers and Dualism

• More than 50% of the astrologers had a dualistic view of the Internet
• View the online world as somehow different to the offline world
• A place of the mind
• New Digital Cartesianism
  • Preference for the physical world
  • The embodied experience
Astrologers and Dualism

Astrology in the Non-Physical World

- Over 60% of astrologers use the Internet for astrological consultations
- Radermacher
  - ‘A meeting with the divine’
  - ‘When the astrologer has a strong sense of being in touch with something outside the parameters of normal human experience’
It is literally a world of Ideas. I think the whole Internet is made up of ideas. I suppose there is a physical presence in that there are servers with bits of magnetic material oriented one way or the other that represent the data. But the whole fact that you can represent everything – your thoughts, your ideas, your location – everything can be represented as a series of zeros and ones in any format you like.
‘Yeah, I’m beginning to think it is another reality. I’m beginning to think something happens there, but I cannot articulate what. There is something but I have no idea how it fits into pre-Internet reality, or if it’s plugging into something that’s pre-existing but we now – people en masse now have sort of a technological way to access it. I really don’t know, but I do have a sense that something’s going on.’
‘I think that the fact that you can have a disembodied existence on the Internet, say, through Second Life or something like that, is very scarily like what it might be like to be dead. I think there is a big thing there...I think it’s fascinating - the possibilities as to what might happen. ‘
What the Astrologers Said

‘If I go there, who can see me and what can I not see, not knowing the territory. So whereas physical long-distance travel is very exciting, actually travelling into the Internet makes me nervous because I don’t understand the territory. So it feels like very alien territory that I don’t understand the rules or how it works, so therefore I don’t know if I’m putting myself at risk somehow because I don’t know the territory.’
‘It's techno world, where I have an ambivalent and unhappy relationship with techno world. So for me there’s some kind of privileging of real world over techno world, so therefore I have a different relationship to it.’

What the Astrologers Said
What the Astrologers Said

Online Consultations

‘The magic can happen’

‘I don’t think that it’s the Internet that’s holding the sacred space, I think it’s the people who are holding the sacred space’
Online Consultations

‘It’s the idea of one person, as a practitioner, showing up for the other person...the sacredness is in the interpersonal interaction. And that interaction happens whether we meet together in person or whether we connect...over Skype video. The sacredness is still present, I would say.’
Online Consultations

‘Usually before looking at the chart, I’ll clear the physical space – tidy up, hoover, make sure all personal stuff is out of the way, get it client-ready, etc. So then I’m sitting down to do the more creative bit of prep in a ‘cleared’ space. Yes, I do exactly the same thing for Skype readings...Even on Skype one can still create a temenos or sacred space within which to work. The temenos encompasses my desk/computer and the backdrop which the client can see, and also the view that I have of them on screen, so the space is held psychically as much as physically.’
Challenge to Authority

Astrological Organisations

Astrological Schools
What the Astrologers Said

‘I think the egalitarian nature of the Internet and the wide variety of free information, it makes, like, well...why? What would I get from joining this organisation that I’m not already getting out of the Internet? I think that’s why the numbers of these organisations aren’t growing, they’re dwindling.’
‘I firmly believe that if people want to find their way into a serious course, they’ll come to see us. I haven’t noticed a drop in numbers as the availability of material or services on the Internet has gone up...in fact, I’d say we have more students now than we had a few years ago. ...I’d say that perhaps those things whet people’s appetites and ...if you’re really serious about learning something you’ll find the place for you.’
'The other major function that they had was the annual conference. And then they printed a newsletter because there was no other way to correspond with people: it was just ‘the newsletter’. And that’s how the information spread. And so, as the organizations grew, most of the models are still built around that idea that you need a conference and you need a newsletter, because those are the only ways people can connect with each other...We don’t think of things now in terms of an external editor choosing what I get to read and then sending it back out. The model doesn’t work anymore...’
Online Astrological Communities

- Ten admins of Facebook groups
- Differing in the number of members from less than one hundred to several thousand
- Astrological and non-astrological discussion
- Arguments
What the Astrologers Said

• Overwhelming support for Facebook groups as communities and, as a highly positive development
  • Beneficial for people in remote communities or communities where they had to hide their astrological activity
  • Communication with astrologers from all over the world
  • Sharing of astrological information
  • Allows astrologers interested in less common types of astrology contact each other
  • Facilitates discussion and learning
  • Unite against the common foe
  • Supporting each other during tough times
What the Astrologers Said

‘I think it’s (Facebook) been very good for promoting community, inasmuch as it’s linked people that would never be linked. So I think it’s really helped networking a great deal and it’s actually brought a very large community into much tighter relationship, I think, than would otherwise have been possible. I think that has also helped the sharing of ideas and that’s been good for the astrology, too.’
What the Astrologers Said

‘There are people connecting, having the same feelings, writing things like ‘Omigosh, you’ve just written about exactly what’s going on for me’. Getting that kind of feedback from people is quite rewarding, that as astrologers and as we’re speaking about the daily or weekly transits, people are very much connecting to what’s happening with their own lives.’
What the Astrologers Said

‘I think it absolutely creates a sense of community and I think it creates a very human sense of community – that people get to know each other beyond just being astrologers. I wouldn’t have known about deaths in people’s families, or illnesses or whatever, with astrologers halfway across the world, some of whom I’ve never met but which I have now formed a bond with because I know of those situations in their lives. And so I think they’re very real communities, actually, incredibly real communities.’
Trivialisation

A lot of Internet astrology is superficial
It favours the ‘quick-fix’ interpretation
What the Astrologers Said

‘I think the best example of trivialization in astrology is the unrestrained use of asteroids. There is no procedure, everyone just picks and chooses what works for them, there is no technique, no standard practice, nothing. Meanings are made up practically on the spot. That isn't astrology, it's tossing darts and making up your own score.’
What the Astrologers Said

‘Too much information goes hand in hand with trivialization and is a problem for less experienced astrologers, especially if they are self taught and neglect the basics of reading the chart, for more exotic pursuits.’
The Quality of Online Astrology

Instant Experts

‘Because there is no mechanism by which information posted to or claims made on the Internet may be vetted beforehand, the World Wide Web produces what some have either lauded or deplored as the phenomenon of 'instant experts.’

Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet, ed. by Douglas E. Cowan Lorne L. Dawson
The Quality of Online Astrology

The greatest concern of the astrologers interviewed

The strongest reactions

The most negative effect of the Internet on astrology

Beginners cannot differentiate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ astrology

Greatest danger to clients of Internet-taught astrologers
‘Today I was teaching ... and I read them three emails I received from three people of different countries asking for consultations... But the level of anxiety of these emails was terrible. There was a high level of anxiety, saying things like, ‘I read on the Internet that if you have that kind of square in a mutable cross (or whatever), that I will forever have problems with “this and that”’. Or another who was asking for the chart of her son, who was one year old, and she read that if the Sun and the Moon in the chart of the children are not in a harmonious aspect the parents will divorce, and things like that. And all these people, invariably, they mention they’ve read this and that on the Internet.’
‘The main challenge that I see is there’s a lot of bad astrology on the Internet and it doesn’t get corrected because it’s just being said off the cuff in various ways, in various threads and conversations. I think that creates a lot of misinformation for people that’s not being corrected. I don’t think it can be corrected – not easily.’
‘So I think it impacts on a very basic level. Again, everyone’s an expert, quickly, and that worries me. Everyone’s an authority and there’s an equal playing field where you don’t know one authority from the other, or one authority from a charlatan. You don’t know the quality of what you’re reading and I think that can do damage, particularly in the early years of learning it.’
‘That is the terrifying thing of the Internet, really, is that you can put anything out there; there’s nothing you can do about it. I’ve been to local groups in the past where somebody’s said ‘oh, I read on the Internet that so-and-so…’ some piece that I think is bloody rubbish…and that is often something quite negative or something so fatalistic. And again, you challenge that and say ‘well, actually, no: that is definitely not true of this, there’s hundreds, thousands of examples to prove that is not true’. You can get the ‘oh well, it’s on the Internet!’
Conclusions

• Mixed Feelings – ‘A double-edged sword’
  • Dualism
    • More than 50% of the astrologers interviewed had a dualistic view of the Internet
  • Challenge to Authority
    • Umbrella organisations may be challenged but astrological schools do not appear to be
  • Community
    • Seen as the most positive effect of the Internet
• Trivialisation/Quality
  • Seen as the most negative effect of the Internet
References


References

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