This article explores the roles of on-line publications in promoting ethnic communication. Through a case study of the on-line Chinese language publications, it examines the potentials of such publications in supplementing and expanding the functions of the traditional ethnic media, strengthening cultural and communal ties of the ethnic groups, and mobilizing them for action. The authors argue that in the age of cyberspace, the role of ethnic media in fortifying the cultural traits of ethnic immigrants is expected to be further strengthened. As a result, ethnic groups are more likely to be assimilated into the mainstream culture without losing their own cultural roots and ethnic identity.

Keywords: cultural identity, cyberspace, ethnic communities, ethnic press, on-line publication, overseas Chinese

The ever-growing Internet is ushering in a new era for the development of mass communication. As bulletin boards, newsgroups, and electronic journals are springing up, and more and more conventional newspapers, magazines, and even radio and TV programs are going on-line, the concept of mass media is being redefined and the impact of technology on mass communication has regained the spotlight.

Historically, advancement in media technology has always brought about changes to the scene of mass communication. After the movable-type printing press was perfected in the late 15th century, books began to reach a greater number of people, making mass communication more of a reality (Schwartz, 1992). The development of the cylinder press in the 19th century led to the mass production of newspapers and magazines, resulting in a “penny press” era. Radio and television again extended the boundaries of mass communication and globalized its process. “It has become almost commonplace, in fact, to observe that technology altered the older journalism and created the new mass journalism” (Pickett, 1960, p. 398).

The fast development of computer-mediated communication (CMC), especially that over the Internet, in the past decade or so not only has drastically altered the scene of human communication, be it on an interpersonal, organizational, or massive scale, but has also brought about both social and cultural consequences. Some of these consequences are immediate and observable, while others are potential and less discernible. The fact that most of the CMC technologies and their usage are still looming on the technological horizon, and have not yet taken their final shape or form, makes it difficult to predict their exact social and cultural consequences. The complexity and uncontrollable nature of the new media environment combine to make predicting the social and cultural impact of emerging technologies highly unreliable (Pavlík, 1996).

One of the enduring issues of major public and scholarly concern about the social consequences of new media technologies focuses on their simultaneous forces of social fragmentation and cohesion. On the one hand, as the Internet and other new media technologies have made the process of creating, distributing, and digesting information increasingly decentralized, there is a danger that consumers of that information—all of us, in other words—will...
become more and more isolated from society and each other (Kennedy, 1993). On the one hand, the global reach of on-line communication, which presents the distinct possibility of an increasingly homogeneous single global culture (Pavlik, 1996), also has the potential to lead the world closer to McLuhan’s idea of a “global village” (McLuhan & Powers, 1989).

Related to the globalization versus fragmentation debate is whether new media technologies, especially the Internet, will lead to cultural homogenization of the world due to the global reach and the Western dominance of these new technologies, or cultural diversity thanks to their power in offering a diverse range of programming alternatives for audiences often poorly served by the mainstream media.

While the outcome of such debates depends on future development of new media technologies as well as how we human beings shape their usage, it is never too early to explore evidence for the impact of the fragmentary and cohesive forces of the Internet and other global-reaching media technologies. Findings of such explorations will better guide our development and use of new media technologies.

As part of the growing efforts to examine the impact of the Internet on mass communication as well as its cultural and social consequences, this study focuses on one particular area: the ethnic press. In many parts of the world, the ethnic press, or media targeted at a particular ethnic group, has existed along with the mainstream media for a long time. In the United States, for example, there used to be more than 1000 non-English-language ethnic newspapers operating in the same year (Miller, 1987), and there are still a large number of such publications today.

Although the ethnic press has been playing an irreplaceable part in the formation and development of ethnic communities in a multiethnic society, ethnic publications are known for their “high mortality rate, increasing financial difficulties, and problems in incurring criticisms . . . if they attempt to be outspoken organs in their communities” (Singer, 1978). In general, ethnic publications are often at disadvantaged positions compared with the mainstream press. They tend to serve a small and scattered market, which makes it difficult to generate financially viable figures in circulation and advertising income. In addition, their potential audiences often face the pressure of cultural assimilation by default or design. They also tend to face greater censorship pressure from the local government and the public majority, since the ethnic minorities are often regarded as aliens representing foreign interests.

The versatile new media technologies, especially the Internet, with their space-binding and all-penetrating features, offer special advantages to ease problems faced by the ethnic press. The question then is: Will the Internet contribute to the survival or revitalization of the ethnic press? Or, more specifically, does the Internet offer a viable means for ethnic groups to communicate as an alternative to the traditional press? Does the Net-based ethnic press offer value-added services or merely replicate those of the traditional press? Will it help staunch the increasing assimilation of ethnic minority groups? Will it serve members of an ethnic community equally or promote class polarization within the community?

With such questions in mind, the authors examined the case of the overseas Chinese-language press, which was chosen for several reasons. First, the overseas Chinese population is one of the largest groups of immigrants in the world. Unlike the older generations of Chinese immigrants, who tended to settle down in large cities where Chinese immigrants lived in compact community, the more recent immigrants, who are mainly university students, tend to go to places where universities are located. Being well educated and more scattered in location, these new immigrants naturally find on-line communication more suitable for their needs.

Second, on-line Chinese publications tend to focus more on issues of common concern to Chinese immigrants as a whole compared with the traditional media, which tend to focus more on local issues. Such a difference makes these on-line publications more effective in strengthening ties among their global audience as a cultural and ethnic group. This allows us to see more clearly the potentials of on-line publications, which go beyond the means of the traditional media.

Third, there have already been indicators of the power of on-line communication in strengthening the communal and cultural ties of the Chinese immigrants and mobilizing for action. The success of Chinese students in lobbying the U.S. government to grant them permanent resident status following the suppression of student protest by the Chinese government in 1989 showed how on-line communication could be used to publicize an issue and organize a massive campaign for it.

These factors have led the authors to believe that the overseas Chinese are among the pioneers and most active users of on-line communication to promote cultural and communal ties among the ethnic people. An examination of their use of on-line communication may yield more meaningful results. Specifically, this article discusses major problems with the conventional Chinese press, reviews the development of computer network-based Chinese publications, and explores the impact of CMC on the Chinese press as well as the potential significance of new technologies for maintaining the cultural and communal ties of the overseas Chinese.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The overseas Chinese press serves an enormous size of readership, as some 30 million Chinese are living outside
TABLE 1
Distribution of ethnic Chinese in the world

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Chinese population (in millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burma</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of Asia and Australia</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao (Republic of China Yearbook, 1995) and constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in dozens of countries. While the majority of these Chinese immigrants live in Southeast Asia, more and more of them are moving into North America, Europe, and other parts of the world in recent years. Table 1 shows the distribution of Chinese immigrants in various parts of the world.

The history of overseas Chinese-language publications could be traced back to the early 19th century, when the first overseas Chinese newspaper, San Francisco News, was founded in 1854 and the first overseas Chinese daily in 1856 (Fang, 1995). At the beginning of this decade, there were 64 daily Chinese-language newspapers published outside China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. If the weeklies, biweeklies, and magazines were included, the total number would reach 300 (Fang & Hu, 1995).

Among many other things, the ethnic Chinese publications cover local Chinese communities, report news from the “mother country,” and advocate Chinese values, tradition, and culture, and by doing so they have greatly contributed to increasing the cohesiveness of the overseas Chinese community (Li, 1995). A study of the Chinatown in New York City (Lum, 1991), for instance, shows that:

Chinese immigrants in the New York City are living in a rather comprehensive Chinese media environment, complete with diverse and familiar source of print and electronic materials. Chinese media inform immigrants about events that have taken place within and outside their community and about available social service. These media also offer an easy source by which older immigrants can maintain a stabilizing continuity in their cultural and entertainment life and younger immigrants maintain contact with their roots.

However, the overseas Chinese-language press has often become a target of suppression, especially in countries where the local government adopted a policy of assimilation. As Chinese communities grew larger and larger, governments of host countries often saw such growth as a potential threat to the social harmony and stability of their society. In the 1960s, for instance, Thai authorities ordered that no new Chinese newspapers and periodicals be launched when they adopted a policy of assimilation toward the Chinese immigrants. When the Philippine government declared martial law in 1972, it closed down almost all the Chinese newspapers (Wu, 1995). Even in the United States, where freedom of the press is defended as a pillar of democracy, publications by Chinese immigrants were also harassed for their support of the People’s Republic of China during the Cold War (Wang, 1995).

The crackdown on the Chinese-language press often reached its peak when the relationship between the host country and China turned sour. In the 1960s, when China and Indonesia ran into conflict over China’s support of Indonesian communists, the Indonesia government shut down all Chinese-language newspapers and schools and disbanded all Chinese organizations in the country (Wu, 1995). When Vietnam clashed with China in the late 1970s, the Vietnamese authorities also banned all Chinese newspapers except the government-run Liberation Daily. Chinese-language newspapers suffered a similar fate in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Burma) during various periods when the relationship with China became tense (Fang & Xie, 1993).

Besides political restrictions, the ethnic Chinese press has also been suffering from a decline in the use of Chinese language. To maintain a sizable readership, the Chinese press depends very much on the Chinese education of second and third generations of Chinese immigrants, yet this has become increasingly more difficult.

Although the overseas Chinese education saw fast development following World War II, it has been suffering continued setbacks since the 1950s. On the one hand, as more and more Chinese immigrants began to be assimilated into the local culture, the second and third generations of Chinese immigrants often could not use the Chinese language effectively to consume the Chinese-language press. On the other hand, the assimilation policy adopted by many countries toward their Chinese population had a direct impact on the education of overseas Chinese. In Southeast Asia, for instance, many Chinese schools were closed by local governments while the remaining ones were allowed to teach only a limited number of hours of Chinese lessons per week (Hong & Liang, 1995). Such restrictions were
only lifted in Thailand and Indonesia in recent years after a continuation of nearly 30 years, causing irreversible changes in Chinese education there (Fang & Hu, 1995). Even in Singapore, where the Chinese constitute the majority of the population, the promotion by the government of English as the language of instruction in schools as a means to facilitate economic development and social harmony also led to the decline of Chinese education and eventually the closure of Nanyang University, the only Chinese university outside China (Milne, 1990). One immediate consequence of the decline in use of the Chinese language is the shrinking size of readership for the Chinese-language press.

Market competition with the mainstream media is also a problem for the Chinese-language press, since it is much more difficult for ethnic media to survive financially. The early overseas Chinese press often faced more financial strains than other media did because the potential size of its readership was always limited, and the distribution usually more difficult. As a result, the development of the Chinese-language press has been fluctuating all the time, with a fast rate of coming and going. For example, of the 10 Chinese dailies published in the United States in the 1980s, more than half are gone today (China Journalism Yearbook, 1984, 1993).

In the early days of Chinese-language press, therefore, a newspaper was often started as a mission rather than a viable financial operation. In most cases, Chinese-language media were financed by Chinese businessmen through individual or collective investment (Chen, 1995), which was usually aimed at providing a community service rather than generating profits. In contemporary times, such a practice has become increasingly more difficult, with the investment required for a large metropolitan newspaper reaching millions of U.S. dollars.

Because of these and many other problems, predictions about the future of the ethnic Chinese press are often pessimistic. Reviewing the development of the Chinese press in the United States, Lai noted that “Publishing a Chinese newspaper was not, nor is it now, a lucrative business” (Milliter, 1987, p. 39). As for the situation elsewhere, Lent (1971) noted that Chinese language newspapers in the Philippines and other places in Southeast Asia were hamstrung by language, production and legal problems, diminishing circulation, limited advertising, and feelings of insecurity, and saw the beginning of the end. Statistics provided in The Ethnic Press in the United States (Milliter, 1987) give a good footnote to the declining Chinese press. In 1917, there were 1323 ethnic newspapers in the United States, but the number fell to 1037 after World War II following the shrinking pool of newcomers, and further to 698 in 1960.

In recent decades, the ethnic Chinese press has gained a comeback as large numbers of Chinese immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China move to other parts of the world, expanding the potential market for the Chinese-language press. In addition, restrictions on Chinese education and Chinese press in some countries have also been lifted or moderated with the growing importance of Chinese-speaking regions in the world. Viewed historically, however, the revival of the Chinese press in recent decades does not mean that the factors behind the decline of the Chinese press are no longer there. The gaining of audience among the new immigrants, for instance, is concurrent with the loss of market among the second or third generations of Chinese immigrants.

**CHINESE PRESS OVER THE INTERNET**

The use of the Internet by the overseas Chinese for mass communication can be traced back at least to the late 1980s, when students from mainland China studying in North America started an English-language newsletter, China News Digest. Since then, Chinese students and students turned professionals have launched dozens of electronic publications based in almost all the developed countries. In addition, Chinese students and professionals also opened up a number of newsgroups on the Usenet, such as soc.culture.china, talk.politics.china, and alt.chinese.text, with the last being the most popular Chinese-language discussion group among the ethnic Chinese all over the world. Two large-capacity archive sites, CND.ORG and IFCSSS.ORG, were set up in 1993 to store most of the Chinese electronic journals and other Chinese materials. Two Web Sites (URL: http://www.cnd.org and http://www.ifcsss.org) were set up in 1994 to cater to the needs of Chinese netters.

Other overseas Chinese groups soon followed Chinese students and professionals. In the United States, the Southern Chinese Newspapers started Global Chinese Electronic Daily News in 1995, targeting ethnic Chinese throughout the United States. In 1996, the Chicago-based Chinese American Internet News was launched to serve readers in Midwestern America. At a local level, Taiwan immigrants in Southern California are served by quite a few networks and electronic publications on the Web, such as the Lake Forest BBS and the New Asian Electronic News & Forums. In Canada, Zhonghua Daobao, targeting Canadian Chinese, was launched in 1995, and the Eastern China Times, a Montreal-based newspaper, also went on-line. In Europe, the list of Chinese-language electronic journals includes Nordic Chines (Chinese in Northern Europe), and Viking, a Sweden-based Chinese journal on popular science. In South America, Chinese organizations started a Brazil–China Home Page. In Southeast Asia, where the development of the Internet lags behind, some Chinese-language newspapers have also been put on-line, including Malaysia’s Sinchow Daily, Philippine’s
TABLE 2
CND subscription growth since 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Months</th>
<th>Direct subscribers</th>
<th>Countries and regions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 1989</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1990</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1993</td>
<td>24,148</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1994</td>
<td>34,281</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1995</td>
<td>35,200</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1997</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>Over 50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Siongpo, and Singapore’s Lianhe Zaobao. In Japan, the Chinese Computing Club was formed on the Internet to exchange news, opinions and computing information. And in Oceania, we can find on-line newspapers such as New Zealand’s Asia News and Australia’s Independence Daily and the Australia Daily.

Statistics show a growing readership for these publications. For example, China News Digest-Global (CND) had more than 45,000 direct subscribers in 1997, located in over 50 countries and regions in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Europe, North America, and South America, where the total number of Chinese students and professionals was estimated to reach 200,000 (Xinhua News Agency, 1995). Table 2 shows the growth of the CND readership by direct subscription.

The growing readership of the electronic publications run by Chinese students and professionals is also indicated by the growing number of users of FTP and Gophers to search the archive sites where such publications are stored. The Gopher server Sunrise (gopher:sunrise.cc.mcgill.ca) at Montreal, Canada, for instance, has registered a continued increase in the numbers of visits (Table 3). These visits break down into hits to individual issues of Chinese-language journals stored at the site, ranging from about 2000 to over 6000 for a particular issue of a journal per month.

The use of the World Wide Web (WWW) page of CND is even more frequent. CND’s statistics in early 1996 showed that this Web site received some 87,000 hits a day. According to figures released by Huaxia Wenzhai (CND-Chinese Magazine) on 26 December 1996, the CND Web site receives about 15 million hits per week, or approximately 1.9 million visitors per week based on the standard 8 hits per visitor conversion rate.

Statistics for access to other on-line Chinese media are difficult to collect, but some on-line publications sometimes report their recorded number of visits. Sinanet, a WWW-based electronic plaza dedicated to the community of Taiwan immigrants, claimed to receive over 12 million hits each day on its three servers. The daily transmission statistics of the U.S.-based OmniTalk Forum showed that in December 1997, daily visits to the site ranged from 37,187 to 50,163. The Walton InfoNet, a U.S.-based Chinese online service since 1994, announced in December 1996 that its home page received more than 50,000 visits a day.

While this study focuses on the “print” publications over the net, it should be also noted that the multimedia development of the Internet has also enabled ethnic Chinese broadcasting media to go on-line. For example, the Los Angeles-based English & Chinese Radio and the Asian American Network now place prerecorded daily radio news programs on the Web, and these can be heard by Internet users with special software. They also broadcast live programs at the same time. With the convergence of visual–audio technologies on the Net, we can expect more and more Chinese radio and even TV programs to be accessible there.

A NEW TURN FOR THE ETHNIC CHINESE PRESS

Although the Internet is still fledging and the computer-network-based media have yet to gain enough followers to threaten the existence of the traditional media, there are already signs that computer-mediated mass communication is bringing about a new turn for the conventional Chinese-language press by solving or easing some of its problems.

First, with the Internet, political suppression of the ethnic Chinese publications will be less effective. As the new technology straddles the border between a mass medium and interpersonal medium with a convergence of mail, information retrieval, message posting, and broadcasting functions, an interpersonal exchange of information could
easily result in a mass broadcast. The blending of personal communication and mass communication makes it difficult for censors to decide where and when to strike. For example, *The Tunnel*, an underground electronic journal published by dissidents in China, has made its presence felt by using the Internet to evade government censors. Each issue of the journal is sent to dissidents abroad by e-mail, who then store it at their Web sites for worldwide distribution. Within China, the editors also try to disseminate this government-banned journal through chain e-mail.

On the other hand, the global nature of computer-mediated communication has drastically changed ways to disseminate information, making it hard to identify and terminate the source of origin. While we will not go so far as say this would leave the cyberspace unpolicied because of technical difficulties in doing so, we can say for sure that governments will find it more difficult to keep people from publicizing and receiving information. In other words, although the Internet may not necessarily lead to changes in government attitude toward Chinese publications, it reduces the effects of restrictions imposed on them. For example, despite the Chinese government’s censorship measures against Internet users, “the Internet provides an efficient and safe forum for Chinese users to discuss politically sensitive issues and exchange information censored by the government-controlled media” (Huang et al., 1997, p. 21). Although service providers can filter out certain sites upon government order, they cannot successfully block all or stop users from bypassing their censorship by using proxy servers or simply logging onto a network abroad. As a result, individual government’s censorship efforts against politically sensitive information in the face of new media technologies may prove to be futile without international collaboration. In the meantime, failure to plug overseas information outlets, which can be accessed by domestic users, also makes censorship against domestic media less meaningful.

Second, to the Chinese press as a whole and the nonprofit publications in particular, the Internet means opportunities to overcome financial difficulties, since major costs for printing and distributing the hard copies are eliminated. Almost all of the dozens of Chinese student publications were started by using university facilities and relying on voluntary work, with little financial investment (*China News Digest*, 1992). On the other hand, for those organizations unable to take advantage of free service, the commercial Internet service is basically affordable. Take the SuperPrism Net in the United States, for example. The setup fee for the Dedicated Web Server is $2500, with a monthly maintenance fee of $500 (as of February 1996). Depending on the type of services, prices for nonprofit organizations range from $15 to $500 for setup and from $5 to $20 for monthly maintenance. In short, with the Internet as a network for distribution, launching a publication is no longer a formidable undertaking, at least not to those who have both the technical know-how and the dedication. It has made it possible for media operations to survive on subsidies, donations, and voluntary work as nonprofit organizations. *China Monthly*, one of quite a few Chinese-language magazines run by Chinese dissidents in the United States, had been depending on grants, donations, and voluntary work to maintain its operations, but it ceased to exist as a print publication in 1995 when financial support drained off. Nevertheless, the magazine found a new birth on the Internet by launching an on-line edition in 1996. Since the monthly was designed for Chinese intellectuals overseas, the switch to on-line publication did not result in major changes in its editorial policy or readership.

If the number of ethnic Chinese media on the whole had been decreasing before the Internet, the new technology is turning the table. Although the current on-line Chinese publications tend to be run by volunteers and amateurs, some of the daily and weekly publications have already generated more influence and support than most traditional Chinese media published regionally or locally. For example, *China News Digest*, a news-distributing network staffed by some 50 volunteers around the world and with an operating cost of only a few thousand U.S. dollars a year, boasts of more than 150,000 readers of its news bulletins located in 67 countries around the world (*China News Digest*, 1998). With increasing revenues generated by Web publishing and other on-line publications, more financially viable publications run by professional writers and editors are bound to crop up.

Third, the Internet has expanded the role of the traditional mass media by blending their news function with entertainment and education, and this will prove to be significant in helping children of Chinese immigrants to learn the Chinese language and develop a taste for the Chinese culture. Many of the Net-based ethnic Chinese publications have archive sites from which users could receive not only news, but also literary works, and educational materials in textual, audio, and even video formats. For example, the Web page at www.webcom.com/~bamboo/Chinese.chinese.html directs surfers to the following materials:

- Reading and listening to Chinese on the WWW.
- Chinese language study courses.
- Links to Chinese-language related FTP sites.
- Sources of Chinese text files.
- Chinese educational softwares.
- Scholarly and linguistic resources on Chinese.
- Resources for East Asiatic librarianship.
- Information about Chinese-language programming software.
- Chinese-language radio broadcasts.

Evidence is difficult to gather about the significance of these archive sites in promoting Chinese-language
education among Chinese immigrants and their offspring, but the fact that these sites have registered regular hits and the authors and their close friends have all downloaded materials from these sites to teach their children the Chinese language and literature seems to indicate that their influence can be potentially large. In addition, on-line publications have also offered space for children of Chinese immigrants to publish their writings to encourage these youngsters in their pursuit of studying the Chinese language and culture and attract young readers. For instance, issue 6 of Little Mermaid for 1997 carried the writings of four children aged from 10 to 12 years, who talked about their life experience overseas.

PROSPECTS OF THE ETHNIC CHINESE PRESS

The significance of the Internet does not just lie in its potential to solve or alleviate the problems faced by the conventional Chinese press but also in contributing to the development of the ethnic Chinese press in other aspects.

First, the vacancies left by the conventional press in the past will be filled up. As Table 1 shows, the distribution of ethnic Chinese is uneven, with the majority of Chinese immigrants located in Southeast Asia and North America. In other areas, the Chinese communities may not be large enough to support their own media.

In Britain, for instance, there are only two Chinese-language newspapers, which are the European editions of two Hong Kong newspapers, Singdao Daily and Wenhui Daily, in addition to two irregularly published bilingual periodicals (Fang & Hu, 1995). On the other hand, in countries where Chinese are concentrated, the distribution of Chinese media is also uneven. In North America, Chinese immigrants are mainly located in a few large cities. Those in other places are also short of their own community media.

The development of the Internet provides Chinese communities, no matter how small they are, with the means to communicate among themselves on a massive scale. For example, Chinese residents in Columbus, OH, in the United States, have taken advantage of the new technology to set up their own home page, “The Chinese Community in Great Columbus.” The page covers local Chinese activities, points to two local Chinese electronic journals—Overseas Campus (Christian) and Liaoyuan—and links to the Web page of the Ohio Contemporary Chinese School and two other Chinese organizations, helping to strengthen the awareness of local Chinese residents of their community.

Second, there will be more specialized and cross-regional publications. The ethnic Chinese press, enormous as it is, lacks such specialized as well as cross-regional and international publications. A review of overseas Chinese publications listed in China Journalism Yearbook and in the Proceedings of International Conference on International Chinese Press and Chinese Cultural Communication shows that the overseas Chinese newspapers and magazines are mostly general news publications either at “national” or “local” levels. Publications devoted to special-interest groups, especially cross-country interest groups, of overseas Chinese are rare. The lack of such publications has much to do, among other things, with the fact that for specialized publications it is hard to generate enough readers within the reach of their existing distribution networks and there are no efficient distribution systems for international publications.

With the Internet, distribution will no longer be a problem, as on-line media can reach anywhere as long as it is accessible to the Internet. The Internet acts as a distribution system better than any distribution systems employed by the conventional media. As a result, there has been a much greater variety of specialized Chinese publications on the Internet than what is available for the conventional media. These include Xinyushi, a culture-oriented electronic journal; Huazhao, a journal of literature for women; Yuwen yu Xinxi, a journal devoted to the study of the Chinese language; Mirage, a journal for science fiction stories in Chinese; Soccer World, the first Internet soccer magazine in Chinese; East Asian Diplomacy and Defense, a Canadian journal devoted to China-related diplomacy and defense issues; and Olive Tree, a Chinese journal devoted to poetry.

While these specialized publications may differ in the subjects they cover, they have one thing in common. They all target particular groups of Chinese immigrants living in different places. They gather around them various groups of Chinese with the same interests, thus contributing to the formation of virtual communities “unbounded by geographical, temporal or other physical barriers” (Branscomb, 1995). In the meantime, many of these on-line publications, representing both general and special interests, are more global in nature as their readers are located in various parts of the world. For example, CND’s achievement of sending news to readers located in 67 countries simultaneously is beyond the means of any of the conventional ethnic Chinese media today.

In addition, the Internet provides the means to set up forums for overseas Chinese to come together to discuss issues of common interest. For instance, Chinese news-groups on the Usenet serve as town meetings to allow Chinese immigrants to freely exchange views on Chinese-related issues, pulling its participants together to form virtual groups of “like-minded individuals, regardless of where they live, work, or play” (Branscomb, 1995). Table 4 provides a list of such news-groups, showing how widely and extensively these forums cover.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the ethnic Chinese electronic publications at this stage are still
supplementary to the traditional ethnic Chinese media. A major problem with the Internet as a vehicle for mass communication is that it still remains a medium for the elite. The reason that the Internet has become a popular means for communication among the overseas Chinese lies in the fact that the new Chinese immigrants are dominated by the better educated. The computer network-based publications may have successfully satisfied the needs of the better educated Chinese immigrants for Chinese-related information, but they cannot yet replace the traditional media for mass communication, which cater to both the elite and the popular audiences. However, as the Internet keeps on growing at its amazing speed, one does not need to be too optimistic to assert that in the near future the Net-based publications will play a more important role in linking up all sectors of the overseas Chinese communities.

In addition to its current elite nature, the Internet among overseas Chinese is also faced with the problem of incompatibility of different coding systems. Differences between the GB code used in China and Big5 code used in Taiwan, like differences in the complex and simplified Chinese characters, are still splitting the world of Chinese communication over the Internet, despite the fact that more and more compatible software titles have been produced to solve the problem.

CONCLUSIONS

Changes brought about by new technologies are never confined to what is technical. “The history of technology is the study of the changes through which economic, cultural, and military techniques have evolved and of the social, economic, and political consequences those changes have produced” (Rae, 1993). Within this context, this article has explored the potentials of the Internet to help the ethnic press as well as the overseas Chinese communities survive and revitalize by maintaining and expanding their communication networks.

Despite the large number of Chinese immigrants in various parts of the world, the ethnic Chinese press has been in decline due to political restrictions, financial strains, and the decline of Chinese education overseas. The new waves of immigration from China and other Chinese-speaking regions over the last two decades have helped to boost the development of ethnic Chinese press overseas for the time being, but there is no guarantee that the new immigrants and their children will not follow the steps of earlier immigrants in being culturally assimilated and losing their cultural roots.

The development of Internet thus has the potential to bring a new leaf to the life of overseas Chinese language press by effectively easing some of its problems, such as financial constraint and direct government censorship. Moreover, the Internet is also helping to expand the functions of the traditional media by offering more diversified and specialized communication among overseas Chinese as well as more globally read publications. Because of such new features brought to ethnic communication by the online publications, Chinese immigrants living in various parts of the world as well as within a host country are more likely to develop common concerns and be mobilized for common action.

Considering the role the ethnic press plays in the formation and consolidation of ethnic communities, the impact of the Internet goes far beyond the field of publication. Minority-language media help minority people to keep
their ethnic identity (Singer, 1978) because they function to pass on knowledge, values, and norms from one generation to another or from the members of a society to newcomers. In this way they serve to increase social cohesion by widening the base of common experience (Severin & Tankard, 1984). It is in this sense that the ethnic press is said to be a force in adjusting the balance between the maintenance of native ways and adoption of new ways of life by immigrants, who are always pulled in two directions (Chang, 1974).

It has long been established that the level of communication has a direct bearing on how far a community can stretch. When communication just relies on word of mouth or other primitive means, a community is understandably small because the means for communication are spatially limited. A community, in such a sense, is a “physical concentration of people who are spatially delimited” (Hillery, 1995, p. 189). New communication technologies have made it possible for a community to evolve out of its physical boundaries. It can simply exist among people “bound by a sense of identity, shared values, and, at least within areas of communicable action, a common language” (Goode, 1955, p. 194). A community, in this broader sense, is a social group (Hiller, 1941).

Chinese immigrants, with 30 million of them living in dozens of countries, constitute one of the largest and most distinctive minority communities in the world. These ethnic Chinese, to varying degrees, have maintained their cultural identity. A 1994 *Far East Economic Review* report, for instance, said that in Southeast Asia, “the many Overseas Chinese continue to generate controversy and sometimes hostility as non-Chinese residents of Malaysia, Indonesia and other countries allege that the Overseas Chinese resist assimilation” (Hicks & Mackie, 1994, p. 46). Besides a variety of factors, such as marriage among themselves, residence in compact community, and attendance in Chinese schools (Lee & Tse, 1994), exposure to Chinese mass media—first newspapers and magazines and then radio and TV broadcasting—is found to have contributed to the preservation of the cultural identity of ethnic Chinese in various parts of the world. With the Internet, ethnic Chinese are expected to become more resistant to cultural assimilation and to further strengthen their communal ties.

The Internet has thus brought about a new phase in the development of ethnic communication and ethnic community relationship. If many previous studies found that the use of the ethnic press contributes to the slowdown of the process of acculturation (McLuhan & Powers, 1989), or assimilation of ethnic groups into the mainstream culture in a society, then in the age of cyberspace, the role of ethnic media in fortifying the cultural traits of ethnic immigrants is expected to be further strengthened.

While more evidence is needed to validate McLuhan and Powers’ (1989) prediction that the “electronic proximity” brought about by new technologies will help the Chinese and other major ethnic groups in North America or elsewhere set up self-sufficient, electronically coordinated enclosures, recent successes of overseas Chinese in protesting against damaging remarks made by U.S. TV networks against Chinese immigrants in the United States and about Chinese athletes at the Atlanta Olympic Games, mobilized and organized through on-line publications and discussion groups, seem to indicate stronger identity for the overseas Chinese community.

Considering the fact that new media technologies can be cohesive as well as fragmenting, it may not be right to say that on-line publications are definitely turning ethnic groups into enclaves. The cohesive force of new media technologies may also pull them into the direction of assimilation and acculturation, drawing them faster into the mainstream culture, but the question is: Can they be assimilated into the mainstream culture without losing their own cultural roots and ethnic identity?

To answer such a question, comprehensive and representative data about the content of on-line Chinese publications, their actual use by overseas Chinese, and their effects on strengthening the ties among the overseas Chinese need to be gathered through content analyses, ethnographic studies, and surveys. At this stage, however, such endeavors are hampered because the development of on-line publications is still evolving and their audiences are much less tangible than those of the traditional media. In addition, the psychological and sociological impact on the users may also take time to become perceptible. As the on-line publications become more established and better technologies for keeping track of the audience are developed, we will be in a much better position to measure the real impact of on-line activities on the development of ethnic communities in future.

While stronger support is yet to be found through more comprehensive and systematic studies, this study nevertheless demonstrated the potentials of on-line publications in supplementing and expanding the functions of the traditional ethnic media, strengthening cultural and communal ties among people belonging to the same ethnic group, and mobilizing them for action. Such potentials have led us to believe that on-line communication is conducive to helping ethnic groups be assimilated into the mainstream culture without losing their own cultural roots and ethnic identity. The new media technologies may eventually turn the world into a global village, but there may be condominiums for different cultures and communities inside such a village.

**NOTES**

1. These publications fall into three categories: United States-based but globally circulated journals, national or regional publications, and university-based publications.
5. Dedicated Web Server refers to the exclusive Web advertising server for corporate clients with the machine owned by the client and run under an exclusive domain name by the choice of the client pending InterNIC registration approval.

REFERENCES