

# **Ethnic Cyber-Communities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The diverse ideas and information found on the World Wide Web can be important information and educational resources for an ethnically diverse student population. This paper examines the kind of information and support that different Asian American, Eastern European American, and Latino American cyber-communities provide for an individual to survive and succeed in the American society.

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In the past two years, there has been a growing popularity of the Internet partly because of the development of multimedia hypertext Web browsers. Homepages have been increasing at a very rapid rate, and many of them are undoubtedly important information resources. The Web can therefore be regarded as a new research area for librarians and information professionals. Innovative uses of Web resources may result in better professional services to library patrons. This seems particularly important for academic librarians, since computer technology has profound impacts on research and learning (Dyrli and Kinnaman 1995; Smith and Stovall 1996).

As a public services librarian at Truman College, a community college in Chicago, the present author perceives a need of using the diverse ideas and information found on the Web to help students from various ethnic groups. She postulates that good ethnic cyber-community homepages are important information and educational resources for an ethnically diverse student population. Selected ethnic cyber-community homepages are examined in this paper. Since most of the students at Truman College are first-generation immigrants from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, the author is particularly interested in selecting cyber-communities of Americans from these ethnic groups. The paper focuses on the kind of information and support provided by different ethnic cyber-communities for an individual to survive and excel in the American society, and to be a well-informed, socially responsible and conscientious U.S. citizen.

It should be mentioned that selection of homepages included in this paper is based primarily on the author's personal netsurfing experience, and her own judgment of the kind of information provided by the homepages. The author is also aware of the fact that many cyber-community homepages, though well-designed and well-intended, are not well-maintained possibly because of lack of human resources. She has therefore selected only those homepages that are frequently updated or revised. Furthermore, the homepages she has visited are by no means exhaustive since she has only limited time and resources available.

## **Asian American Cyber-Communities**

**National Association of Asian American Professionals (NAAAP) Chicago**

<http://www.naaap.org/> (<http://www.naaap.org/>)

This is the Chicago chapter of NAAAP. NAAAP is "a non-profit 501(c)(3), all-volunteer organization whose mission is to promote the personal and professional development of the Asian American community" (NAAAP-Chicago 1997a). As its name implies, NAAAP membership comprises a diverse group of Asian American professionals with various levels of education and work experience.

As a cyber-community, NAAAP-Chicago has made a good effort in using the Internet to achieve its missions and to communicate with a wide range of Asian American organizations. Its homepage is regularly updated and includes a link to its newsletter, NAAAP Today.

NAAAP-Chicago is organized into six functional committees: community relations, corporate relations, social and cultural affairs, education and professional development, public relations and membership, and university relations. In general, these six committees work to enhance Asian American cultural awareness and perception, and to help NAAAP members advance their professional skills by organizing workshops and seminars.

One NAAAP-Chicago program that is of particular interest to Asian American students is the mentor program offered by the university relations committee. The mentor program "is targeted towards Asian American college students in the Chicagoland area ... [and the program] is intended to complement students' academic experience by exposing them to Asian American professionals" (NAAAP-Chicago 1997b).

NAAAP-Chicago also co-sponsors the Illinois Asian American Essay and Speech Contest every year with the Illinois Office of the Governor and the Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Chicago Area. Two important goals of the contest are "to encourage the development of [strong written and oral] communications skills [in high school students]; ...[and] to sensitize students on issues facing the Asian American community" (NAAAP-Chicago 1995). The essay contest provides a valuable opportunity for the younger generation of Asian Americans to reflect upon the essence of being Asian American.

In short, as a cyber-community, NAAAP-Chicago tries to reach out for Asian American organizations, professionals and students on the Internet, and to cultivate relationships with American corporations. Many of the services that it offers are both informational and educational, and are of practical value for Asian Americans to survive and succeed in American society.

### **South Asian Women's Network (SAWNET)**

**<http://www.umiacs.umd.edu:80/users/sawweb/sawnet/>**  
**(<http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/>)**

SAWNET is a cyber-community of people interested in issues relevant to women from South Asia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The SAWNET homepage is very well-organized and provides a rich repository of information resources on health, careers, grants, domestic violence, and South Asian women's organizations in this and other countries. These information resources are important resources for many South Asian Americans in their everyday life and works.

Besides providing social services information, SAWNET also maintains individual homepages of its members, as well as an electronic mailing list for members to discuss issues of their concerns and to participate in their own cyber-community.

SAWNET shows much pride for achievements of South Asian American women in literature, arts, science and technology. Profiles of these women, as well as detailed description of their works, can be found under the links to "Books by and for South Asian women," "Cinemareview and literature" and "News about South

Asian Women." Success stories of these women can undoubtedly provide aspirations for many Asian Americans.

Education is also another significant concern of SAWNET. The SAWNET homepage includes a list of books by, for, or about South Asian children. Many South Asian American parents may find this list helpful in educating and passing their South Asian heritage onto their children.

### **VietGATE: Gateway to the Online Vietnamese Community**

<http://www.saigon.com/> (<http://www.saigon.com/>)

This site is selected since there is a Vietnam-town within walking distance from Truman College. Also, a significant proportion of Asian American students at Truman are of Vietnamese descent and they are very much interested in information resources for Vietnamese Americans.

VietGATE provides Web links to a wide variety of Vietnamese American information services, including business, community, and education services. It maintains a searchable, online yellow pages database which contains thousands of Vietnamese businesses in California. It also houses VIET Magazine, an online magazine by and for Vietnamese Americans.

Another electronic publication link provided by VietGATE is the one to VN-CDROM, a not-for-profit community volunteer work group that publishes CD-ROM products on Vietnamese American culture, literature, and community services. VN-CDROM sells these products to raise money for a community investment fund, which is used to help different Vietnamese American community groups.

Other community concerns of VietGATE include job services, impacts of the Welfare Reform Bill on Asian Americans, and a book-computer drive. The book-computer drive is a program sponsored by the Vietnamese American Education Foundation, a non-profit all-volunteer organization based in Washington, D.C. The Foundation collects donated books and computers, and the U.S. Defense Department donates flights to ship the books and computers to Vietnam to help improve the Vietnamese educational system.

## **Eastern European American Cyber-Communities**

### **Polish American Association**

<http://www.polish.org/> (<http://www.polish.org/>)

The Polish American Association (PAA) is "a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, [and] is the nation's only comprehensive human service agency dedicated to serving the Polish community" (Polish American Association 1996). PAA is chosen because there is a very large Polish American community in Chicago.

The PAA homepage is intended to link together geographically isolated Polish Americans, and to provide them with current information resources that would help them survive and succeed in this country. The homepage contains information on various social, community, and education services offered by PAA. It also includes Web links to Polish collections in Illinois libraries, and to many other Polish American organizations in Illinois that provide various kinds of professional supportsbusiness, professional, religious, cultural, educational, and so onto Polish Americans.

Other highlights of the PAA homepage include immigration/citizenship information, discussions on impacts of the Welfare Reform Bill on Polish immigrants, and selected articles from Link, the quarterly newsletter of PAA. The selected Link articles are grouped under content areas rather than publication dates, thus making retrieval somewhat easier. Five grouping categories are used, and they are social services, employment, immigration, education, and statistics.

## **San Francisco Bay Area Russian Community Network (SBARC)**

**<http://www.hooked.net/users/igort/> (<http://www.hooked.net/users/igort/>)**

A Russian American cyber-community is selected because there are many Russian American students at Truman College. The SBARC homepage serves as an electronic community bulletin board that people may use to post requests for information of their own interests and concerns. SBARC also provides information on Russian American resources in the Bay Area such as Russian goods and services, Russian restaurants, and religious life. Religious information resources includes Web links to Russian orthodox churches, and a comprehensive list of Jewish organizations.

For people not living in the Bay Area, the SBARC homepage contains information on, and Web links to, other sites that provide a wide range of Russia-related information from Russian history, art, and artifacts to news, commerce, contemporary music and entertainment.

There are two Web links that are particularly interesting a 50-lesson English-for-Russians course, and an English-Russian Russian-English dictionary. Many Russian Americans, particularly those who have just arrived at this country, may find these two online language utilities valuable and useful.

## **Latino American Cyber-Community**

### **LatinoLink**

**(<http://www.latino.com/>)<http://www.latino.com/> (<http://www.latino.com/>)**

As stated in its mission statement, LatinoLink "aims to provide news, analysis, commentary and photo essays that explore the joys and challenges faced by those who call the United States home yet trace their roots to the Spanish-speaking Americas ... [including] Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Bolivia, to name only a few. LatinoLink's goal is to reflect our diversity and our commonality" (LatinoLink 1997).

LatinoLink is a cyber-community that takes the form of an e-magazine combined with e-conferencing and chat forums. The e-magazine covers a wide range of areas from social and political issues such as immigration, bilingual education, and affirmative action to business, commentary, books, entertainment, lifestyle, and job bank. Of course, all articles in LatinoLink are of particular interests to Latino Americans, but they all serve an important function of keeping one well informed so as to better survive and succeed in this country.

The e-conferencing and chat forums enable individuals to participate more directly in the cyber-community, to interact and share ideas with fellow cyber-community members on issues of their particular interests or concerns. Various issues are discussed in these e-conferencing and chat forums. Some examples are career networking, racial issues, gay and lesbian issues. The e-conferences also serve as bulletin boards for individuals to share information about community events, career or business opportunities.

## **Summary and Concluding Remarks**

Some commonalities can be found in the Asian American, Eastern European American, and Latino American cyber-communities presented in this paper. The first and foremost commonality is career, business, and/or professional support. This, of course, is important since survival in American society means essentially doing well economically. The NAAAP is particularly interested in surviving well and professionally in corporate America. SAUNET is also very much concerned with professional achievements in America and the western world.

Education is another commonality. All of the selected cyber-communities provide some kind of educational services, and/or links to educational resources and institutions. Education seems to be recognized by many, especially first-generation immigrant Americans, to be an important means for survival and success.

Of course, survival in a free and open society also requires an awareness of various social and political issues. In fact, such an awareness is critical not only for individual survival, but also for democracy. All of the ethnic cyber-communities mentioned in this paper demonstrate their concerns with different socio-political issues. Many, such as LatinoLink, PAA, and VietGATE, are particularly concerned with recent immigration issues.

In one way or another, all of the ethnic cyber-communities try to preserve their own cultural heritage. They all provide information resources related to their own history, culture, and/or religion. These information resources can contribute to a deeper understanding of multiculturalism, which is quite important for survival in a globalized economy.

Finally, it should be noted that while some ethnic cyber-communities, such as SBARC and NAAAP-Chicago, focus more on local communities, others like SAWNET have staff and participants scattered throughout this country and the world. However, the Web is still growing and how it is to be used still remains largely a matter of our imagination and creativity, though within the confines of available technology. As one self-identified Asian American cybernaut once noted, "a cybernaut is like an astronautan explorer, a dreamer pushing the envelope of 'cyberspace' into the new world of information. They are voyagers like our immigrant Asian parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and boat people who came to America without knowing what to expect... Often isolated in fragmented communities across the nation, Asian Americans from New York to Hawaii can now transcend the barriers of space and time to participate in conversations and to discover a new sense of fellowship" (Ebihara 1996). It is the "new sense of fellowship" that makes ethnic cyber-community homepages particularly influential. The new sense of fellowship can also help an individual, particularly a college student in his/her early stage of adulthood, identify his/her roles in society as a conscientious and contributive citizen.

## NOTES

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