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Information Technology and the Postmodern Community

by

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ABSTRACT

My research explores the extent to which computer mediated networks - email, newsgroups, chat lines, mailing lists, the Web - are fostering a sense of community or whether the networks are leading to the emergence of "lifestyle enclaves". This qualitative exploratory study is based on Robert Bellah et al. 's conceptions of community and lifestyle enclaves, and Sherry Turkle's ideas on identity as applied to computer mediated communication. In terms of identity, this thesis explores the extent to which participating in computer mediated communication leads to a liberating reconstitution of the self, and whether the networks lead to the replacement of face-to-face contact by a computer interface.

Participating in computer mediated networks was found to lead not to the emergence of communities or to new forms of self-knowledge; it leads instead to a politics and ethics that disposes of the connection with reality. Lacking a reality principle that grounds the self and the community, the networks are better thought of as instrumental, for use primarily as a tool for the purpose of communication and for access to information.

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I felt privileged many times during the course of conducting this research. The people whom I talked with via email and face-to-face were extremely generous in sharing their experiences of using computer mediated communication. It was a privilege to hear their stories. To Richard I am unboundedly grateful, for he not only planted the seed for the topic of this study, but provided constant and unconditional technical and personal support.

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DEDICATION

For Isabel, my beautiful sister.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As human society enters the twenty-first century, there is an apparent openness among countries and cultures, and a free flow of information, goods and ideas. As cold-war barriers fall, a new era of change continues to unfold. Information and technology are at the center of this transition. Information technology with its networks, energizes the mobilization of world affairs and moves us towards an electronic future. At its fullest development, information technology is the merging of video, telephones and computers, leading to the emergence of what is, as yet, a largely unknown world of "virtual reality". Information technology networks will allow access to a variety of information, interaction, and entertainment by combining the switching and routing capabilities of phones with video and information offerings of the most advanced cable systems and computer technologies.

The infrastructure which makes this possible has been popularized as the "Information Highway". The potential of information technology is becoming realized as computer mediated communication proliferates. Increasingly, our interaction with the world around us is mediated by computer technology. Our contact with machines is becoming more frequent and more individuals are interacting through digital interfaces. "Virtual worlds" already exist in global information networks, used heavily by academics, business, and by those who have a computer and a modem and are willing to pay a fee in order to get wired to a host network. Those who use the Internet, the Usenet, mailing lists, IRC (Internet Relay Chat), MUDs (MultiUser Domains),the World Wide Web (WWW), and computer email services (see Appendix 1), know the experience of participating in a "virtual community" online. The interconnection of these existing virtual networks which use computer mediated technology to link people all over the world, is informally known as "the Net".

The central thesis of my research is that the Net realizes the power to create and simulate experiences and in the process redefines the basic concepts that have characterized the essence of human societies in the last century. Social space, interaction norms and the self are being altered in computer mediated communication. My research contributes to the development of a framework which explores the notion of community and its relation to the self in the context of computer mediated communication. In developing the following chapters, the main question is about the nature of our social relations as they develop in the relationship between virtual and real life.

Rheingold (1994), Jones (1995), Turkle (1995), among others, argue that critical to the rhetoric surrounding computer mediated communication is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community. It seems undeniable that the development of communication technologies is transforming the capacity of society to build new networks and coalitions. It then becomes important to discern the extent to which computer mediated communication builds communities, leading to the question of how in using the networks we must re-examine our notions of community. Electronic connections allow us to "be" at various global sites while sitting in front of the computer screen. Being electronically connected may lead, by implication, to the impossibility of community. Thus conceptualized as a tool to rebuild community, the computer now tends to build community inside machines. These virtual communities are offering a new context for thinking about identity and are providing a new social laboratory for experimenting with constructions and reconstructions of the self (Turkle, 1995). The authors point out that participation in virtual worlds raises important questions about the nature of our communities and ourselves.

My research follows two main lines of exploration. The first line of inquiry explores the applicability of Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton's (1985) concept of "lifestyle enclaves" to computer mediated communication and interaction. The central issue is to ascertain whether computer

mediated interaction extends existing lifestyle enclaves and whether it fosters the creation of new enclaves. Additionally, this concept is evaluated by exploring whether computer mediated connections can be more than lifestyle enclaves, thereby revising concepts of community. The second line of inquiry utilizes Sherry Turkle's (1995) conceptions of the self in exploring the extent to which participating in computer mediated interaction modifies the subject in terms of identity leading to a (re)constitution of the self.

In addition, electronic communities and identities will be analyzed in terms of postmodern theory. The analysis of information technology within the postmodern condition includes the work of Turkle (1995), Kroker and Weinstein (1994), and Borgmann (1991). The main issue in the relationship between the Net and postmodern thought concerns the extent to which electronically mediated lifestyles and identities reflect the fragmentation of today's reality, and how they contribute to the shaping of postmodern knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

Before attempting to understand what participants in computer mediated communication believe a community is or might be, and how electronic connections affect identity construction, it is critical to understand the conceptual nature of community and identity. What is a community? How do individuals construct their identity? Different answers to these questions can be found in the writings on community theory, sociology of communications, sociology of interaction, sociology of science, postmodern theory, and in a variety of books and articles on the subject of computer mediated communication and communities. My research of the literature led me to conclude, however, that in fact little has been written that directly explains the depth of the impact that computer mediated communication has on the formation of community and its relation to individuals' identities.

A. Community and Lifestyle Enclaves

Bellah et al. (1985) see a marked difference between the concept of community and lifestyle enclave. Community is an inclusive whole, the interdependence of public and private life, reproducing the entire institutional complex of a functioning society. Communities have a history, and what holds them together is the ethical, aesthetic and ritual practices of commitment that define the patterns of loyalty and obligation of the community as a way of life (Bellah et al. 1985:154). Bellah et al.'s ideal community is a "community of memory" where the past is retold in the narratives which contain a context of meaning that "allows us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those close to us with the aspirations of a larger whole and see our own efforts as being, in part, contributions to a common good" (1985:153).

Communities of memory provide some continuity between the past and the present by binding members together in certain "habits of the heart". These habits are the mores that help shape the moral and intellectual character of the community in terms of ideas and opinions, and with regards to everyday economic, religious, and political practices (Bellah et al. 1985). Tradition and commitment are the "second languages" of the normative life of a community. The authors point out that "history and hope" are essential elements in the understanding of communities. When a community is merely a collection of similar individuals who do not share the same second languages, it "degenerates into lifestyle enclave".

Lifestyle enclaves are an expression of private life; they are usually unrelated to work and primarily linked to individual choices of leisure and consumption (Bellah et al. 1985:72). Lifestyle enclaves celebrate the narcissism of similarity and are segmental in two ways. They involve only a segment of each individual, concerning only their private life. In addition, they are socially segmental in that they include only those who are socially, economically, or culturally similar (Bellah et al. 1985:72).

Lifestyle enclaves are based on the "first language" of individualism. This is the language of self-interested individuals trying to maximize individual good. Individuals join together in a "community of interest" in order to fulfill their own needs. The ties formed in enclaves are not those of the community of memory: rather they are largely free from traditional boundaries deriving instead from individual choices (Bellah et al. 1985:134). Lifestyle enclaves are maintained so long as members find meaning in the expression of their individuality within an enclave of similar tastes and interests.

I use Bellah et al.'s concepts of community and lifestyle enclaves to organize my analysis of participants' narratives about their electronic connections. More precisely, I analyze how these concepts apply to and are modified by computer mediated communication. Another rationale for using Bellah'at al.'s theoretical concepts stems from their usefulness in terms of providing an analytical guide of the relationship between community and the individual.

B. Identity

Computer mediated communication offers a new means for the process of self constitution. The substitution of computer mediated for face-to-face conversation introduces a new possibility for playing with identity. Identities are not grounded in the physical body, but can be fluid, real, or imagined. Turkle argues that virtual communities offer a dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of computer mediated communication and interaction. Virtual communities "offer permission to play, to try things out, facilitating the development of self and identity" (1995:205).

In terms of views of the self, new images of multiplicity, flexibility and fragmentation are dominating current thinking about individuals' identities. As Turkle (1995) points out, the Internet is another element of the computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. Turkle's work on MUDs reveals a

virtual world for anonymous social interaction where individuals can play roles as close to or as far from their real life self as they choose. In MUDs the text unfolds in real-time and participants become the authors of the story. They are interactively engaged in the screen and they can take control of the action. As in acting the explicit task is to construct a viable mask or persona.

Play has always been an important aspect of individuals' efforts to build identity (Goffman, 1984). MUDs are not the only electronic networks in which to play with identity, but they are an unparalleled opportunity for such play. On a MUD participants build characters and environments and then live within this virtual situation. A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. Creating screen persona is thus an opportunity for individual participants to express unexplored parts of their selves. In this way the games are laboratories for the construction of identity (Turkle, 1995). Life on the screen permits participants to project themselves into their own dramas in which they are stars, directors, and producers.

As mentioned, MUDs are not the only networks where individuals can build and play with identities. Chat lines, the Web, newsgroups, and email all create the opportunity to invent alternative versions of one's self and to engage in virtual forms of interaction. These electronic networks are also a significant social laboratory for experimenting with identity. I use Turkle's (1995) work on MUD games to analyze identity construction in these electronic other networks.

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Several bodies of literature develop a picture of the complexity of building communities and constructing identities through computer mediated communication. My discussion in the next chapter uses postmodern theory to analyze the ways in which computer mediated communication is a form of postmodern interaction by offering the possibility of the emergence of fragmented communities and multiple identities; how electronic connections contribute to postmodern knowledge by changing the knowing

subject and what it knows; and how participation in electronic networking affects the political realm by creating and maintaining social statuses.

In the following section, I will describe how I applied the knowledge received from the literature for exploring the relationship between how individuals are creating electronic connections and how they are constructing their identities through those connections.

Methods in Investigating CMC

I. Research design

Computer mediated communication affects people's experiences of community and self. The objective of my research is to explore ways in which electronic formations are lifestyle enclaves, whether they are an extension of existing lifestyle enclaves, and whether they create new lifestyle enclaves. Also, I want to explore whether participants' connections can be more than lifestyle enclaves. The complementary issue is to explore how computer mediated interaction (re)constitutes our selves. In both questions, I seek to ascertain the impact that computer mediated communication has on the formation of the individual's identity and social relations. A final issue for analysis is how computer mediated communities and identities are a reflection of, and are contributing to, postmodern life in terms of knowledge and politics.

To date little written work exists, in the social sciences in general and in sociology in particular, that directly examines the relationship between community and identity and how individuals negotiate this relationship in computer mediated communication and interaction. Some of the research that has been done relies mainly on observation of online interaction (see Wiley, 1995, Jones, 1995). My research is modeled primarily by Turkle's (1995) work on identity on the Net in which she combines observing online interaction with interviewing participants. Thus I employed different qualitative methods in my research including: (virtual) participant observation on the Net and (face-to-face) semi-structured interviews with those who communicate and interact online.

A. (Virtual) Participant Observation

Participant observation was used to investigate the patterns of interaction among Net users. This technique is preferred because it allows the acquisition of first-hand knowledge of people's virtual interaction, their activities online, and the structure of the social world in "cyberspace". According to Adler & Adler (1987) the researcher may assume a peripheral role which is the least committed and most marginal of the membership roles. Assuming this role means refraining from participating in activities that are at the core of group membership and identification. The peripheral membership role may be the least influenced by subjective bias because it is the least involved. However, it also has the least amount of direct participation in core activities to draw upon as basis of experience.

Virtual participant observation was conducted at specific Net sites (Appendix 2) such as some IRC channels, the Web, and Usenet newsgroups on several topics including environmental, religious, sports, computers, feminist, human rights, arms, and sex discussions. All these networks have public access and anyone can lurk [1] in on the discussions. As a lurker my identity remained anonymous; and I created a generic "handle"[2] to visit IRC channels. I went online to observe participants' interests and patterns of interaction, as well as to gain insights about the content available.

B. Other Research Materials

I conducted a number of informal interviews with both professional and lay people working in areas related to computer technology. Specifically, I talked with students who use email, chat lines, interactive games; with individuals who use a computer everyday in their work; and with technical professionals who develop Web pages and set up other computer applications, such as intelligent agents. I additionally read a variety of materials aimed at the "wired" world, and had the opportunity to actually go online during two of

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[1] To lurk refers to reading information or observing online interaction without actively contributing to it.
[2] Handles are user identification names used instead of the participants real life name.

my interviews which allowed me to observe the participants in their IRC and MOO [3] interactions. I also went to local cybercafés[4] where I had the opportunity to talk with some of the people who were interacting online at the time. In addition, I went to a gallery exhibition on interactive art entitled "cyberfeminism". The theme of the exhibition was the impact of new electronic technologies on women's lives, as well as their response to the new media. I also communicated via email with a great number of people all over the world, and received some very useful insights and comments regarding the impact of computer mediated communication on people's lives.

All these elements - the online observations, the informal discussions with those who use computers daily, the reading materials, the visits to the cybercafés and the gallery exhibition, and the email messages I received - converged to inform my understanding of electronic connections and their impact on perceptions of community and identity. However, the primary body of data came from twenty-three intensive, semi-structured interviews with the men and women who communicate and interact through the computer.

C. (Face-to-face) Semi-structured Interviews

1. Content Areas

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to understand what participants in computer mediated communication and interaction believe a community is from their own perspective and experience, and their reasons for choosing computer mediated communication. Interviewing was used because it allows the researcher to "seek to discover the informant's experience of a particular topic or situation" (Lofland & Lofland, 1984:12). The emphasis is on the relationship between the researcher and the subject. Oakley states that the "goal of finding out about people through interviewing is

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[3] See appendix I

[4] A cybercafé is a physical café that in addition to the typical table set up offers its patrons computer terminals and free access to the Interne

best achieved when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship" (Oakley, 1981:41). Additionally, the use of intensive, semi-structured interviews is one of the most powerful methods of qualitative inquiry, allowing researchers to "step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCraken, 1988:9). Thus, to develop an understanding of the subjective experience of those who communicate and interact through the computer, interviews were an appropriate research instrument.

My focus was to understand what participants believe a virtual community is or might be, and how participation in online interaction affects the construction of their identity. Participants' beliefs on community and identity are not accomplished in a vacuum, but arise out of the individuals' experiences that are grounded in social interaction, consequently resulting from socially shaped ideas and assumptions. Some of the ideas and assumptions that influence participants' views on electronic communities and virtual identities include: attitudes towards their physical communities, ideas about commitment and values, beliefs about cultural norms and accountability, and individualism. I explore these ideas and assumptions in the personal interviews.

The interviews also explored the interactions participants' experienced both in public and intimate social arenas. The interview questions probed the relation between their online identities and their identities in face-to-face interactions. Exploration of participants' personal beliefs were also included in the interviews. A number of personal factors impinge on the process of identity construction and on the participants' beliefs about community. Perceptions of the self, beliefs on politics, and life goals are all factors which can affect participants' sense of self and participants' decisions about developing and belonging to a virtual community.

I constructed an interview guide prior to beginning my research (Appendix 2). I conceptually structured the interview along the lines of two interrelated categories: what

participants believed their electronic connections are in terms of community, and how participants construct or reconstruct their identity in computer mediated communication. Despite my deliberate (purposeful) construction, the actual interviews rarely followed the form of the guide. Persistently, once the preliminary questions about participant demographics and details regarding the networks they frequent were accomplished, participants proceeded to talk for fifteen to twenty minutes, on each of the main questions, about their experiences with electronic networks: what they felt a community is online, how it is formed and maintained, the benefits of online interaction and communication, highlighting what they felt were important issues or concerns. Participants were extremely eager to talk about their experiences online, perhaps reflecting a lack of research in this area. The challenge during these interviews was not one of prompting information from reluctant individuals, rather I sporadically asked questions moving the interview in one direction or another. Following the purging of information, I would refer occasionally to the guide to flesh out particular areas that might have been glossed over or omitted by participants. Overall, my experience was that the interviews naturally covered all areas of interest I had conceptualized. I also found that there were areas that I had not considered which came up consistently during the interviews. Additionally, there were a few times when I asked participants for clarification and elaboration on technical terms and concepts regarding computer technology that I was unfamiliar with.

2. Interview Sampling Considerations

Given the lack of prior sociological research in the area of information technology by which to guide my recruitment of participants, I decided that an efficient means to recruit individuals was by posting a paragraph on specific local newsgroups advising readers of my research objectives and identity, and requesting voluntary participation (Appendix 3). In response to my call for participants I received email messages from many places including England, Australia, Mexico, the United States, and all over Canada. From all the

respondents I interviewed the first twenty individuals living in the local area. In addition to contacts obtained through the posting, I conducted three other interviews suggested to me by other participants and a friend of mine.

Decisions for inclusion in the sample were determined primarily on participant willingness and availability. There are many definitions and perceptions of community and identity. Rather than exclude someone because of externally imposed definitions, I felt it was important to legitimate any participant's definition of their experience of community and identity. Participants' beliefs and ideas regarding community and identity varied- this became quickly evident- and to exclude any definition seemed arbitrary.

3. Interview Context

As mentioned, the vast majority of participants were recruited through newsgroups while other participants were recruited through friends and acquaintances. Most interviews were conducted in participants' homes, three were conducted in my university office, one was conducted in a restaurant, one in a public park, and three in the participants' offices at their place of employment. The general tone of the interviews was informal and conversational. Some interviews were accompanied by tea, and some conversations continued beyond the formal interview. Often, participants would volunteer to lend me books or articles they felt were pertinent to my study, and they made suggestions on other online sources or events related to computer mediated communication. The time and place for the interviews were arranged by the participants, and all participants were by themselves at the time of the interviews, except for one woman whose baby woke up and was then breastfed while she was being interviewed. One participant let his dog in and out a few times; and two others answered the telephone during the interview. Rather than detract from the quality of the interview, however, I felt this reflected comfort with me as an interviewer and with the research itself. Achieving such a comfort level goes beyond

merely establishing rapport, contributing to the collection of more meaningful, comprehensive and honest information from the participants (Oakley, 1981).

II. Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning each interview, I asked participants to read and sign an informed consent form (Appendix 4). After participants had read the consent form, I paraphrased its content for them: that their participation was voluntary and that confidentiality was ensured. In my research I have followed a consistent policy of disguising the identities of all participants. I have invented names for participants, and in reporting cases of people who have part of their identity on the Net I requested permission to use their online handles. Additionally, I have chosen not to report on my findings regarding interaction in chat lines and MUDs, unless I have met the Net user in person rather than in persona. I made this decision because of the nature and focus of my research: the relationship between participants' virtual and real life in their experiences of electronic communities and identities.

In continuing to highlight the contents of the consent form, I informed participants on how I would be storing and handling the data; and that I was willing to dispose of tapes and transcripts at their request. I emphasized that, although I may have particular questions or probes, they were welcome to refuse to answer any question or to terminate the interview at any point. In addition, I stressed that there was no one way for the interview to proceed, and that participants should feel free to explore and explain as they pleased. No participant refused to answer any question during the interview. All participants completed the interviews and, to date, I have not received any requests to destroy data or delete comments.

Interviews were audiotaped, and permission was obtained from participants prior to making recordings. People were offered the option of completing the interview while I took

notes, but no one chose this option. My general impression was that participants were fairly comfortable with having their words and ideas recorded.

III. Interview Sample Characteristics

I attempted to include as much variation as possible in terms of sex and socioeconomic status of participants by going beyond the newsgroup posting for participants. I was only marginally successful. Nineteen white men and four white women participated in the interviews. The socioeconomic status of the majority of participants fell in the "middle class" range. This measure was based on participants' report of their income and occupation. As many interviews took place in participants' homes I was able to assess the apparent validity of their reports. Participants' occupations included: janitor, nanny, student, social worker, computer consultant and programmer, software developer, university professor, computer technician, computer contractor, television producer, and senior administrator. Participants' incomes ranged from no income to one hundred thousand Canadian dollars per year, with a mean income of thirty seven thousand Canadian dollars per year.

In my research, there were a number of other factors that I came to understand as being as important to sample make up as socioeconomic status. The kinds of networks participants frequent, the number of daily hours spent online, and participants' general attitude towards computer mediated technology, in particular their reasons and purposes for using the technology, were all important characteristics of my sample. I did not actively select participants on any of these basis, but the final sample included people with a wide range of online experiences.

1. Networks used

I speculated that the networks participants frequent may have an influence on their perceptions of community and identity. Different kinds of networks are used for different

purposes. Email is used primarily for communication and exchange of information; newsgroups and the Web are used to access and divulge information, and as a form of social debate; real-time interactive chat lines and games serve various purposes including social interaction and creating virtual identities. Thus, whether participants' online interaction consists predominantly of real time chatting and games, or whether it is predominantly email communication may affect their beliefs regarding community and identity.

All participants used email and newsgroups subscribing to a number of newsgroups ranging from five to thirty. On these newsgroups users show a variety of interests including: gun control, religion, social theory, music, video art, philosophy, pets, job search, computers, social support groups, and sex. A few participants subscribed to private mailing lists including: business ethics lists, physicians lists, and computers lists. A large number of participants (9) had a homepage on the Web. In my sample two women and three men participated in real time interactive chat lines; and of these only one woman and one man participated in interactive games such as MUDs.

2. Amount of time online

The amount of time participants spend online may also influence their views of community and identity and perhaps reflect participants' level of commitment to their online interaction. Participants spent at least two hours daily surfing[5] the Web. One participant spends forty to sixty hours a week on the Web! The greatest amount of time is spent reading and posting to newsgroups: two to three hours daily. However, the vast majority of the participants do not actually post to newsgroups, rather they lurk and observe others, or search for information or ideas without actively engaging in the interaction. With regards to chat lines and games, one participant spends on average twelve hours a day interacting

[5] Surfing refers to the online activity of randomly following hypertext links, or merely going from one site to anothe

either on a chat line or playing a MOO game. The others who participate on chat line spend considerably less time online, with an average of two to three hours a day.

3. Reasons for using computer mediated communication

Participants have different reasons for going online, but a reason common to all is that their primary purposes for being connected is communication and exchange of information. Participants also use the networks as a form of social activity and entertainment; and some participants go online to receive support from particular online support groups, including the new parents support group, the mood disorder significant-others support group, and the Alzheimer's support group.

IV. Data Analysis

Computer mediated communication poses new methodological challenges for the researcher: whether and how to use online interviews, indeed, what to make of them. In the initial stages of my research I thought that conducting online interviews would result in a larger sample with a wide cross section of individuals from various countries. In fact, I received many email messages affirming precisely the point that computer mediated communication eliminates the need for face-to-face contact, and that online interviews and materials should be used as part of my research. However, given that the focus of my research is to understand how experiences in virtual interaction affect participants' real lives, it became clear that by conducting interviews online I would be collecting virtual data leading to a virtual thesis, leaving out the real people themselves. I therefore decided to interview individuals face-to-face.

My research has a distinct real life bias because it explores, in general terms, the relationship between the virtual world of computer mediated interaction and the real world of face-to-face relations. In face-to-face interviews I am better able to explore an individual's history, and tease out the roles technology has played in their lives. A final

reason for the real life bias is ethical in nature: in face-to-face interviews I was able to obtain signed informed consent for every individual interviewed. This would be impossible to do online.

All interviews were tape recorded. Some were transcribed by a secretarial service, but the majority were transcribed by me. The analysis for chapters three and four was conducted according to grounded theory methods (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In grounded theory, data analysis proceeds inductively, with data collection, analysis and research occurring simultaneously. I began interviews in April of 1996 and completed my final interview at the end of November, 1996. During that time, transcriptions of earlier interviews was on-going, as was my review of the literature and online observations. My understanding of the issues evolved as I performed both field and theoretical research. In developing my understanding, I applied methods of theoretical saturation and theoretical sampling.

Theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:61) occurs when certain topics are continually repeated in the data without providing new insight. In theory, once theoretical saturation is reached, the researcher goes on to explore new areas of the topic. This, however, was less clear cut than the literature implies; participants' narratives of their online interaction were often constructed in such a way that I could not ask them to pass over aspects of their experience I felt had been saturated. I did, however, do less probing during later interviews in these areas.

Theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:45) refers to the process whereby the data collected sets new research directions. An interview might point to some area or aspect of the issue that has not been considered. When this happens, theoretical sampling leads the researcher to seek out instances of that particular aspect in hopes of saturating that element of the problem. I was able to employ theoretical sampling throughout the course of my data collection, as I transcribed and analyzed interviews at the same time as I continued interviewing. With each interview, I was able to shift the focus slightly to explore aspects

of issues that emerged from previous data. For example, the inclusion of three women in the sample came near the end of my study and was motivated by my developing understanding of the potential differences of online experiences based on sex. Since my prior sample included only one woman I wanted to explore further the situation of females' experience in online interaction and communication.

During my interviews, sexuality became a consistently emerging theme. I began to hear that subjects related to sex were more salient in online interaction and discussion than any other subject area. In later interviews, I included questions and discussions around the notion of "cybersex" and its meaning for participants. A second, overreaching theme that emerged was that of social and personal change. Participants described changes in perceptions of others, in relationships, in expectations, in beliefs and views of the world, and in concepts of the self. As the research progressed I increasingly explored these areas of change, asking questions about who participants thought they had become, what relationships had changed, what beliefs had changed, and what these changes meant to them.

In addition to Bellah et al.'s (1985) methods for developing their theories, in chapter three my analysis was also informed by their theoretical conceptions of community and lifestyle enclaves. Bellah et al.'s work struck me as an appropriate model for my research because of the theoretical contrast between community and lifestyle enclaves. In chapter four, in addition to Turkle's (1995) methods, my analysis was informed primarily by her theories on identity on the Net; Turkle's theories are themselves grounded, as they have been developed in her years of research analyzing the culture of simulation. In chapter five my discussion is based on Borgmann's assessment of the postmodern condition with computer mediated communication. In the following chapter I use postmodernism in terms of Turkle's culture of simulation and Kroker and Weinstein's culture of "recline".

Chapter 2

The Net and Postmodern Knowledge

Introduction

Bellah et al. analyze contemporary community and lifestyle enclaves within the context of physical reality. With computer mediated communication the context must include the virtual realm, therefore requiring a postmodern theoretical perspective since there is no single theory. In analyzing computer mediated communities and identities within a postmodern framework, I compare and contrast Turkle's assessment that participation in computer mediated communication leads to forms of social liberation, with Kroker and Weinstein's assessment that participation in electronic networking leads to replacement of the human.

According to Turkle society is moving from a "modernist culture of calculation to a postmodern culture of simulation" (1995:10). Turkle sees the culture of simulation as the new cultural context defined by "eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self" (1995:10). The erosion of boundaries is occurring in the fields of research and in the everyday lives of individuals, specifically those who interact in cyber communities.

Turkle's ideas given empirical form in computer mediated experiences develop models that are postmodern: they admit multiplicity and flexibility. They acknowledge the constructed nature of reality, self, and other. The Net is another cultural element that suggests the value of approaching one's story in several ways and with fluid access to one's different aspects: participants are encouraged to think of themselves and their communities as fluid, emergent, decentralized, and flexible (Turkle, 1995). Computer mediated communication and interaction describes a trend consistent with the postmodern idea that identity and community are not fixed objective entities, but fluid social constructs, stories that may be subject to revision.

Turkle argues that computers carry with them new ways of knowing, heightening and making concrete postmodern theory. Virtual identities offer an experience of multiplicity and instability of meaning that is characteristically postmodern. The electronic experience of multiple selves, Turkle claims, allows participants the possibility of changing their ways of thinking about the self and others, situating them in the postmodern deconstruction of human subjectivity: "when people explore simulation games and fantasy worlds or log on to a community where they have virtual friends and lovers, they are not thinking of the computer as an analytical engine, but as an intimate machine" (1995:206). Computer mediated narratives radically decenter the human body, the sacred icon of the essential, modern self. Turkle argues that this deconstruction provides new forms of social liberation especially for women.

While Turkle is optimistic about the liberating postmodern potential of computer mediated communication, the reality of the participants I talked with is congruent with Kroker and Weinstein's (1994) theory of postmodernism. Kroker and Weinstein see modernism and postmodernism as the great ideological phases of recline. Fundamentally differing from Turkle's culture of simulation, Kroker and Weinstein's culture of recline is not characterized by liberating multiplicity but by the wish to be replaced. Kroker and Weinstein claim that the signal form of postmodern embodiment is the "disappearing body". In opposition to Turkle, Kroker and Weinstein posit a more realistic view of postmodern knowledge. Most participants that I interviewed, who will be properly introduced in the next chapter, vehemently question the appeal of computer technology to alleviate social and individual problems. Michael, for example, asserts that "anyone who thinks that technology is the end all be all to our problems, either in education or in other areas, is seriously mistaken". He adds that computer technology is "a tool and a resource, and as such there are important issues of cost and accessibility that cannot be ignored when talking about the computer as an aid to solving the world's problems". Moreover, most participants do not perceive any connection between computer mediated communication and

the community at large. The connections participants are making are essentially instrumental.

Contrary to Turkle, and in agreement with Kroker and Weinstein, computer mediated communication is not really an instrument of changing ways of thinking about the self or the world. Participants do not search for their multiple selves, and the apparent multiplicity does not permeate real life. Even though computer mediated communication illustrates ideas associated with postmodernism it is not leading to thinking about contemporary social issues; rather it represents a wish to be replaced. Steve, for example, argues that the Net is a perfect replacement for those who are socially insecure, introverted, or that "lack social skills" for face-to-face communication. Morin also observes that, by being online individuals are being replaced by the computer interface allowing them to "avoid others" and "hear only what they want to hear". The promise of liberation and connection occurs under the technological myth of facilitation.

The simulation worlds of today's computer mediated communication capture something important about the ethos of contemporary society and postmodern knowledge. People use objects to work through cultural images and to help arrange these ideas into new patterns of meaning. But these new meanings are not permeating participants' real lives. From this point of view the holding power of computer mediated lifestyle enclaves and virtual identities does not derive from the ability they offer to think about postmodernism. On the contrary, people seem to lose the ability to think critically about real life concerns while living in a virtual environment. Computer mediated communication allows participants to live in postmodernism in terms of multiplicity, but this does not lead to thinking through postmodernist substantive issues. Specifically, it is not leading to a (re)thinking of community, or to a (re)thinking about issues of gender and sex - as will be evident in chapters three and four respectively.

Participating in computer mediated networks is not leading to thinking through real life issues; rather it is leading to a network of lonely individuals or "the lonely crowd"

whose main wish is to be replaced. And a lonely crowd wishing to be replaced cannot be liberating. Virtual lifestyle enclaves are not fostering a sense of real life community, just as multiple virtual identities are not fostering real life knowledge. Computer mediated communication leads not to liberating knowledge but to the replacement of the mind and the body. The computer interface is not a cultural object that people appropriate to think through social relations; rather individuals merely have substitute communities and identities. In this chapter, I explore the postmodern theoretical conditions for understanding the (re)configuration of the self, and the formation of communities in computer mediated communication.

Postmodern Knowledge

The fundamental lessons learned from computer mediated narratives do not have much to do with calculation and rules; instead they are concerned with simulation, navigation and interaction. Participants interact in networks navigating the Web, surfing its hypertext links that instantaneously take them from site to site; MUDs are simulated worlds that exist only in computer mediated interaction. The emerging culture of simulation affects modernist understandings of bodies and minds at many levels. Fifteen years ago models explaining social relations that dominated academic sociology were modernist in spirit; nearly all tended to treat the nature of social groups and their dynamics in terms of centralized structures and hegemonic norms. In contrast, today's models often embrace a postmodern aesthetic of complexity and decentering. Leading feminist theorists, for example, do not search for the objective truth in explaining social relations but expect the truth to emerge from the interactions between many different aspects of social life, its language and institutions, and individuals' biological characteristics such as age, sex, and race. What emerges from the interaction of all these realms, like the emergent simulation in computer mediated interaction, can be too complex to be completely analyzed.

Through modernity a male-dominated academic and cultural way of thinking that took one style as the right and only way to arrive at explanations of truth discriminated against "soft" approaches. The word soft tends to be equated with unscientific and undisciplined as well as with feminine and a lack of power. Soft is associated with flexible, nonhierarchical style, one that allows a connection with one's objects of study. Soft mastery goes along with seeing negotiations, relationships, and attachment as cognitive virtues. It is interesting to note the transposition of values in the culture of simulation that now encourages people to express precisely "soft" view points.

Theorists of postmodernism (Baudrillard 1988, Lyotard, 1984) have written about worlds without origins, of simulacra: copies that have no originals. In computer mediated communication and interaction the line between things and their representation breaks down because the representation exists in the absence of the real. Virtual communities and virtual personae on computer networks function as copies of objects that have no original. As will become evident in the following chapters, most participants' handles or characters within electronic enclaves are not a representation of their real life selves, or their real life communities. As Tony points out in explaining that he does not have the desire to meet face-to-face those he communicates with online: "they have a personality on the Net, and you don't want to find out that they are different in real life". Pretending to be the opposite sex, or to pretend to be whatever one wishes is to, represent a self that has no origins. Virtual identities can be false, invented, deceptive. Virtual identities are not grounded in truth and shared meanings are with regards to the virtual interaction, not real life interaction.

The notion of communities and identities without origins elicit the postmodern challenge to the traditional epistemologies of depth. These are theories of knowledge where the manifest refers back to the latent, the signifier to the signified. In contrast, the postmodern offers communities and selves without depth, in a computer mediated world of surface. As will be clear in chapters three and four, computer mediated communities and

identities are, in most cases, superficial and instrumental. The level of depth of computer mediated communication is captured nicely by Richard's analogy that online discussion and interaction is "as deep as the interaction you have when you ride the bus: I mean, you do occasionally bump into somebody who is really interesting, but to me that's not depth. If that person asks me to go over to his place for a drink, I'll likely say no". Richard argues that his online interaction is not leading to real life bonds or ties: "I interact with them online, but I wouldn't say I know them. I don't think of them as friends". Ed too believes that "you can't get to know somebody on the Internet: you need real physical interaction in order to know each other as individuals". Similarly, Steve argues that people may "meet interesting people, but it is a random occurrence". He compares computer mediated communication on chat lines and newsgroups with drama classes where "someone throws out an idea, and someone picks up that idea and develops it for a while. Then someone stops and changes the situation". People respond to what is onscreen rather then follow a conversation. The difference disappears.

Steve argues that in terms of depth, people's discussions in chat lines and newsgroups are for the most part mindless: "you certainly would hope that people were advanced enough that an expression of thought or intellectual idea would take more than, say, eleven words. Well I tested this with a friend of mine one night on a chat line: I told my friend that once we saw a sentence with eleven words in it we would quit. We waited for a very, very, long time". Morin agrees that "there's no intellectual debate, just yelling at each other, saying things that they would not dare say face-to-face". Additionally, Richard emphasizes that people should not forget that they "are paying to talk to somebody". Participants are also not building virtual communities as images of real physical communities. There is no ties or bonding commitments, no shared values, rather people hear only what they want to hear without having to put up with things that they find bothersome. The search for meaning can only occur through exploring the surfaces. This is

postmodern computer mediated knowledge. A knowledge that is navigated, explored by surfing or browsing.

Postmodernism undermines the epistemologies of depth that stood behind traditional representations: the manifest does not refer to the latent, and existence does not refer back to essence. The only objects that can represent this world of surface are precisely those that challenge representation, that is the computer mediated interface. Virtual communities and virtual identities are postmodern to the extent that they represent nothing but themselves. Virtual identities, for example, are not representing the real person but the personae or characters played by that person. Invented or false virtual identities are not representations of real life identities. Virtual actions are the persona's actions, not the person's own actions. Computer mediated communication and interaction offer the possibility of inventing models of reality which contest the distinction between the real and virtual.

Jean Baudrillard (1988) speaks of the end of the social and the end of history, a new situation in which conservative and liberal perspectives have lost their explicative power. He sees electronic communication as part of an hyperrealistic illusion, a technologically stimulated flight from the breakdown of human communities. People no longer have a sense of connection between their affairs and the destiny of humanity.

Similarly, Kroker and Weinstein believe that the virtual communities of electronic networking have a charismatic appeal, that is individuals are drawn to them, because "we are re-entering the burning atmosphere of the lonely crowd" (1994:39). This is the crowd that is logged on terminal screens willing themselves to become part of a virtual network, while alone with the computer interface. A technologically generated community exists as a simulated world for hiding loneliness. The appeal of electronic networking operates in inverse relation to the disconnectedness of people from each other and from their own bodies. The ideological perspective of a computer mediated culture is electronic mediation at the top and physical disconnection from below (Kroker and Weinstein, 1994:39). In

individuals' searches for connection and conviviality they find in computer mediated interaction a substitute and simulation: a virtual community and a virtual identity.

Kroker and Weinstein see the 1990's emerge as a era of cultural recline: "a time for cynical romanticism and cold love, where the body disappears into a virtual imaging system" (1994:2). Kroker and Weinstein describe the present age, not as self-discovery of multiplicity and fuzzy thinking, but as one of interminable recline. Reclining is the strategy of declining life. People recline and indulge: "for invalid life, culture is reduced to a standing reserve of prosthetic devices" (Kroker and Weinstein, 1994:44). Recline is about surrendering to technologically mediated virtual identities and virtual lifestyle enclaves: "recline is expressed in the will to be incorporated by technologically produced environments" (1994:46). The principal values of a culture of recline are safety and convenience as an expression of the wish to be replaced. Reclining life is a product of the social inequalities and bodily limits that necessitate to be rescued by a technology that provides safer bodies and better minds: physical bodies have diseases and visual stereotypes and the computer can have better memory and contain more information than the human brain. This makes the body weak and the computer very appealing. The weak body and the limited mind are therefore replaced, to be better maintained, by prosthetic devices.

To recline is to give up on the future: there is no need to try to solve real world issues and social injustices; rather people seek comfort in being replaced by computer mediated communities and identities. People cannot believe in a community of safer bodies; even as they continue to pursue the idea in computer mediated networks, cynically hoping that a technological miracle will save everything. As Kroker and Weinstein point out, the hope is cynical because it is not an expression of a real attempt at advancing social justice, but an expression of reclining life. Reclining is not about searching for solutions to social inequalities but about coping with these inequalities in a technological compromise that provides safety and convenience (1994:44). Recline is a series of negations: no truth, no

consequences, no body, no commitment, no disease, no contact. The wish to be replaced reflexively advances the notion that every technological development is another stage in human replacement, based on a nostalgic belief that technology serves the individual and his body. Computer mediated recline is really about "the disappearing of reality into a virtual world of technological automata and non-space" (1994:49). That is the disappearance of reality into an illusion of reality.

In the same way that the virtual reality works to decenter conventional humanist notions of an unproblematic reading of the real, it also posits a vision of post-human existence where technology and human are understood in contiguous rather than oppositional terms. The idea of post-human is central to Kroker and Weinstein's theory of postmodernism in relation to computer mediated communication. A post-human concept refers to the stage where we exist "in the interim between the human and its extinction or replacement that makes us post-human, but not yet unhuman" (1994:42). Kroker and Weinstein observe that the age of the human was dominated by the ideological objective of realizing one or another conception of human essence. While the post-human age is bleakly ruled by the, mostly unconscious, wish to replace the human (1994:42). At a superficial level, this means that instead of talking with real people participants chose to communicate through the computer interface which replaces the human. Instead of real life entertainment people chose online entertainment; contact with humans is replaced by the machine. Instead of real sex, there is cybersex. Instead of being yourself and your own sex you can play various characters some of which allow you to be a different virtual sex. Again the computer interface seems to eliminate the need for human contact. Instead of real life support individuals get online support.

At a deeper level, however, Kroker and Weinstein see the wish to be replaced as being part of the quest for purification of the societal community: sex without disease, social relations without social stereotypes. The body becomes virtualized in order to achieve sexual cleansing, ethnic cleansing, social cleansing. This electronic search for

purity exhibits a certain nostalgia for the future and the intention of making good of the losses of the real world.

Of course not everyone wishes or needs to be replaced, or not to the same degree. The postmodern wish to be replaced speaks of a desire of technological transcendence of modernist social and individual inequalities and injustices, and general dissatisfaction with the world. Despite that, and perhaps because people realize that social injustices and inequalities are not alleviated with computer mediated communication, most people continue to chose face-to-face relations as their essential means of interaction.

Postmodern Identity and Community

Turkle (1995) asserts that people are embracing McLuhan's notion that computers may extend an individual's physical presence: when people interact in real time video links and shared virtual conferences; and when they use computer mediated communication for sexual encounters. But the context of a culture of simulation departs from McLuhan's ideas in that people become increasingly comfortable with substituting representation of reality for the real. People join virtual lifestyle enclaves that exist among people communicating on computer networks. In addition, people have multiple virtual identities offering the opportunity of self-expression.

Computer mediated communication illustrates postmodern theory specially with regards to construction and reconstructions of identity. Computer mediated communication and interaction provides virtual places where the self is multiple and constructed by language. As Turkle argues, through computer mediated communication and interaction the essence of the self is not unitary nor are its avatars stable identities: "what most characterizes the model of a flexible self is that the lines of communication between its various aspects are open. The open communication encourages an attitude of respect for the many within us and the many within others"(1995:267). A fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity. As individuals sense inner diversity they

come to know their limitations. They apparently understand that they do not and cannot know the outside world and themselves completely. But for most participants, this understanding of instability of identities and flexibility between different identities does not permeate real life.

In postmodern virtual reality participants self-create, and in this sense the computer mediated interaction allows experiences of postmodern selves. The context of computer mediated communication and interaction is postmodern with its parallel narratives in MUD rooms, or chat lines authored by their players logged on from different places; the author is displaced and distributed. As Turkle suggests, traditional ideas about identity are bound by a notion of authenticity that virtual experiences actively subvert. Each player on a MUD game can create many characters, participants in chat lines can use handles to create virtual personae, and individuals can have their identities distributed in their homepages. The self is not only decentered but multiple without limitations, where one can easily retire or destroy their character or handle and simply start a new life with another. Virtual personae are never used up, they can be recreated, reassigned and reconstructed with a number of different names and under different user accounts. People do not have to be who they are in real life. Age, sex, gender, sexual preference, life circumstances, everything one claims can be true or invented: "the boundary maintaining images of base and superstructure, public and private, material and ideal never seemed more feeble" (Haraway, 1991:165).

For Turkle, multiple identities provide an unparalleled opportunity to acquire a postmodern understanding of the self and society. My data, however, indicates that in terms of the deconstruction of subjectivity this understanding is limited to the virtual interaction and, in most cases, it does not merge with participants' real lives. Despite the multiplicity and possibility of reconstituting the self, the manifestation of online persona is not contributing to a reconsideration of traditional, unitary notions of the self. For one thing participants do not use the networks to discover their multiple selves. And the few who do use them to express repressed aspects of themselves, do not carry their online experiences

into their real lives. Some participants, as it will be evident in chapter four, may be more open in terms of expressing their selves more freely, like Carolina who is more flirty online; or Tony who is more open in terms of talking about his real life with his online friends. But Carolina is not more flirty in real life, and Tony is not more open in talking about his life to his real life friends face-to-face. He actually prefers to keep his virtual identity and his real life identity separate. Computer mediated communication is not an instrument of self-knowledge. The self may be decentered but it offers no slippage (Turkle, 1995) thereby it offers neither the opportunity for self-knowledge nor the possibility of thinking about postmodernism. Most of those I talked with are living fulfilling intense lives within a modernist ethics of individualistic self-achievement.

In opposition to the liberating thesis, Kroker and Weinstein posit the replacement of the human into a series of technological illusions. Participating in computer mediated communication is an expression of the wish to be replaced where the body is reduced to a "digital servomechanism". Individual subjectivity, contrary to being celebrated, it "crashes as it swiftly merges with an information economy of data bytes", where "the mind is filtered by organs without a body, and the body is suspended in the illusion that digital reality maximizes the zone of freedom (misplaced virtual facticity)" (1994:75).

Beyond the negative implications, the wish to be replaced or disappear may, in fact, be the reason for the interaction where participants find satisfaction in disappearing into data bytes. Some participants use the computer precisely to disappear. Richard, for example, uses computer mediated communication to be incognito. He is trying to disappear into computer mediated interaction in order not to have to deal with real life people and situations. The wish to be replaced by the computer interface may, on occasion, lead to temporary relief of incompleteness, allowing the body and mind to be presented as an other to participants themselves and to others. Carolina, for example, is more flirty and more open when using her virtual identities or when she is playing her virtual characters.

Computer mediated communication changes aspects of the subject: on one hand, the computer interface depersonalizes text thereby removing traces of individuality; and on the other hand it offers participants the opportunity to express aspects of their individuality. Computer mediated communication reduces individuality to written descriptions leaving out the physical body. Richard may express his opinions but through the computer interface his opinions have no trace of individuality because they have become depersonalized. This, of course, is the same expression of individuality found in a survey research. Thinking of expressing individuality in the context of a newsgroup or a chat line discussions is analogous to forgetting that a telephone conversation only conveys the illusion of presence. The virtual environment only conveys the illusion of individuality. The mere fact that participants use handles rather than their real life names implies that perhaps they do want to lose their individuality. Disembodied content is loss of individuality. What gives people their individuality is their identity; a virtual identity leads to virtual individuality.

Other participants use interactive networks as an opportunity to express their individuality either in terms of expressing repressed aspects of their selves, or as an extension of their real life selves. The handles that Carolina chose allowed her to be aspects of herself that were repressed by lifestyle conventions. What she could not be in real life, she became in computer mediated networks. On these networks she met her current fiancé, whom she later met face-to-face. Her expression of individuality online extended to her real life. Expression of such forms of individuality requires that individuals actively participate in ongoing discussions and interaction. For most participants expression of individuality online is limited to the choice of networks they frequent, the characters they create, the handles they choose. And, of course, all participants express their individuality by merely being online.

A contradiction of computer mediated postmodern knowledge is that it promises a new level of self constitution, one beyond the rigidities and restraints of fixed identities, but also makes possible the subordination of the individual to manipulative practices. Carolina

changed her handle from "Felicia" to "Prairie Wind" because with Felicia she was constantly pasted with sex messages. With the handle Felicia she identified herself as a woman, leading to the stereotypical responses by other participants. Prairie Wind is a more generic handle and with this handle she did not have any problems. In denying the real body participants are subordinating aspects of their real selves to the technology. Female participants are being manipulated into accepting and adhering to oppressive forms of virtual interaction. To change a female handle to a generic handle in order to avoid being harrassed is equivalent to blaming the victim for the harrassment. The responsibility for the harrassment is placed on the choice of handles rather than on those who actively harass. Individuals are replacing their organic body by the virtual body, being manipulated into an ideology of facilitation, of convenience and safety.

Virtual communities, in chat lines, MUD games, newsgroups, and email illustrate postmodernism to the extent that they are not bound by physical time and space. They also offer the experience of multiplicity since any participant can subscribe to a variety of these communities. Individuals can access their virtual communities at any time without having to physically dislocate themselves. Additionally, these virtual communities offer a virtual environment where social and physical bodily cues and expressions are not present. However, despite the absence of the physical body, the context and the content of the interaction is guided by many of the assumptions of face-to-face communication: in people's self descriptions, in the roles they play, in the handles they create, in their choice of networks.

Participants, as will be shown in chapter three, use the metaphor of community but they realize that a community of mutual support or a community of similar interests are really lifestyle enclaves and therefore are based on individualistic assumptions that do not lead to commitment to a shared past or future. Computer mediated communication does not offer much communitarianism, thus it does not provide the grounding for self conduct, or for the resolution of existing social problems. As Kroker and Weinstein suggest: our

technological future has never been more transparent: alt.bondage, alt.sex, alt.politics, alt.bosnia, alt.vacantbeach , alt.loneliness, alt.death, where "we flip into the hyper-role of lurkers wandering through the virtual rooms of the city on the digital hill" (1994:77). These, and many more, are the electronic communities being formed through computer mediated communication.

To lurk, browse, or surf can hardly be considered communitarian activities. Of course they are not, they are individual activities based on individual desires and needs. As Kroker and Weinstein argue, the combination of television, telephones, and computer produces graded refinement of mediated contact, allowing participants increased options for adjusting the distance of their relationships. Through the use of profiles, databanks, newsgroups, chat lines individuals are able to connect with exactly those who give them the most satisfaction, with whom they share interests, opinions, projects, and sexual preferences, and for whom they have need. Those connected can not only find information but access to other individuals finding the ones best suited for their lifestyle enclaves. Electronic networks are not fostering a sense of community but highlighting individualistic tendencies. Participants can mold their community to their own desires. They can choose with whom to communicate and to what communities they subscribe because there is no centering or grounding of such decisions. What holds these communities together is not a common vision or values but an individual instrumental need or desire for information and communication. Once this instrumental need is satisfied there is no further commitment to the interaction within the electronic enclave. For most participants these enclaves are not socially liberating, nor do they wish them to be.

Virtual Knowledge

Turkle (1995) maintains that as the emergent culture of simulation becomes increasingly associated with negotionational and nonhierarchical ways of thinking, it has made a place for people with a wide range of cognitive and emotional styles. In particular,

she claims that women have come to feel that computers are more culturally acceptable. Yet in my research there were only four women who responded to my request for participation; while there were nineteen men who responded to my request. If computer mediated communication were more culturally acceptable for women, then one would expect that more women would take the opportunity to go online, and to talk about their experiences. More importantly, the women whom I talked to are connected because of instrumental reasons of communication and access to information, not because the mediated interaction provides the opportunity to be liberated. Instead of liberation, they argue precisely the opposite: that mediated interaction is based on the same assumptions as face-to-face interaction. To have a female handle leads to stereotypical online reactions from other users, and women deliberately choose handles that are neutral, or they pretend to be men, or they identify themselves as someone's girl friend in order not to be harassed. Although the values encouraged may be soft, and feminine, allowing for different perspectives, most of those who communicate and interact online are male. Additionally, the content and structure of computer mediated communication are based on male dominated modernist assumptions for interaction.

As Turkle points out, computer mediated communication and the connections it facilitates replace the idea that social relations are based on logical understandings, and emphasize experience as the basis for learning. In terms of community and identity, computer mediated communication and interaction postulates the emergence of social relations from fuzzy processes, where opening the box does not reveal crisply defined mechanisms that critics can isolate for the deliverance of truth. This is consistent with a widespread criticism of traditional Western philosophy. Although Western thought and culture have traditionally presented consistency and coherence as natural, feelings of fragmentation characterize postmodern life. Theories (Turkle, 1995, Haraway, 1991) that speak of the experience of a divided self have a familiar resonance.

However, a divided multiple self is not inherently a liberated self. Contrasting with any possibility for liberation, Kroker and Weinstein assert that virtual selves are a replacement of real life selves. In accordance to postmodern theory, the 1990's are typified by the decline of the importance of hard ideologies of capitalism and communism and by the ascendancy of the soft ideology of computer mediated communication. This soft ideology is described by Kroker and Weinstein, not as the feminine ideology of negotiation and interdependence, but of the "will to virtuality" as the common language of the information elites of today's society. Kroker and Weinstein argue that the soft ideology of computer mediated communication is premised on three key illusions: the illusion of interactivity, knowledge, and expanded choice (1994:23).

Interactivity is an illusion because computer mediated interaction is the opposite of social relationships. As many participants pointed out if people wanted interaction they would search out real people, not the computer screen. Richard, for example, argues that Net communication is actually less social. Some participants go online precisely because they do not have to be social in the real sense of the word. Additionally, those who spend enormous amounts of time are not necessarily expanding their interactive network. Some interact with a small group of online participants, such as in a MUD game that can have as little as five players. Participating or browsing the newsgroups or the Web is not interactive, not with people. The act of surfing may be interactive in that there are posts and replies and hypertext links from site to site, but it is not real time and space interactivity, nor is it with people. The interaction is within the different computer applications: hypertexting from page to page or site to site, or writing a post or a reply. Email is also not interactive in the social sense. Rather it functions as a replacement for face-to-face contact and actual physical interaction.

Furthermore, most participants that I interviewed did not actively participate in online interaction, rather they merely browsed or surfed the networks for information or as entertainment. Whether people go online because they do not have the social skills for real

life social situations, as Carolina points out; or they participate, browse, or surf the newsgroups, as most participants do, there is no physical social interaction. On the contrary, as Carlos points out, being online actually decreases social interaction; thus Carlos spends less time with his family, goes out to public places less often then when he was not online. Steve also finds the Net a "sink hole of time", with little fruitful interaction. When he is online he is alone in front of the computer screen, there is no other presence, just the computer. Additionally, people do not become more social as a result of online activities. The only interaction is with the keyboard. The illusion of interactivity is also, no doubt, partly due to the metaphors used to describe online activity. Terms such as play, browse, surf, chat, and network, all contribute to thinking about computer mediated communication as highly interactive.

The second illusion is that of knowledge created by the hyped notion that computer technology delivers individuals to an expanded range of human awareness. Contrary to notions of self-knowledge and discovery, computer mediated knowledge is reduced to information and "consciousness is striped of its lived connection to history, judgment and experience" resulting in the illusion of an expanded knowledge society whereas the reality is virtual knowledge (Kroker and Weinstein 1994:24).

The illusion of knowledge occurs with regards to self-knowledge and with regards to access to and content of knowledge. Turkle claims that experimenting with different virtual identities leads to self-knowledge and new forms of self-mastery. However, this does not consistently happen, and if it occurs at all it does not inherently translate into real life ways of living and knowing. Participants may pretend to be of the opposite sex to satisfy their curiosity of what it is like to be "hit on', but once this discovery is made these people are not likely to change their conduct, or their patterns of meaning about the real world, there is no slippage. In fact, most participants argue that computer mediated communication allows for the opportunity to be and say things that would not be acceptable or possible in real life, such as pretending to be of the opposite sex. These individuals use

electronic networks not because it allows them to learn what it is like to be of a different sex in order to alter their perceptions or their behavior but as an experience of the unreal, the interesting, the different. Participants do not use the networks in order to change their views or acquire different views of existing social relations. Certainly, to change behavior or to acquire new ways of thinking about the world did not figured prominently in participants' narratives about their reasons for using computer mediated communication.

Regarding content of knowledge, it is clear that not all available content is equally valid, useful and relevant; in terms of access there is only a small percentage of the population that has access to knowledge networking. It is true that those who have access to computer networks can get all kinds of information on any topic; information, however, is not necessarily knowledge. In addition, to be able to access the information is not equivalent to knowing the information. Knowledge simply becomes networking the databases. All users need to know is how to access the information. In fact, knowledge is reduced not expanded. Individuals do not need to actually know anything, as long as they can access it online. Human awareness is also not increased, individuals may have access to a variety of different view points, but the choice of what networks to pick and who to interact with is determined by individuals' own interests and view points; not by an inherent interest in acquiring a variety of different ways of knowing the world, in order to make that world a place with less social injustices. In terms of content of computerized knowledge, some participants have pointed out that content on publicly accessible databanks, such as newsgroups and chat lines "sinks to the lowest common denominator" where people have mindless discussions. The quantity of available information says absolutely nothing about its quality or substance. But it matters less what people discuss then that they are being part of the apparent knowledge networking.

With computer mediated communication there is, in fact, a diffusion of knowledge and substance. Surfing and browsing, playing different characters and selves, being part of multiple electronic lifestyle enclaves may offer an experience of knowing a virtual world of

meaning. But because there is no slippage participants' computer mediated experiences tend to remain in the virtual realm, consequently all virtual networks - chat lines, newsgroups, MUD games, the Web - do not function as instruments of liberation.

The final illusion of the ideology of computer mediated communication, is that of expanded choice (Kroker and Weinstein, 1994:24). Multiple channels, multiple newsgroups, multiple identities, multiple lifestyle enclaves, all information available instantly through the computer interface. Computer networks offer everything at once at any time. However, they offer a choice without context, why choose one chat line over another, or an identity over another? Having multiple choices does not necessarily mean our range of possible conduct is expanded. People may have the choice of thousands of different chat channels, or thousands of newsgroups on all possible topics, but this will only lead to a greater amount of time spent searching for what participants really want or think they need. The more choices they have the less likely they are to think about why they chose one thing over another; their choices become arbitrary. Within a veneer of multiple choices there is the reality of growing desensitization. Any one choice loses its substantive importance. What is important is not what people are surfing for in terms of content but that they keep surfing.

The virtual soft ideology is a series of ruling myths about the efficiency and inevitability of computer mediated experiences. This clearly undermines sociology since society is the missing matter of virtual relations. As Kroker and Weinstein suggest in the electronic networks history and social trends can be randomly retrieved, instantly repooled, and globally distributed in media markets for selected population targets. Computer mediated communication creates a processed culture that codes its past like a vast archival database. The archived past is at any time resequenced as the present.

Computer mediated communication undoubtedly offers contemporary sites for contesting the notion of the real where the networked interactions are compelling relationships that are entirely dependent on individuals' online self-presentation. In

computer mediated communication, groups of users are creating virtual personae who live in diverse virtual lifestyle enclaves. This formation of multiple identities and multiple communities undermines any notion of real and unitary assumptions. As Turkle points out: "In simulated science experiments, virtual chemicals are poured from virtual beakers, and virtual light bounces off virtual walls. In financial transactions virtual money changes hands. In film and photography, realistic-looking images depict scenes that never took place between people who never met" (1995:267). The notion of the real is, however, always ever present. Most participants are not confused about what is real. They know that there is a difference between online reality and off-line reality; and most keep the two realities separate to the extent that one does not merge into the other beyond instrumental connections.

There are people for whom the Net provides a shelter from whatever it is they think they need shelter from. However, postmodern interaction and communication does not inherently lead to forms of self-knowledge that permeate individual's real lives allowing them to find a sense of meaning and connection with others. On the contrary, it can produce the disappearance and eventual replacement of physical bodies into a series of technological illusions of meaning and connection.

Conclusion

Turkle suggests that participants in electronic networks are using life on the screen to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about relationships, sexuality, politics, and identity. This apparent comfort is disappearing in a tension between two aspects of how computers influence contemporary culture and society. On an individual level, computers are able to facilitate pluralism in styles of use. They offer different things to different people. On a larger scale, however, computers offer an experience that generates a postmodern aesthetic that in the language of its theorists, increasingly claims the cultural privilege formerly assumed by modernism. Computer mediated communication is a

precious resource for learning and self-development (1995: 267). But people are not really succeeding in learning anything beyond their immediate instrumentally oriented tasks.

Computer mediated communication is postmodern because its language is everywhere and nowhere, always and never, it is material and immaterial. Participants' virtual identities are experienced as a virtual other person. Computer mediated lifestyle enclaves and virtual identities illustrate postmodernism because they offer multiplicity and the experience of the virtual. But interaction and forms of communication are guided by patriarchal principles, despite the apparent and desired technological liberation. Experiences in these networks are not leading to slippage, therefore people are not really using the networks to think through anything, but as instruments of communication and access to information. Participating in computer mediated networking is also an expression of the wish to be replaced. Computer mediated communication is highly convenient, no restrictions of space or time; and safe to the physical body: no human contact only the computer interface. Individuals do not want to be disturbed by real life people who produce a society of diseases and injustices. The computer interface makes it easier for those connected to ignore real life problems.

Participation in computer mediated communication is not only not leading to individuals becoming more connected, but it is disconnecting them from each other's minds and bodies. Individuals do not primarily connect electronically to form a community or to discover their many selves, thereby they are not thinking through contemporary knowledge, and participating in the networks is not leading to new, much less improved ways of knowing and patterns of meaning. This is why computer mediated communication and its networks cannot lead to the alleviation of social inequalities and injustices. Turkle envisions participation in computer mediated communication as providing the possibility of acquiring liberating ways of knowing and living. However, this vision proves to be highly optimistic. The reality of the state of postmodern knowledge is more accurately captured in Kroker and Weinstein's assessment that computer mediated lifestyle enclaves and virtual

identities offer only illusions of connection and liberation leading instead to the eventual disappearance of the human body and mind into virtual form. Within a computer mediated postmodern context there are mainly hyperreal illusions.

In participating in computer mediated networks, Turkle sees the wish to be liberated while Kroker and Weinstein see the expression of the wish to be replaced. Whether one is optimistic or pessimistic about computer mediated potential for social liberation and connections, my data clearly indicates that Bellah et al.'s problems of community within an ethics of individualism remain relevant and unresolved in postmodern electronic mediation. In chapter five the analysis focuses on how electronic enclaves and identities, and the knowledge they produce, can be understood within Borgmann's framework of "hypermodernism" and "postmodern realism". Borgmann presents an assessment of the postmodern condition that emphasizes Bellah et al.'s problems related to community, proposing a computer mediated politics and ethics that promote Turkle's liberating ways of knowing, but recognize Kroker and Weinstein's replacement fears.

Chapter 3

Patterns of Net Use: Lifestyle Enclaves

Introduction

Metaphors of community are evident in the everyday discourse of the individuals who use computer mediated communication. Those who communicate through email messages, participate in discussions on newsgroups or private lists, use the Web, and interact in real time chat lines and games, describe electronic formations in terms of their notions about physical communities. Implicit in their metaphors are assumptions about the nature of the connections they are making. In this chapter, I examine these assumptions in the participants' descriptions of their beliefs about what a computer mediated community is or might be.

The use of the community metaphor by those who use the electronic networks to describe social aspects of their communication is quite ambiguous. Community may refer to "a community of ideas", or "a community in the mind", or networks of virtual strangers exchanging ideas and information, or virtual friends debating ideas on gender-bending their online persona. A variety of groups such as email users, hackers, newsgroups and private lists subscribers, and role-playing enthusiasts have all been designated virtual communities. This is, in part, based on the users' assumption that being online is inherently a social activity. In addition, the notion of electronic sites invokes the illusion of place where people "meet". This vocabulary created and imposed by those who build the technology helps to make the community metaphor appear self-evident. On the Net, however, membership in a group is a matter of subscribing to a newsgroup, or a private list, or logging on to a chat line or Web page from which the user may unsubscribe or disengage with little or no consequence. Individuals form their own connections merely by choosing from available search engines which networks or sites they want to read or subscribe to.

Virtual communities are, by definition, dependent on mediated interaction and on the ability to share information instantaneously across time and distance. This ability to communicate and interact through the computer interface disperses and simulates gathering spaces by allowing individuals to "be" at an indefinite number of places at the same time while their body is in front of the computer screen. In addition, users' participation in online interaction, and the connections they make may be transitory, lasting only a few moments or a few days depending on their interests and needs. Participants' connections can also be unorganized and uncrystalized, with individuals subscribing to a variety of networks with no apparent coherent structure beyond the users' private wishes and desires. Therefore, the question that must be asked is this: in the almost entirely amorphous and ephemeral world of the Net, how does a community maintain existence? The central tenant of my analysis is that computer mediated communication does not lead primarily to the formation of community; rather, electronic networks tend to connect individuals in a way that fosters the emergence of new "lifestyle enclaves", and extends existing ones.

Community and Lifestyle Enclaves

Community is a term used loosely by today's society. Bellah et al. (1985) use the term in a strong sense of community defined as a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so it is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past. The practices of commitment are shared activities that are not undertaken as a means to an end but are ethically good in themselves. A community is constituted by such practices.

Tradition and commitment define the normative life of the community (Bellah et al. 1985).

Bellah et al. use the term lifestyle enclave in contrast to the concept of community. A lifestyle enclave is formed by people who share some feature of private life. Members of a lifestyle enclave express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities which often serve to differentiate them sharply from those with other lifestyles. They are not interdependent, do not act together politically, and do not share a history. Lifestyle enclaves are defined by the belief that the individual is the primary reality whereas society is a derived, artificial construct.

This view is shared by utilitarian and expressive individualism, as specified by Bellah et al. (1985). Utilitarian individualism takes as given certain basic human appetites and needs and sees life as an effort by individuals to maximize their self-interest relative to these given ends. Utilitarian individualism views society as arising from a contract that individuals enter into only in order to advance their self-interest. This form of individualism has a certain affinity to a basically economic understanding of human existence. Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized. This core, though unique, is not necessarily alien to other persons or to nature. Under certain conditions, it is possible through intuitive feeling to merge with other persons, with nature, or with the cosmos as a whole.

Lifestyle enclaves are based on these forms of individualism. In electronic connections, one can clearly see the dominance of utilitarian and expressive individualism as modes of character and cultural interaction, and specially the delicate balance between them and their mutual dependence. The drive toward independence only makes sense where individuals can also find a context to express their deepest feelings and desires. Electronic, fragile communities are put together to meet the utilitarian and

expressive needs of individuals, with only a peripheral survival of tradition, commitment, and community.

Lifestyle enclaves are linked to the ability to find others who reflect and affirm one's selfhood. These others may provide an appropriate form of collective support in an otherwise individualizing society. The symbols of lifestyle enclaves define people, however marginally, as distinct from others, and thus having an identity of their own. In a period when rarely "few of us find a sense of who we are in public participation as citizens, the lifestyle enclave, fragile and shallow though it often is, fulfills that function for us all" (Bellah et al. 1985:75).

In light of Bellah et al.'s conceptions of community and lifestyle enclaves, to what extent can electronic formations be more than lifestyle enclaves? Differently stated, if electronic communities are lifestyle enclaves, do they affirm Bellah et al.'s pejorative assessment? Throughout my interviews and online observations, individuals chose to become connected primarily to fulfill their own private needs in terms of personal communication, or as entertainment, or access to information. Most of those I talked with did not perceive mediated communication as leading to the emergence of communities, nor did they use it for such purpose. Even as respondents speak in a metaphor of community, what they describe is not a community as conceptualized by Bellah et al; rather their beliefs about the connections they are making are more appropriately associated with the concept of lifestyle enclaves.

ELECTRONIC CONNECTIONS

Me at the Expense of Us: Morin

Morin, a twenty-nine-year-old social worker, who uses email regularly and occasionally browses some newsgroups and the Web, is quite certain that his online connections do not form a community of any kind. Morin does not see how the networks

he uses could form a community since "there is little shared experiences and there's no real sense of common purpose". For Morin, without some shared experiences and aims there can be no ties or "bonds" with which to maintain a sense of community on the Net: "if I don't like what those people are saying I can easily act as though they don't exist, bounce off that Web site, unsubscribe to that newsgroup". In addition, Morin points out that electronic networks do not build real communities because "you don't have to put up with what you don't want to". This allows him to "avoid others" who may not share his views and "hear only what I want to hear".

For Morin, the greatest positive characteristic of computer mediated communication is that it allows individuals to communicate with others across vast distances instantly. But he suggests that, if people were to communicate exclusively through the Net they would develop "parity communities" and "caricature relationships". Mediated communication is "neat" and the technology is "wizzy", but Morin adds that he really has "no use for it, but I enjoy it". He sees the newsgroups and email as an efficient tool for communicating and to get information, but "there's nothing on there you could not get by phone or letters, it would only take longer and be more trouble to get". Morin does not see himself as part of any specific Net community, or the Net community in general, for him "going down to my favorite pub with my buddies" is more important than interacting with his virtual connections. But as Morin sees it, even interaction in a pub as a social activity does not lead to the emergence of community, it is a reflection of a lifestyle.

Unequivocally arguing that computer mediated communication does not lead to the formation of communities on any networks, Morin describes Net interaction and being connected as the most recent manifestation, or the latest symptom of a "western individualistic ideology" which focuses on the individual without taking into account the wider social context. Morin observes that in Net interaction the overwhelming tendency is along the lines of "me at the expense of us" where the needs being fulfilled are largely

individual. As Morin puts it: "I get something and have to give nothing to get it". He identifies two levels of needs being met in mediated interaction. At one level there are the practical kinds of needs, which include doing research without having to go to the library, access to databases, and to "speed up what you are already doing". The second level is the socio-psychological which includes such things as "brag value" associated with having an Internet account and an email address. In addition to the brag value, Morin observes that "everyone likes to get email, for me it's very much an ego trip to get lots of messages, I feel special". This implies that there is a certain social value associated with being connected to a computer mediated network. Morin believes that on the Net people's connections are at an individual level not at a community level. In Morin's comments we can see elements of recline in terms of its principle values of convenience and safety.

Community of Ideas: Keith

Similarly, Keith a forty-two-year-old technician who uses email, reads and replies to some newsgroups, and is in the process of developing his own homepage on the Web, does not believe that the emerging electronic connections are forming communities. He describes mediated communication in the first instance, as primarily social. Using the pub metaphor he suggests that being logged on to some interactive networks is "like going out to your favorite pub and seeing the same faces, not a family or community but it's the same crowd, a circle of acquaintances". However, he himself does not use the networks as a "social thing". Interaction mediated by the computer can be considered social to the extent that there are groups of individuals involved in replying and posting messages for their own entertainment. Both Keith and Morin realize that social aspects of communication, mediated or otherwise, or circles of acquaintances, do not inherently lead

to the emergence of communities. The networks are used for transmission of information pertaining mainly to each individual's private interests and lifestyles.

Keith describes the interaction on newsgroups and through email as leading to the formation of a "community of ideas" where individuals align themselves with those participants they agree with, or that "have ideas you find attractive". In addition, he finds that often browsing the Net stimulates his creativity by "getting new things that I don't see in the ordinary everyday media". A community of ideas is not a community in Bellah et al.'s sense. The interaction is based on the exchange of similar ideas but these ideas do not shape the moral and intellectual character of the users with regards to everyday economic, religious, and political practices. Participants are not committed to these ideas as a set of mores by which to live their life. A community of ideas is merely a collection of similar individuals without sharing some history or tradition. Predominantly, Keith finds the Net a valuable tool for communicating and searching for information on computer games and science fiction related subjects.

Community of Interests: Steve

Steve, a thirty-seven-year-old software developer who uses the networks extensively, including newsgroups, chat lines, and the Web, believes that the original bulletin boards could be considered communities to the extent that they were "tight knit, very family-like groups of people". He cites a widely discussed online incident in which the host of a chat forum called Phans Fantasy, "specked"[1] a user for swearing in a particular discussion. The mentioned specking incident provoked a widespread reaction by other participants against the host. Apparently, there was a shared assumption by the participants that this was an adult chat line, and those involved in the discussion saw the

[1] Specking is a technical move, allowed only by the hierarchical authority of the host, which takes users out of the screen interaction. The user may remain "in the room" but can not participate in the ongoing discussion.

host's action as inappropriate and they "rallied and attacked the host". For Steve, this form of collective turning on the host demonstrates how close-knit this group was. Since the incident, however, the group has dissolved: "everyone has since left". Participants in certain networks may become temporary allies based on shared assumptions for interaction. Alliances may form fast, but this does not mean that these alliances are evidence of community building since they can dissolve just as fast as they are formed. Steve admits this when he states that "rarely do you see a room where everybody knows everybody else, that group of close-knit people rarely do they show up anymore".

Steve goes online mainly for professional and business reasons. He is interested in the technology as a business tool: "we do a lot of business online, it gives us an excellent tool for people to get to us with questions or with orders". In addition, "we've been able to distribute beta versions of our products to test groups around the world for feedback". Steve finds the Net an excellent communication and business tool. However, he would prefer face-to-face contact and "actually watch the people use the product" but "sometimes that's not possible and this allows us a good second choice". Besides business, he finds "good technical help" in terms of "solving different problems and market research to try to find what is it that people are looking or asking for". The Net offers a network support for his business. These networks of support are not leading to the formation of communities since individuals link up in order to meet their own private, and commercial needs. Computer mediated communication becomes instrumental, to the extent that it is a means of obtaining the information users want or need.

Doug

Similarly, Doug a twenty-year-old student, designer and programmer who uses chat lines, email, newsgroups, and the Web, believes that some original networks and

bulletin boards were communities to the extent that "you could get to know everybody and everybody was participating not just lurking". However, he believes that there has been some sense community loss in the last few years because "the number of people connected in any one group is too large". He sees the increased number of people in each group as impeding the development of online communities. Doug believes that some networks can recapture the sense of community if "only certain agents are allowed to post to the group". He points out that "a lot of interesting places are going to close down from public access because there's too many people" who participate, making the group too large to be able to "get to know all these people in any kind of meaningful way". He, therefore, does not believe that the networks he currently frequents can be a community. For Doug, the essential requirements for community building online are active participation in the ongoing interaction, in terms of regularly contributing to postings, and a small number of members or users in each group.

This implies restricting access to a few participants in private, invitation-only forums and lists. Doug is advocating a kind of community that excludes those who in his own words are "ignorant people coming into the Net that have no sense of Netiquette". Doug's requirements for online community building are, in fact, aspects of electronic enclaves based on similar interests and tastes. Doug's ambivalence in regards to the potential for online community building is clear: originally there was a sense of community, currently that sense of community has been lost, but the networks could regain a sense of community if his criteria were met, which he hopes will be the case with restricting access to the general public.

Doug interacts online because "it's the only place I can find to talk to people about the music I'm interested in". He is interested in "underground" music that apparently lacks exposure in the traditional media. He sees the Net as a "valuable place for meeting people that have the same interests". Doug agrees with Keith that on the Net "regardless of what you think, there's somebody out there who agrees with you". For

both Doug and Keith, the Net provides for the opportunity to "stop crying in the wilderness". Net discussion and interaction allows them to find others with the same interests and views; presumably these others are not as easy to find through traditional forms of communication. Computer mediated communication brings together those with similar interests providing an opportunity, to a limited extent, for some participants to feel less isolated.

Ed

Ed, a twenty-six-year-old television producer and programmer, agrees with the idea that the Net offers the possibility of finding others who have the same interests, whom it would not be so easy to find in real life. Ed is a "military brat" or a son of a military official, and sees the newsgroup on the subject as establishing a "national community" of military brats. Because the brats are a geographically dispersed group, it would be physically impossible to have a common gathering place, therefore, through the newsgroup it becomes possible to find traces of community. The group's intention is "to connect up with old friends, share similar stories, like having no home". Ed finds that this group offers "something that I can personally identify with". Beyond this sense of identification, Ed wants to use the group to develop a documentary or a narrative fiction, "setting up questions and interviews, or try to access stories that I can bring in and script, and then maybe actors to act it out".

Ed does not frequently reply or post information on the Net, "I'm a sort of voyeur reading over other people's stuff as opposed to participating". He spends two hours a day online and feels that he is not part of the "Net community". For Ed a community becomes established to the extent that there are users who frequently post and reply to messages. Ed is involved in forming a newsgroup for the Alliance of Campus Community Television in Calgary, and argues that this group "has not established any sort of

community yet, because in a community you need users and right now there are only four of us that are on there". He believes that an electronic community can only be maintained if those connected actively and frequently contribute information.

However, he does not agree with the notion of "community standards" which he believes are "out there as a fascist strategy to oppress certain cultural groups". Rather, he speaks of belonging to a variety of different communities: "there can only be a plural sense of the word community, whether it be the community of the arts, the campus community, the virtual community of the army brats, or the male community". Ed's assumptions about his physical communities prompt him to define aspects of electronic formations as communities. However, he states that he has "different values and a different history from others in my communities". In belonging to all these somewhat abstract communities, Ed is running the risk of not belonging to any one community in Bellah et al.'s context of a community of memory. Without some shared values and history there are no practices of commitment that define the patterns of loyalty and obligation of the community. There is no context of meaning that allows participants to connect their aspirations with those of a larger whole, and participants' efforts are contributing to their own individual goals and desires.

Community of Support: Jennifer

Some participants define virtual communities in terms of providing a network of mutual support. Jennifer, a twenty-eight-year-old help-desk consultant (answers telephone inquiries on computer related issues), who uses email regularly and reads a few newsgroups, claims that online communication can be a great source of support. She is a new mother and finds that the Net "gives you a good cross section of parents and parenting issues". She contrasts the kind of support she finds online with reading a book "which is written by a medical professional who may have a different understanding and

bias that normal people don't". Jennifer finds that support through mediated communication is more "real" than reading the book to the extent that those she communicates with "actually have had or are going through the same parenting experiences" and "you get all these ideas on what works and what doesn't".

In addition to support in terms of sharing information , she finds "great comfort in seeing all these other people who have young children pulling you through the night, and you see that there are other people out there going through the same kinds of things". The Net is a convenient and efficient way to access the greatest amounts of information from a variety of different people. At the same time, she attempts to articulate mediated communication in the parenting groups in terms of friendship: "in some ways it is similar to a group of friends you talk to". In her relationship with "virtual friends" she is primarily interested in obtaining personal support in terms of access to perspectives and ideas about "the way things work". Not in specifically developing friendships.

The structural arrangements of the Net allow users to access specific and detailed information: "you can zero in on the specific problem, for example, parents that are feeding their babies". Jennifer appreciates the topical structure of mediated communication, "it's nice that it's all divided by topic so you can easily find what you are interested in". From the vast quantities of information available online participants must assess the quality of the information they receive. Particularly in publicly accessible networks, as opposed to closed list which are based on professional expertise. Participants need to have enough background information to be able to assess the value of the advice they are given or the information being provided. When participants do not have a way to assess the information it becomes "just noise on the line". Jennifer uses "common sense" and tries to cross reference different sources in order to assess the validity of the information she receives from the new parents support group. She may, for example, ask her family doctor, or telephone her mother, or do a search of some journals and books on the subject. As Jennifer points out, the Net is just one source and like with

any other source participants need to make sure the information is valid and of value to their specific needs.

Jennifer believes that some online groups are forming a community, to the extent that participants have a common purpose. She gives as an example the OS2 group "who are strong users and feel strongly that their operating system is the best so they do bend together". As an illustration of "bending together" she states that "if they see a magazine article saying something negative about their system they will petition people to email the magazine editors saying no it is not, that kind of thing". For Jennifer, this constitutes some evidence of community which she describes as a "group of people bending together around this operating system trying to keep it alive".

However, she notes that not all groups behave like the OS2 group. She frequently browses the newsgroup on job postings in Alberta, and has noticed that as the number of people online increases the more difficult it becomes to find relevant posts. She states that "currently, only five postings out of seventy five are for legitimate jobs in Alberta". The majority of posts are irrelevant either because the jobs posted are for outside Alberta, or people's posts have nothing to do with a job opportunity. Consequently, she found it necessary to develop "agents" or "filters", which are programs to filter out unwanted information from the newsgroups and lists she subscribes to. In this way she is able to "ignore whoever I want". She adds: "that's the beauty of it, I don't even have to know that those people exist". In terms of commitment, again "you can hear only what you want to hear", thereby reclining into convenience.

Pat

Pat, a forty-eight-year-old research associate and professor, who uses email extensively and subscribes to a variety of mailing lists and groups, believes that some Net groups convey a tremendous sense of community in terms of mutual support. He reads

and participates regularly in a specific online support group geared towards individuals whose significant others, wife, husband, mother, child, suffer from a mood disorder. Pat believes that the nature and dynamics of this groups speaks of the idea of community: "when I first heard my wife say that she wanted a divorce, that she wanted out, I was very disconcerted. But then when I discovered this list, I realized that just about everybody on this list has heard that kind of talk". Pat finds the mutual support, the challenge, and the critical comments on such a personal issue enormously valuable: "if you say my wife said this, and I'm frightened, chances are that within a couple of hours you have six or seven people coming to you saying 'oh I have experienced the same thing, and this is how I dealt with it'".

Pat believes that these shared experiences are significantly bonding. He argues that many of the same characteristics that individuals benefit from being in an intimate physical kind of support group can develop online: "I sense that, and I believe that I have been able to become more connected to certain other people because I've been able to open up more quickly about some of the things that really concern me". Pat states that the bonds developed in this group are, in large part, due to the fact that the interaction is mediated: "the fact that it's not face-to-face allows people to be more honest, more quickly, about themselves than they would get even in a physical small support group". He believes that the lack of physical recognition allows participants to develop more quick, extensive, and meaningful relationships, than in real life support groups. He believes this is, in part, because of the protective nature of the human condition; specially in terms of personal issues as significant as the well being of those we love or one's own self preservation: "people don't open up to just anybody". Online interaction affords the opportunity to open up more honestly to others because participants are already protected by the computer interface. There is no physical recognition. This clearly highlights the wish to be replaced by the computer interface for safety and convenience. For Pat, however, being online did not make him more open. He is generally an open person,

regardless of whether the interaction is mediated or in person. But he insists that : "the benefits of support can be reaped just as readily and sometimes more so, in mediated interaction".

Pat has extensive experience in leading and participating in physical support groups because of his past pastor ministry work, and is not advocating cyber groups in favor of physical support groups: "there's nothing like a hug and that kind of thing sometimes". Physical contact is, obviously, one of the great benefits of social support that is lacking in online groups. Pat points out that one has to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of computer mediated communication. On one hand, because interaction is disembodied, participants can be more open and honest more quickly; but on the other hand the lack of bodily contact is inevitably indispensable. Pat is explicitly arguing for a "balance" between online and real life relationships: "I haven't stopped sharing some of my concerns with my close friends around me. I say balance, but don't overpass it. The Net has been valuable in terms of support, community building, but add to that the other dimension". The dimension Pat is referring to is the embodied, physical dimension.

There is clearly some form of online solidarity, and bonding in this group, but "these people are used to caring, because of their beliefs and background with the church, and so they care online. Because we have enough experience from real life support groups we bring this online". For Pat caring online draws on his real life experiences.

Pat speaks of this group in terms of community building, however what he describes is not a community developed or capable of developing from shared values and norms. Rather, he describes a group of one hundred geographically dispersed group of individuals who have never met in person and whose bond is based on the fact that they all have a significant other who suffers from a mood disorder. In a way these people do share a limited history, the illness of their significant others, thus the development of significantly bonding relationships online. However, participants might not share similar

political, religious, and economic beliefs necessary for the formation of community. Additionally, their lives might not be interdependent in any other way except in terms of mutual online support. What they share is an aspect of their private life, and themselves.

For Pat personally, computer mediated communication has the significant impact on his behavior in terms of understanding the illness and how to deal with the many issues surrounding it. Additionally, he finds that the online group offers a wealth of information in terms of different perspectives, and practical real life experience as well as theoretical information. Pat recognizes that "this is a sort of elitist kind of situation that only a few people in this world have the opportunity to share about that particular issue at that level of intensity". This situation is elitist to the extent that others who could potentially benefit from online support may not be able to afford it.

Steve also believes that online support groups can be enormously beneficial. Specifically, for people whose illness or disease prevents them from physically enjoying the real world. Steve argues that these people have a legitimate reason for using the Internet "I have met this chap in Texas who had a stroke, and this is his only way out of his apartment". Steve further claims that "up to that point I thought the whole thing was just a bloody waste of bandwidth, but after hearing his comments, I believe that there's a definite value to him". In terms of psychological advice and support, many I interviewed also believe that sometimes just having someone to talk to is a great savior of sanity and savior from loneliness.

This describes an online version of therapeutic networks. These are a collection of individuals who join together as a temporary remedy that can be discarded once their ailment is gone. Once the therapy has performed its function and individuals are again able to deal with the emotional and social problems confronting their lives, the interaction and communication with the group is stopped or significantly reduced. Primary commitment is not to the online group but to the needs of the individual participants in

the group. Physical support groups are not communities as conceptualized here; neither are online support groups, what they are is therapeutic networks that are safe and convenient.

Net Communication as Less Social: Richard

In contrast to Pat and Jennifer, some people emphasize that Net interaction and communication not only does not build community but it is actually "less social". These people use computer mediated communication mainly because by interacting via the computer they do not have to deal with "real people".

Richard, a thirty-three-year-old computer contractor, claims that mediated communication is less social and therefore "less threatening". He identifies himself as a "hermit" who does not want to "waste time on being personable". Online he does not have to behave in a "socially acceptable" manner. Richard does not go online "looking for interaction". he is drawn to the Net environment "because it already matches my personality, I have a hard time with small talk". Richard describes the paradox of cybercafés and the technology's relation to community building: if people go online looking for interaction, "go to a cybercafé, rather than a real life café", then interacting is already by default not interesting: "if you want to go online to meet people, you already don't want to meet people, you basically want to be by yourself". Participants are, of course, physically isolated from each other. For Richard computer mediated communication is just that: communication, not community building. Richard believes that if people want interaction they should mean physical interaction not virtual interaction. The expression "virtual interaction" is itself a paradox in the sense that there is no real physical interaction. For Richard computer mediated communication is in its conception "anti-community". Richard by his own admission does not interact much in real life and believes that the "computer was made for people like me". He believes that

"in today's context the failure of computer types is that they were allowed to keep isolated, like a priesthood, and now they fail in human terms". Even for those who are not socially inclined there is the realization that Net interaction is not the same as human interaction. Rather it really is an expression of the wish to be replaced by the computer interface eliminating the need for human face-to-face interaction.

Community in the Mind: Carolina

Carolina shows some ambiguity about whether the networks she connects to are leading to the formation of virtual communities. Carolina is a twenty-six-ear-old nanny who uses email and occasionally browses newsgroups, spending most of her online time on chat lines and MOOs: "six hours on average daily and on the weekends I can be on there almost twelve hours".

For Carolina, interactive real time chat lines and games, such as Harper's Tale, Arctic Moo, and channels on Hotwired, do offer her some "feelings of community". She describes the interaction there as analogous to "a friend that just walked in the door". She adds that because "you talk to people on there for a year, you recognize them when they log on, and in that sense is definitely a community". She cites a case of a participant in a chat line who "tried to commit suicide online", even though she "knew him online", she never actually met him face-to-face. Nonetheless, she states that she started to cry: "I was so upset, and I got thinking I don't even know this guy and I'm sitting here crying". Her ambiguity continues when she says "but I know so much of his heart, so much from talking that it's just like a real life person". The contradiction in her own words is obvious. Even though they have never met in person, Carolina believes she knows him as he is in real life. For her, virtual relationships are like real life relationships.

Carolina believes that in her favorite MOO channel, Harpers' Tale, there is a sense of community building. This is directly related to the fact that she plays a few

different characters, such as the "queen honcho" and her online son's character. In addition, her real life fiancé plays her husband, the "head of the farm" and some of the other characters. This is a small group of people that interact regularly; this collectively built virtual environment is based on a theme from the novel with the same title.

She tries to articulate her Net interaction in terms of friendship, "in relation to interacting with people you're not involved with in real life, you pretty much consider them a friend". Carolina, however, contradicts herself when she relates why she chose Harper's Tale: "I found it really fascinating, because basically it's like you get to live in your own mind". In addition, she is aware that computer mediated interaction "in some ways gives you a false sense of reality: I find it much more difficult being online now that (her fiancé) and I have actually been together in real life, sometimes I just hate it, I don't want to look at stupid text". Seemingly contradicting herself, in her analysis of her relationship with her fiancé, she states that "one thing I have a problem with now is switching to communicating in real life". For her, the lack of bodily gestures and facial expressions allows her to "say anything I want to him and I don't have to see his reaction". Carolina's ambivalence in trying to articulate the relationship between her online and face-to-face interaction is quite evident. On one hand, she finds it easier to express herself more freely online, but on the other hand, she realizes that she really wants more than just text and the computer interface. And she finds it harder to be her real life self face-to-face.

Insistently, Carolina believes that she is contributing to the "Net community" by answering questions or giving advice on online relationships of which she had a few. Despite the fact that most of these virtual relationships did "not work out", Carolina did eventually get involved in a virtual relationship that did work, and she is suppose to be married in the summer. Meeting her fiancé online is not evidence of community building. Morin appropriately uses the lottery analogy to make the point: "there's so much traffic

that someone is bound to connect". However, that does not mean that the Net is the great new way to meet friends and soul mates, or to generally interact with people.

Community of Frequent Posters: Michael

Michael, a professor who uses email extensively and subscribes to a variety of professional, private mailing lists, suggests that there may be some ways in which mediated communication builds communities. He describes the earlier values of the Net as being "very much scholarly communitarian values, mutual aid without the financial transfer, sort of an implicit social contract". This form of social contract involves individuals asking for advice or help and "someone steps in and gives it, it's not always good advice but they give it, and you feel free to ask for advice or help yourself". Michael compares these early values of electronic communication to the "scholarly values" of academia where there is an implicit assumption of mutual aid: "I've never been in a situation and needing information or advice on an academic matter and rung someone up without them making a real effort to answer and help me". The parallel is not surprising since the Internet started as an academic and military research and communication tool. Michael, however, is skeptical about the permanence of such a social contract, "the corporate business has discovered it [the Net] in the last five or six years, and whenever business discovers things I get nervous, commerce's main objective is to find a way to make a buck".

Michael believes that computer mediated communication can lead to the emergence of community if there are "some shared assumptions of conversation, some shared background information, and some shared perceptions about appropriate ways of mutual interacting". In contrast to Bellah et al. Michael believes that to form a community there do not have to be shared values, or mutual trust, or the same willingness to commit to the community: "you may really dislike everyone on the community but so

long as there are shared mutually acknowledged systems of conventions for interaction, that can cease to be a problem". He himself does not share "a lot of the values that people on the professional ethics lists have. In fact, I strongly disapprove of many of the things that they hold very dear, but we have enough of a shared set of assumptions for conversation to take place". This is very similar to how Goffman (1984) describes face-to-face interaction.

Conversation, however, does not necessarily lead to community building, particularly when the system of conventions is not mutually acknowledged. Michael cites the case of two men who were expelled from a business list for being disruptive. Apparently these individuals disapproved of affirmative action and "they didn't know when to shut up filling the list with endless rumblings on gender issues and it became impossible to discuss anything other than affirmative action and that's not all there is in business ethics, so they were booted out". Michael is identifying the criteria not for building a community, but for appropriate ways of mutual interacting.

Michael believes that on the Net communities are created and unified if its members share the same interests and have a common aim: "sometimes what unifies, creates a community is that they are all aiming towards creating a certain state of affairs in the future, or retaining a certain state of affairs". These people are coming together on a largely random basis, to receive help of various kinds from one another " a very large community of mutual aid, . . . I subscribed in the early eighties to a UNIX newsgroup. I was learning UNIX and this was a great group to post a question and someone would answer it for you". The community metaphor should be taken with caution, what Michael is describing it is not a community as conceptualized by in Bellah et al, but a network of support in the sense of professional advice.

Michael realizes that there are some ways in which electronic formations are not communities. He points out that with regards to group membership there is no way to

know, for example, that participants have stopped subscribing to a list. Messages are sent to the list server before they are put on the list itself, "so that no one knows that you've dropped out [and] that's parallel to dying. I suppose a person can be a member of the community and die and not be noticed" but he realizes that "if no one notices them gone it is not clear how far you want to say that they are members of the community".

Additionally, even if participants notice that someone stopped replying to postings, it is practically impossible to know what happened to that person. Whereas in a physical community there is generally a social network from which members are able to get information on other members. As Doug points out: "in face-to-face you generally know some of their friends, but online you're not really able to tell what happened to them". This speaks of the fact that in online networks participants are only known from their postings, and their virtual interaction and communication. This may reveal nothing about other aspects of their lives, as Michael puts it: "in that sense the physicians' list, for example, is not really a community, although the people that contribute to it very regularly behave as if they were members of a community, they use first names and so on". He recognizes that "you don't have a community when the only interaction between members are each putting postings on the different newsgroups or lists". This kind of interaction creates enclaves of users who post and reply more or less frequently.

Michael's primary reason for being connected is to gather information: "the thing that I find the most valuable is that I have access to electronic databases". These are commercial databases such as the Dialog database from which he uses the Knowledge Index, that contains abstracts on all sociological, psychological, medical, and philosophical literature. In addition to Dialog, Michael also uses the electronic version of the Encyclopedia Britannia, and the available versions of the Oxford English Dictionary. These databases cost money, and only some people can actually afford to access them. Michael states that, "a lot of useful stuff is free, but the really useful stuff you have to pay for. Lots of things can't be done if you don't have the big money, like the big databases,

the dictionaries, the encyclopedias." Membership and access to such groups or lists separates the information-rich from the information-poor.

Community of Similar Thinking: Carlos

Carlos, a forty-six-year-old and senior administrator, shows some ambivalence on whether electronic networks form communities. Carlos logs on to Usenet extremely regularly reading "about three hundred groups and posting to about fifty" in a wide variety of subject areas. He participates on some IRC channels and "spends an awful lot of time surfing the actual Web". I addition to his forty hour work week, Carlos spends "forty to sixty hours a week online".

For Carlos, the Net groups constitute a form of community "to a limited extent", although he agrees with Doug that the sense of community has almost been destroyed over the last few years. Carlos, like Jennifer, puts filters on his incoming information. He finds it necessary to use filters in order "to get rid of all the jerks who come onto the Internet through America On Line and that". Carlos filters out all information regarding "multi-level marketing, or things for a 1-900 phone numbers, or anything posted from America On Line because I've never seen anything intelligent from them". Carlos' way of dealing with the "jerks" online, if they happen to get through his filters, is to "send them email and bomb their site with maybe one hundred gigabites of pages"; or he will "send bombs to their ISP [Internet Service Provider] and cut off their feed for a few weeks". On the Net, the prevailing attitude as Carlos sees it is, "if you're going to come and disturb ours [site, newsgroup], we're going to destroy yours".

In addition to bandwidth waste, unauthorized forwarding of email, calling for someone's expulsion from a network via the "kill file"[2], and suggesting that someone's system administrator should deprive someone of Net access, participants often engage in "flaming"[3] Perhaps named for its inflammatory nature flaming tends to be argumentative, and often has little to do with the original discussion in which it develops. Because of the extremely personal nature of flaming, a cycle containing argumentative exchanges can gain momentum quickly, attracting outside attention to its participants, having the effect of luring some of the observers into the cycle as well, causing the spread of a war. Flame wars can start over such seemingly trivial issues as spelling, grammar, or semantics.

Flaming and flame wars, beyond the distress they cause to individual recipients, can dominate and interfere with the discussion of those not involved in the war, thereby diminishing the utility of the networks in which they take place. Flames are often discouraged because of this, however, they persist and are commonly found in newsgroups oriented toward controversial social issues and debate. The more moderate technical discussion groups have their share as well[4] The relative frequency of flaming, language use violation, bandwidth waste and other forms of personal attacks impedes or, al least, impairs the emergence of online communities. Beyond that, these practices can also be considered a kind of play act. predominantly male, during which participants display their egos.

Filtering agents offer Carlos, in his own words a "higher signal to noise ratio". Carlos has been working in the computer industry for over thirty years and his metaphor for his perception of community building online is interesting. He believes that for a community to emerge from electronic interaction, access cannot be granted equally because "not everyone contributes intelligent comments and arguments". Carlos's

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[2] Electronically blocking people's messages.

[3] Flaming is characterized by gratuitous and uninhibited making of remarks containing name calling, swearing, hostility and insult.

attitude may be attributable to the prevailing elitist sentiment on the Net. Bots, filters, closed lists, clearly offer convenience and safety.

Carlos believes that on the technical newsgroups he subscribes to "there is a clear sense of community". However, he describes its membership in terms of lifestyle enclaves. It is a group of "people with common interests who are trying to help each other as companies are downsizing, or to give each other advance knowledge, happening of information, and you get to know people". Carlos also sees a "clear community" forming in the recreational subjects newsgroups, such as cooking. This is again a lifestyle area not community. Carlos seems to realize this when he states that the Net is really "not a close community but similar thinking, I'm in a very narrow area in my profession, and to find my peers I have to go outside Alberta and outside Canada". Carlos also uses the Web "as a hobby or for enjoyment in itself". Being online has become part of his lifestyle.

Carlos observes that not all newsgroups are building communities, however. Among some political and religious newsgroups there is not a sense of community; rather: "they really are a debate forum, and an argument forum, and a fight forum". These groups are in fact "breaking their own community: they come into other groups and post things like 'you're all going to hell', and they spam[5] five hundred or six hundred groups at once". Others I interviewed also pointed out that some religious groups online are quite prone to "shouting and raving" forms of interaction, and other extreme forms of expressing their view.

For Carlos, quite apart from the sense of community, "the Web is actually providing a way to go back to the simpler days of people getting up on their soap boxes and speaking. People would gather around and listen. Some would wander away, some

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[4] It should be noted that a special newsgroup, alt.flame, exists for the specific purpose of flaming without being disruptive to the discussions of other newsgroups.

[5] Spamming refers to cross posting to more than a few groups at a time, usually less than twenty.

would come. Well, the Internet is providing that soap box platform". Carlos uses the adventure analogy to describe his online interaction "surfing is what I like doing, you do a key search or you'll see a URL in a news posting and you go there and you'll just starting following links at random and it's amazing where you end up". Carlos believes that computer mediated communication allows individuals to express an "ad hoc philosophy coming into vogue in our society, perhaps this is going to be the start of the next group, the next beat generation, the next hippies". The implication is that the information elite is a rebellious class, dissatisfied with the way things are.

In the final analysis, Carlos can only be ambivalent on the extent to which electronic connections form community: "even though there are some ways in which the Net supports community, because it is conservative, it actually is the antithesis of community". As an example he points out that in China "officials will grant licenses to certain people to have access to the Web, but they retain the death penalty for unlicensed use of the Web". Carlos offers a personal illustration of how the Net can be antithesis of community. He believes that a pertinent negative consequence of computer mediated communication and interaction is that, because of the amount of time he spends online, many of the social activities he used to do with his family have decreased or simply stopped: "before I was on the Web we used to do things like going dancing together [with his wife] regularly. Well, those sort of activities just disappeared over the years". This paragraph summarizes concisely the paradoxes and contradictions related to the Net's capabilities for bringing people together. Instead of bringing people together computer mediated communication can lead to social isolation, decreasing the amount of face-to-face contact and social relations.

It is clear that users of computer technology value it as a tool for global and local connections. More importantly, it is also clear that these people have some understanding of the ways in which computer mediated communication separates individuals along the lines of access and relevance of information. Participants' narratives are constructed with

a variety of community metaphors: a "community of ideas", or a "community of interests", but they understand that electronic formations are not leading to the emergence of communities in Bellah et al.'s sense. To form a community members need to share some essential moral and traditional sources of beliefs and practices that bind individuals in a common good. In participants' narratives there is clear evidence of recline for safety and convenience. Thus, perhaps, participants' ambivalence regarding the potential of mediated interaction for building communities.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AS LIFESTYLE ENCLAVES

Group Membership

Participants' perceptions and beliefs concerning computer mediated communication raise important issues relevant to the understanding of electronic connections, and the validity of the community metaphor. An important issue pertains to the nature of group membership in online networks. Some of those I talked to identify themselves as lurkers rather than active participants, and do not consider themselves members of any virtual community. Others do participate extensively with frequent contributions to online discussions and information. These participants are highly hesitant to consider lurkers as members of any group.

Morin proposes creating categories of membership in terms of frequency and regularity of postings and replies. In descending order of contributions he identifies three main groups of users of computer mediated communication. The first is a small group who use the networks regularly, the second is the original users, that is the academics and the military, the third is a group of new users who are "going to fall off" and be replaced by other new users who are persuaded by the hype to go online. Morin sees the "hype" about the superhighway as being highly inflated by statistics which show that there are forty million users. Morin points out that every company gives their employees an

Internet account, and that universities provide students with a free account. Not all connected, however, use the networks with the same frequency. Additionally, having an email address and an Internet account does not necessarily mean that people access it, a great number of people may simply not use their accounts.

The nature and dynamics of membership in a electronic form of spontaneous dialogue in not stable or enduring. The patterns of postings and replies of those who use the networks do not represent traces of community regardless of the frequency of their contributions. The degree of participation may affect users' perceptions about whether the networks form communities. However, lurkers have access to a lot of the same information and use the networks for the same purposes as many who actively participate. The silent observers or electronic voyeurs are using mediated computer communication to access information in order to fulfill their own needs, and like those who regularly contribute, they are forming and extending their own lifestyle enclaves.

Elitist Formations

Another critical issue, in questioning the validity of the community metaphor, is the extent to which electronic communication leads to the emergence of elitist formations. While the community metaphor is widely used by those who are connected, what they describe are social connections that are fundamentally elitist. Most advocate elitist small groups of participants based on similar interests and tastes. The filter system that Carlos and Jennifer developed operates in a parallel way to the invitation-only groups advocated by Doug, and the private lists that Michael subscribes to. They are electronic ways of bringing together an elite of individuals who share similar interests. Whether it is getting information on underground music, on parenting issues, on finding ones' peers, the Net provides the opportunity to find others with similar interests. As Keith states, it "just feels better to know that there are people out there who agree with

you". Individuals are connected to the networks within which they share similar economic and cultural interests forming electronic enclaves.

Most participants recognize that being online is "a privilege" and that the vast majority of people do not use computer mediated communication. As Ed points out, the notion that the technology will become massively available is unrealistic and "a very bourgeois thing to say". He emphasizes that mediated communication cannot substitute for face-to-face interaction because "we should not forget those people who are not online, or even people that are homeless, or the transients out there". He adds that "in real life it doesn't happen like that" acknowledging that the presumed potential for access to the masses is far from being realized.

The vast majority of Net users constitute an information elite of white, male, educated individuals whose occupations fall within three areas: computer related occupations, interactive media, and university related occupations. Computer mediated communication is separating the information-rich from the information-poor, contributing to the perpetuation of social inequality based on access to technology. To have an email address and an Internet account affords participants a certain social prestige, connecting individuals along the same lines that characterize existing social divisions.

The Net is elitist not only in terms of the demographic composition of its users, but also in relation to its content. Many emphasized the irony of the ways in which the Net globally connects people based on American content and the English language. Michael, for example, points out that: "the thing that annoys the hell out of me about the Internet is how completely American it is, if I didn't speak English I would be even more annoyed. I mean you can't even put accents in". It is possible to develop translation agents, however, they will be translating mostly American content. Jennifer is also aware of how predominant the English language is on the Net. Because online people are

judged by what they write, participants who can not write or are less proficient in the English language are at an disadvantage. Additionally, those who write better will be perceived as more capable of expressing themselves than those who do not write as well.

Individual Self Expression

The connections users are making do not inherently lead to the emergence of communities, nor do they necessarily lead to meaningful exchange of information. Rather, in many instances, electronic experiences offer the opportunity for individual self expression. Self-expression becomes the main purpose for online communication and interaction. Ed, for example, is interested in the medium as "one's own personal space". He wants to build a "virtual gallery" of collages and video works. A virtual gallery is a "closet gallery" where the home closet metaphor is used because participants organize the gallery's electronic space into two floors providing a map showing the rooms you can enter (go into). The virtual gallery is based on a theme and, like homepages on the Web, users can build a gallery with whatever they wish in it.

The concept of a homepage is also highly individualistic and egocentric. A person's homepage is a electronic space where individuals display a page of personal information, private interests, and hypertext links to other sites. Having a homepage presumes that there are people interested in the information provided; or perhaps someone just accidentally links to it from another site.

In a similar vein, Keith claims that participating in online discussions provides the opportunity for a "much more individual kind of expression". For him, in mediated interaction "you can keep dialogue a lot purer by concentrating very closely on a particular argument putting your specific thoughts down more explicitly and more extensively that you would face-to-face". Presumably, the potential for distractions and digressions is diminished in mediated communication, leading to purer dialogue. For

Keith, the Net offers an opportunity to express his "strong political views" without having to impose them on anyone.

Physical Isolation

Some see the physical isolation of the networks as providing a way for participants to be more open. Tony, a twenty-eight-year-old student who uses email, and frequents some "Clubwired" chat networks, sees the interactive networks as providing the opportunity to be more open. He describes his relationship with another user whom he never met in real life: "I'll tell her things online that I wouldn't tell anybody here". "Here" refers to his real life friends and family. He goes on to observe that "the fact that this person will never talk to any of my friends here, will never discuss anything that I say to her to anybody I know here, I think makes you more open than you would be otherwise". He adds that some of the people he interacts with online "know a lot about me, I reveal a lot of myself online. The people that I become friends with know where I live, they know that I'm married, they know what's going on in my life and I know what's going on in theirs".

Similarly, Carolina finds that on chat lines she is able to be open in terms of being "more flirtatious", and generally more "talkative" than she would be in face-to-face interaction. The physical isolation is not only an acceptable boundary for interaction, but it is the reason for the openness. Being online allows people to be more open only because they are physically isolated from each other. The majority of people who communicate with each other online have never met face-to-face, and some have no desire to meet. Steve also sees that the Net can be appealing for "its sense of freedom, to be able to say what you want without commitments or consequences". Physical isolation is, of course, not conducive to community building. On the contrary, it makes it easier to avoid physical communities, and replace them with virtual simulations.

The Net as Replacement

There seems to be a common perception among those I talked with that the people who spend extensive amounts of time on interactive networks such as IRC or MUDs do not have a great deal of face-to-face interaction. Many suggest that some people are attracted to mediated interaction because, as Steve puts it, "they feel very socially uncomfortable in an environment where it is difficult to lie or whatever, I mean on the Net everybody is beautiful, and inevitably most people aren't". Steve further suggests that for some people it is a great medium for expression of "cyberpersonalities" where "one can become anything you want to be".

Similarly, Morin, questions the extent to which those who post and reply frequently on newsgroups, interact extensively on chat lines, or play interactive games for hours, spend great amounts of time interacting face-to-face. He suggests that, "mostly it seems to be a small group who whether they are on the Net or not, they would cut themselves off from face-to-face contact. These people don't play nice with the other kids". Both Steve and Morin explicitly imply that if people spend extraordinary, or unreasonable amounts of time in mediated interaction, then they are not likely to have much time left for face-to-face interaction. The direction of this relationship, however, is not clear: for some face-to-face interaction decreases as a result of online increased interaction, for others face-to-face interaction is already reduced and as a substitution they use online communication.

Concerns were expressed regarding the amount of time spent online. Steve, for example, finds the Net a "enormous sink hole of time". Steve spends an average of eight hours a night online, in addition to his work related online activities. As he puts it, "I am living proof that there's no such thing as sleep deprivation, I function happily on three hours a night, if that". He admits that he "goes through periods of addiction" where "for a

month I'll hit a newsgroup or a chat line really hard, then I'll go to another until I realize that it is a waste of time, and a great way to avoid work". He has considered canceling his account "just so it's not present". However, he does a lot of business related work on line and that is how he justifies its existence.

Carolina believes that, for some people the Net becomes a substitute for real life interaction, because "they just don't have the skills required to be in real life socials situations". She herself uses the Net as her only form of social interaction: "I don't interact a lot with people outside work and family. I used to go to my parents' church but I don't anymore, and I definitely feel the sense of not being with so many people anymore and, in a way, I probably fill it with the Internet". However, she does not believe that it is sufficient to communicate via the computer. The Net cannot be an adequate substitute for face-to-face contact because "at some point you need the body there". The Net is a great venue for those who are " socially insecure" or those that "have fantasies". Similarly, Richard suggests that the Net is a good replacement for those who perhaps "feel afraid that they can't be as personal in real life". Steve finds it interesting to observe how many people are on line "on a Friday night". He has a message for those people, even though he is clearly one of them, "all you social geniuses who are babbling on the Internet go out and see some real people, have a real conversation, interact with real things". He adds that "virtual is a lovely and intellectual idea but humans, fortunately, need real stimulation".

Replacement clearly occurs at different levels. At one level, there is instrumental replacement where computer technology is a tool that takes over existing activities, apparently making daily life more convenient. Some participants see the Net as a replacement for broadcast T.V., the postal system, economic transactions, telephones, and entertainment. These participants see computer mediated communication not as an extension of real life but as a replacement for already existing venues. At another level, there is replacement of the physical body with the computer interface, as exemplified by

the opening statement of a chat channel called "#spacebar": "you are not alone, here there are millions of personalities just like you, so if you want to talk, sit down and talk to somebody". Instead of talking to real people, participants can write to virtual people online.

Computer Mediated Discourse

A final issue in questioning the community metaphor, concerns the vocabulary used to describe computer mediated communication. Electronic discourse reflects the participants' lifestyle attitude rather than their encouragement of community building. Surfing the Net, browsing the Web, chatting, and interestingly user, are all metaphors that best describe lifestyle enclaves.

An examination of the evolution of standards of conduct on Usenet, for example, may lead some to argue that these standards of conduct in electronic networks, or Netiquette as they are called, are evidence of the development of a system of social values, or a moral code akin to the ones that arise in the context of communities of memory. However, Netiquette is not necessarily a system of values that ties the community together in a common purpose: as participants describe, they log on to the networks primarily to fulfill individual needs. Despite the existence of standards of conduct on Usenet and other networks, online interaction remains unstable and amorphous. The standards themselves may be quite temporary: changing, for example, as the number of participants in electronic networking increases. A community in the sense used here as a community of memory requires a history and a past and a shared commitment to a common future. On the Net, the standards of conduct are a system of courtesy rules which replaces shared values and mutual trust. These rules are not providing a context for community building, but for personal communication based on mutual interests and needs.

Conclusion

Computer mediated communication encourages individuals to choose which virtual groups they wish to identify with, to cut free from social and physiological boundaries, to define and construct their own selves. Those who use electronic networks articulate their connections in individualistic terms outside the context of tradition and commitment. Online, the sources of commitment are not the second languages of a community of memory, they are at most the common belief in freedom of expression and information. Users' commitment is to their own needs. Participants view commitment in online groups in the form of: "you just ignore those tendencies or views that you don't like". Participants may "bend together", and find the support they need, and they may access or conversely disseminate information not available in mainstream media; however, individual activities are not leading to the formation of electronic communities. From many users' perspective, most discussion groups, and other networks are not collaborative but hostile environments characterized by flaming and other personal attacks.

While the idea of connectedness leading to community is commendable, the popular language of the Net is radical individualism. This raises serious doubts regarding the potential for building electronic communities as the emphasis is on self- interest. A collection of individuals seeking to fulfill their own needs is not a community, it is a lifestyle enclave.

Chapter 4

Net Interaction: the Virtual Self

Introduction

The preceding chapter argues that the ties individuals form through computer mediated connections are not those of the community of memory but are of lifestyle enclaves. Computer mediated communication separates ideas of self from family, work, and religion. Since communities are made up of selves it is critical to examine how a virtually separated self is shaped and grounded. In this chapter, I examine the notion of how a virtual self maintains existence within electronic lifestyle enclaves.

The mutability of identity in newsgroups, interactive chat lines and games - all settings where it is possible to interact anonymously and pseudonymously - necessitates that participants find new ways to negotiate social relations that in face-to-face communication are essentially fixed by recognition of identity. In computer mediated interaction individuals exist as persona or personae and the self is defined by its ability to choose its own virtual identities. But on what grounds are those choices made? For many there is no objective criterion for choosing one self over another. Participants' own idiosyncratic preferences and needs are their own justification because they define the self. Individuals may shift identities by explaining that they get more personal satisfaction from one identity than from another. Identities appear and disappear. Participants go from virtual identities to real life identities, seemingly crossing boundaries. Identity emerges in the interaction and is always multiple. The right identity is, perhaps, the one that yields an exiting challenge or the best feelings about participants' selves.

Turkle argues that computers have become the technological era's primary objects-to-think-with carrying with them new ways of knowing. This is part of a process of bricolage or theoretical thinking whereby individuals and cultures use the objects around them to develop and assimilate ideas (Turkle, 1995:47-48). The process works like this: people buy a computer as an instrumentally useful product that they interact with everyday.

In this interaction they are developing new ways of thinking and new expectations about the kinds of relationships they have with the machine. People decide that they want an account on a commercial service because this will provide new access to information and people. But it does more than that: when they log on, they may find themselves playing multiple roles or characters of the opposite sex. In this way they are taken by the experience that enables them to explore previously unexamined aspects of their sexuality or that challenges their preconceived ideas about a unitary self (Turkle, 1995:49).

According to Turkle virtual identities - whether in role playing or creating handles that allow participants to gender swap - can be an opportunity to explore conflicts raised by one's own sex to the extent that they enable participants to experience what it feels like to be of the opposite gender. This can lead to reflection on the way ideas about gender shape expectations in social interaction: "MUDs and the virtual personae one adopts within them are objects-to-think-with for reflecting on the social construction of gender" (Turkle, 1995:213). However, my research questions this position by examining how computer mediated communication labels according to sex thereby continuing a patriarchal tradition of making an individual's sex the principal basis for identification.

My line of argument, in opposition to Turkle, is that participants do not primarily search for their multiple selves in online interaction, just as they do not go online in search of community. Moreover, the multiplicity apparently prevailing in computer mediated discourse in terms of multiple identities does not necessarily permeate participants' real lives. The adoption of online identities, when it occurs, does not inherently translate into real life forms of liberation. Perhaps some participants are able to experiment with different identities leading not only to an expression of different aspects of the self but to a reconstitution of the self in terms of allowing repressed selves to be voiced. This, however, is at a personal and emotional level. At a social level, the multiplicity of identities in computer mediated interaction is based on the same set of assumptions for face-to-face interaction. I argue that this is because online interaction is based on the same individualist

assumptions of interaction that Bellah et al. identified a decade ago as characteristic of lifestyle enclaves. A computer mediated self is disembodied and has fluid access to its various avatars, but such a self is also primarily grounded in its own self interests and desires or needs.

My analysis explores the extent to which self definition is based on the ultimate form of individualization of our society, or conversely the extent that participants' selves are based on a group, or a collection of users of a particular brand. Participants present their narratives in a language of individualistic achievement, self-knowledge, and self-fulfillment that makes it difficult for them to have or sustain intimate or public commitments to others. Computer mediated communication as a window into the horizon of human relationships reveals individuals who are profoundly ambivalent about the nature of computer mediated existence, about the persistence of gender and prejudice, about the transcendence of sex and sexuality, and about the ultimate and essential value of human identity.

Computer Mediated Communication and Identity

Turkle analyses how the computer profoundly shapes our ways of thinking and feeling, how ideas carried by computer technology are reshaped by people for their own purposes, how computers are not just changing lives but changing selves. Turkle's own metaphor of windows - a technical innovation where people can cycle through different computer applications - serves well to introduce how Turkle sees life on the screen: "... windows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as multiple, distributed system". The "self is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times. The whole practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds, that plays many roles at the same time". Real life is "just one more window" (Turkle, 1995:13-14). The windows allow participants to cycle through virtual and real life. Windows allow participants to be in several contexts at the same time, in a

MUD game, in email, in a Web page, in a chat room. The windows offer a view, perhaps reflexively, of participants' multiple identities.

Turkle argues that "life on the screen makes it very easy to present oneself as other than one is in real life. And although some people think that representing oneself as other than one is is always a deception, many people turn to online life with the intention of playing it precisely this way. They insist that a certain amount of shape shifting is part of the online game" (1995:228). Shape shifting refers to the process by which participants can become whatever they want, the physical body can become machine (virtual) and then can turn back again into the flesh. These are human bodies that are flexible enough to morph into cyborg ones.

Shape shifting being part of the online game, how are individuals to negotiate between their online personae and their real life selves? The relationship between the user's real life and virtual life can lead to what Turkle calls "slippage". She argues that slippage is characteristic of identity play in computer mediated interaction. Slippages are "places where persona and self merge, places where the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self" (1995:186). Slippage however, is not so much about "places" but about processes of self-creation and self-discovery in the relationship between a constructed persona and a real-life self. The process of slipping occurs as the virtual personae and real-life selves merge.

According to Turkle (1995:255-269), today the computer culture's most compelling objects give participants a way to think concretely about an identity crisis; or to act out without the crisis. In simulation, identity can be fluid and multiple. A signifier no longer clearly points to a thing that is signified, and understanding is less likely to proceed through analysis than by navigating through virtual space. In the culture of simulation the computer as the second self expands to include many other selves. New, false, multiple, and emergent identities simultaneously exist within unknown boundaries in all kinds of electronic networks. While some participants do discover important aspects about

themselves, learning from them and carrying them to real life, most of my sample reports that they do not. Their online experiences do not translate into either a discovery of the multiple selves, or the adoption of multiple view points by which to ground the self. Virtual personae are not primarily objects-to-think-with but objects that participants experience with. In and through their narratives of these experiences participants are, explicitly or implicitly, demonstrating a profound ambivalence over the value of human identity.

Virtual Identities

A virtual identity is an online or cyber identity, created by individual users and developed in their computer mediated communication and interaction. As discussed below, computer mediated communication allows users to create and express virtual identities in a number of ways. Individuals can create characters in real time interactive games and they can create handles in chat lines. Both characters and handles allow users to have an online persona(e) that can play diverse roles. In addition, participants can create a virtual identity by using personalized signatures in their email messages and web pages. Virtual identities and the possibility of expressing different aspects of the self, however, are not leading inherently to self-discovery that translates into real life self-knowledge.

1. Role-playing: Characters and Handles

On the Internet people may learn to accept a multiplicity of roles and ways of being, in some networks people are playing with aspects of themselves and creating virtual personae. Role-playing in general, whether pretending to be of the opposite sex, or pretending to be a parent or wife, can be used to reveal new aspects of identity and to permit greater complexity of relationships. A self free of absolute values or rigid moral obligations can alter its behavior to adapt to others and to various social roles. It can play all of them as a game, playing with particular social identities, yet never changing its own basic identity, because that identity depends only on discovering and pursuing its own

personal wants and inner impulses. For some, virtual identities are merely an opportunity, albeit an important one, to express different or repressed aspects of their selves. Thereby functioning as a replacement, or representing the wish to be replaced.

Role-playing and creating handles are a common way of constructing a virtual identity. Handles are used instead of the participants' real life names, and are used to play with identity. For some handles and the characters they play allow them to express aspects of themselves or their lifestyle. Doug frequently uses the handle of "Imagination's End". He believes that a virtual identity should be an expression of aspects of one's self. He uses "a variety of aliases, it's not to conceal my identity because if anybody asks I'll tell them. But the name I use on the Net means something about myself and what I do there, that's why I use it". In addition "Imagination's End" conveys a lot about his ideas: "although it is imagination's end I don't believe that we can never reach the end of imagination, there's no limit to imagination".

When Carolina initially logged on to chat lines she used the handle of "Felicia". With this handle she experienced a side of herself that she had not had the opportunity to experience before computer mediated communication. She explains that "I had no idea that Felicia was going to be what the boys consider the hottest name of the century. I can't believe what happened when I first logged on: in real-life I had never dated before, I had never been involved in that side of life, and here I am online and these guys are sending me really sexy messages". She believes "it had to be because of the name Felicia". Carolina points out that "when I first logged on it was extremely flirty". She speculates that it may be because "on there you can be suppressed parts of yourself. In real life I'm not flirty, I have a touch of it but nothing like online". The virtual identity allows her to express repressed parts of herself. Within the interaction she discovers herself, and the online experience made her feel more like her real self. Carolina, however, did not really have the choice of physically flirting with men, as she pointed out, because of her parent's religious beliefs. In this way the computer interaction allowed her to express aspects of herself

openly, and without any social consequences to her parent's church, and social network. The electronic networks provide safety and convenience.

In interactive games such as MUDs, participants can construct identity by building characters that allow them to role-play. Carolina explains that on the MOO she frequents she created a variety of characters which allow her to play different roles including the role of wife and mother of ten children. Her real-life fiancé plays the character of her husband and the father of the children: "we play mom and dad and we interact with them [characters playing the children] as mom and dad".

Carolina argues that role-playing in Harper's Tale provides her and her fiancé an opportunity to play at being parents: "[fiancé] and I have to act like parents of a new-born, a two-year-old, of twins, and so on. In that way, we've certainly got great insight into how each other thinks about raising kids and our point of tolerance too". Carolina believes that role-playing gives her and her fiancé "great practice because a lot of people in real life would never be able to experience these circumstances before it happens to them". However, she warns that "you have to remember that this isn't real life and when [fiancé] growls at me in character it's not real life. Sometimes it's hard, though, because you think he is like that in real life".

There is a clear contradiction in Carolina's account, she claims that mudding gives her real life practice at being a parent and a wife, but at the same time she claims that it is not like real life. If their virtual experiences are not an enactment of who they are in real life, then Carolina is not learning how her future husband would in fact act, since she cannot be sure whether his character is playing his real life self. But because Carolina believes that she is playing aspects of herself, even if her fiancé is not, it seems like real life. For Carolina, role-playing provides an environment for working on some personal issues. Identity play can become a context for discovering who she is and who she wants to be. Participants' virtual roles may lead, on occasion, to a process of self-discovery and subsequent self-knowledge, but most virtual personae are a form of individual self

expression that does not lead to self-knowledge in real life. Self discoveries are based on individual wants and desires expressed online.

Turkle argues that, identity play is common in computer mediated interaction. However, contrary to Turkle, most of those I interviewed did not see identity play as a pertinent aspect of their online interaction and communication. Nor did they have a virtual identity beyond email and their web pages. They do however visit chat lines, on occasion, and from their own online experiences and observations they all have their personal opinion about what it can mean to have a virtual identity.

Steve usually identifies his real-life sex, however in his experience as a software developer he sees " a lot of people who tend to have cyberpersonalities and some of these people really do prefer this form of distant communication, they feel that they can be intimate". Steve believes that, for some people the Net in a great medium, "they feel that online they can express things that they would secretly want to do, maybe fantasies that they want to explore more than just thinking about it". For some people "I'm sure that they have the desire to really behave that way, they just don't have the social courage to behave that way in public, so they take on cyberpersonalities". Steve calls this the "multiple personality syndrome" where people can be who they want to be. Beyond the negative implication, Turkle (1995) points out that multiple identities are not inherently pathological, since they may allow participants to discover or resolve problems within themselves, and with others.

Additionally, Steve thinks that for people who are "sensitive and really emotional, the Net is a great way for them to hide behind the keyboard and minimize personal damage". Steve, like Carolina, believes that some of these cyberpersonalities expressed online may be repressed aspects of the individuals' real life selves, "and this is why they can be so sensitive, because it's striking at the real them". As a software developer, Steve is interested in people's reasons for their online interaction. Specifically, he wants to know the appeal of sex chat lines. His personal versus his professional belief is that "for some

it's safe, and an opportunity to work out fantasies that they probably would not ever act out in real-life". His impression is that, "because social standards inhibit certain types of self expression, online people believe that they can live out their wildest fantasies". Such experiences include being the opposite sex, or having virtual sex. This implies that real life social relations occur in a constricting milieu that admits a low level of tolerance for the expression of certain behaviors or points of view. Online, free from the physicalities of space and time participants can be who they want or wish, without apparent immediate social consequences, especially physical recognition. This clearly highlights recline into safety and the wish to be replaced.

Whether role playing to learn aspects of themselves or to experience different fantasies, online interaction allows participants to develop a virtual identity. Tukle believes that the anonymity of most MUDs provides ample room for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves (1995:183). Contrary to her findings, however, anonymity was not an important consideration for those I interviewed. Neither Carolina, nor Doug, or Tony felt particularly anonymous in their chat line or interactive games interaction. In these networks most people know their real life names, phone number and address. Anonymity was not what maintained the interaction. Rather, it was primarily a technical structural arrangement which the participants do not care about. Participants do remain anonymous to the extent that others know them only by the characters they play or the handles they use. But since most participants seem to divulge some of their real life identity, such as their home phone number, for example, their anonymity is only partial. All those I interviewed obviously have an email address and most also have a web page. These people are not anonymous, nor do they want to be, they want to be within an identifiable crowd, creating and perhaps expanding their virtual selves and real life selves.

There has been an increase in developing software which links still images, video, and audio to text based documents like the Netscape navigator. This increase in visual interaction and stimulation may be taken as further evidence that anonymity is not an issue

in computer mediated communication. Steve points out that, "there has been a lot of talk about 'cu-seeme' technology. This is a virtual three dimensional environment that is based on the idea of increased interaction: "try to elevate the stimulation level". Steve points out the irony: "trying to raise the interaction level but still maintain that distance". Recline is evident in Steve's comments.

Other studies of new modes of electronic communication also indicate that the anonymity offered by the computer screen empowers anti-social and unconventional behavior (Jones, 1995; Dery, 1994). This assertion rests on the assumption that text-based channels represent a gender neutral medium of exchange and that language itself is free from any from of gender, race, or ethnic determination. Both of these assumptions are called into question not only by feminist research and theory, but also by female network users who participate in the virtual subculture. For all the anonymity they offer, computer mediated communication and interaction reproduces stereotypically gendered patterns of conversation.

There is a common perception among those who use the electronic networks that, to present oneself as a woman online contains certain, mostly predictable, risks. As Carolina points out from her experience with the handle of Felicia, "if you're a female look out because you're just raw meat for the dogs. The guys are just going to hit on you, there is no end". She got "hit on", or more precisely she was sent full text sexual messages, so often that she decided to change her handle to a more generic "PrairieWind". However, eventually she switched back to Felicia as she gained confidence and felt comfortable with online interaction, and as she learned "how to get back at them by sending them pages of stuff or telling on them to the rest of the group". Added to the confidence factor is the fact that Carolina developed a relationship online and included her status of girl-friend in her user identification name along with Felicia.

The reaction from using a female handle is widely discussed on many newsgroups. In the alt.irc newsgroup, some of those who contribute to the discussion suggest that

woman should not use a female handle: "don't use a feminine nick . Neutral is good; something that hints in the wrong direction (i.e. SportsFan or TheKid) might be better". As an obvious way to avoid being "hit on" female participants are advised and ultimately chose to have a gender neutral identity. On the other hand, some argue that "I've spotted people using silly unthought-out nicks and then get upset when they get people messaging them consistently. Now, I remember seeing something like 'F4wsports'on a sex channel...the fact was that she just visited the particular channel and did *not* realize (how naive!) that being interested in diving/water skiing was 'not' how others perceived her in the channel".

The point, enacted in the course of subsequent discussion, is that electronic newsgroups and lists are governed by gendered codes of interchange that are often not hospitable to female participants. This clearly indicates that online communication is structured similarly to communication in other settings and is overtly subjected to gender, status, age, and ethnic determinations. Despite the fact that computer mediated communication obscures physical characteristics many women find that gender follows them into online communication, and sets the tone for their public and private interactions. To the extent that some women purposefully choose gender-neutral identities, or refrain from expressing their opinions. Women defensibly deny the physical body, expressing the wish to be replaced by the computer interface in disembodied communication.

The experiences with handles and characters are consistently confirmed by many of the men I talked with who "just for fun " log on with a female handle. Steve, for example, runs a little experiment with switching handles: "I was training some junior guys and we logged on some chat line to see what sort of people were on there. I wanted to demonstrate to them what most of these people were after". They logged on with a generic user identification and they noticed that "there wasn't a heck of a lot going on". Then they changed the handle to "hotbitch" and, "it was quite amazing, my junior guys couldn't believe the number of private chat invitations that were opening up. We just switched handles, we didn't post a single message". In addition, one of Steve's girl friends stopped

logging on chat lines "because as soon as she goes in and people figure out what sex she is, she gets pasted with all these sex messages". As a software developer, Steve knows that "there is an appeal to pretend to be of the opposite sex, or thinking that people are interacting with someone of the opposite sex. It's part of the fantasy that keeps people coming back" to the chat lines and games.

Similarly, Michael cites an example of an FBI agent in Southern California whose responsibility was to police the Net "and he tells a story about someone that he couldn't persuade that it might be difficult for a woman on the Internet". Eventually, the agent did convince the other man to log on with a woman's name. Within half an hour of being online he began to change his opinion about the way women, or those pretending to be women, are treated in online interaction, because "he got hit on by half a dozen men offering him all sorts of things with various degrees of disgustedness, and this was not a chat line it was something else".

While having a female handle induces a series of stereotypical responses, both Michael and Steve argue that Net interaction can be a liberating experience for women. Steve believes that the Internet "gives some women the opportunity to be as liberal as they want and say things that they want without possible commitments or consequences". Similarly, Michael claims that "I'm told by some women I talked with that they find it very liberating that they can set aside their gender in their interactions on the Net. Women often have weaker voices than men, and you can't shut down a message online. In that respect it can be a great equalizer". In addition, he believes that "it's an interesting and marvelous idea that people go online pretending to be the opposite sex. That's marvelous, but scary, that they can discover that they can follow the rule do onto others as you would like to be done by, and they can change roles and learn what it is like to be a woman". Steve's and Michael's opinions, however, are contradicted by the women that I interviewed who argue that online communication is not liberating. Carolina's experience, for example, is that having a female handle leads to online sexual harassment. Despite this, Michael definitely

believes that it can be of great benefit to be able to impersonate someone from a different group whether it be ethnic, sex, or socioeconomic background "as a way of imagining yourself in their shoes". Michael emphasizes that being able to imagine oneself in somebody else's shoes can widen people's experiences.

Ed finds the idea of creating a screen persona "a neat thing, you can play yourself up to be someone else, you can be this ultra self. I think that's very interesting that there are such things as beauty pageants online. You can't see these women, just their description. Anybody can pretend to be as beautiful as they want". Free from the physical recognition the virtual body can become whatever the participant wishes by replacing the real physical body with a more beautiful virtual description. The wishes are, typically, stereotypical: "on the Net everybody is beautiful: tall, slim, elongated cheek bones, with an exciting personality". The self is only as true as the story it tells at the moment. It gains its dimensionality through telling the story.

As Turkle (1995) points out, MUD games and other electronic networks are laboratories for constructing identity where "you can play roles as close to or as far from your real self as you choose" (1995:183). Participants in online interaction can learn and express aspects of themselves by playing as many roles as they wish. A common role-playing characteristic of computer mediated interaction is gender bending or gender swapping in MUDs and chat lines. People seem to have an extraordinary curiosity at experimenting at being the opposite sex. This curiosity is in no way new, but online it becomes easier to pretend to be of the opposite sex, or of no sex at all.

When Carolina met her fiancé on a Hotwired channel his handle was "cottontail" and she claims that "for months and months I thought he was a girl. But then he started to send me these private messages, and something about princess, and sending me computer roses, that's when I started thinking: this is really different for a girl to be doing this, so I asked him". To the question of how can she be sure that people are who they say they are,

she admits that "most of them I really don't know". Carolina generally assumes that people are who they say they are online.

Gender swapping with role playing or handles is technically challenging and it can be psychologically complicated. Taking a virtual role involves participants ongoing relationships. In this process, they you may discover things about themselves that they never knew before. They may discover things about other people's responses to them. Participants' motivation to gender swap in order to have sex with someone from a different gender, perhaps also virtual, strongly suggests that assuming a virtual identity is not an emotionally neutral activity.

Even though MUDs and other electronic networks are providing the grounds for action based practice of imagining alternatives that can serve as a form of consciousness-raising about gender issues, or that deconstruct gender, this does not consistently happen. Women present themselves either as the stereotypically constructed female gender, or they present themselves as men setting aside their sex for online communication. Regardless, virtual personae are not leading to the desired prospect of liberation of social minorities. Rather it expresses the wish to be replaced by virtual relations that are safer and more convenient.

There is an inherent ambiguity in computer mediated technologies that is tied to the material body. For as much as they offer the opportunity for new forms of virtual bodies, even in the age of virtual identity, life is lived through physical bodies. If on one hand, new communications technologies create new contexts for knowing, talking, fucking bodies, they also enable new forms of repression of the material body. Such as the denial of the physical body, or the pretension of being a false body.

As mentioned, most of those I talked with do not have (or admit having) a virtual identity in terms of gender swapping or even handles. Rather they identify themselves by their email and their web pages.

2. Personalized Signatures

On newsgroups and email messages users have personalized signatures as a way of creating and expressing identity. For example, one participant adds a quote by Alice Roosevelt Longworth at the end of his email messages as an expression of his philosophy of life: "I have a simple philosophy: Fill what's empty. Empty what's full. And scratch where it itches". Alternatively he quotes Josh Billings "Never work before breakfast; if you have to work before breakfast, eat your breakfast first". Another user personalizes his messages with: "Did ya, did ya really? 'He said...maybe' 'Damn fine walls' 'Look I'm really not sure about this' 'WHERE did you leave it' 'Dai Taoloth' 'I can't, I mustn't, please don't make me' 'I can hear you staring at me!' 'Once you die you're dead, and that's all there is". Yet another user identifies himself at the end of his messages as the "Minister of All Things Digital and Electronic, and Holder of Past Knowledge". He also adds a quote from The Raven: "And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor, shall be lifted---nevermore". Quoting Ann Rand another participant expresses himself this way: "What objectivity and the study of philosophy require in not an 'open mind' but an *active* mind—a mind able and eagerly willing to examine ideas, but to examine them critically".

Some signatures are not quite so elaborate. For example, "Toxic URLs! Unsafe for children, Democrats, and most mammals. Quis custodut ipsos custodes? The Net". Some express their idiosyncrasies as "chickens get a taste of your meat"; or "I know me well built"; or "friends come and go; Enemies accumulate"; or "Don't let them bother you"; or "Well behaved in RL". Some simply create a handle and use it as a signature for their messages. For example: "women-not-to-be-messed-with@Kei.com"; or "Mr. BoomBastiK"; or "BaDKaRmA"; or "Mistress Cybernoski". With personalized signatures, individuals idiosyncratically demonstrate their ideas and philosophies. These philosophies are, certainly, expressions of the participants' selves. For some it expresses a virtual self separated from a real life self; others express aspects of their real life selves.

On the web, identity is expressed and constructed in a "homepage". A homepage is constructed by pasting on it words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites on the Internet or the Web. Turkle's homepage, for example, contains links to the text of her curriculum vitae, to drafts of recent papers about MUDs and French psychoanalysis, and to the reading list for the courses she is currently teaching. As a visitor to Turkle's homepage I can click on a highlighted word and watch a display she refers to as "the Mighty Morphin' Michel Foucault" that morphs images of Michel Foucault and the Power Rangers into each other (Turkle, 1995:258-259).

Many of those I interviewed have a web page, either for business or personal use or a mixture. Steve, for example, set up his homepage mainly for "sales and product download". Keith has a homepage which is "my web page is basically about me. Eventually I'll also have links to a couple of my stories, and summaries of my novels". Michael claims that homepages are of great value. He created his own homepage and later transferred its contents to the philosophy's department homepage. Michael's objective and focus is to try to provide a source of information on the Internet that would be of interest to philosophers: "I have fifty or sixty pages that take to various nodes for the specialist areas of philosophy. From our homepage, just by going down a couple of arrows you can find all the journals, you can get the major philosophical associations, at least the major English speaking ones, you can get most philosophical literature up to the 20th century by going to the book section". Someone using this homepage can, for example, look up Kant, Plato, or Aristotle in the English translation.

On the web, identity emerges from the links, the images, and sounds provided. People link their homepages to such things as music, paintings, television shows, cities, books, photographs, comic strips, and playboy models. There is no technical limit to the amount of links users can create. In fact, the most visited homepages are typically the ones that provide the most, and the most interesting links. A homepage has differently styled rooms in cyber links that connect the world, brought together by the efforts of the user. As

Turkle points out, "homepages on the web are one recent and dramatic illustration of new notions of identity as multiple yet coherent" (1995:260). Perhaps the home metaphor provides the coherence. The screen pages become a home of sorts. A home the contents of which identify the owner's interests, work, and other demographic and idiosyncratic details.

An email address or a web page becomes part of the individual' identity. They also constitute a virtual identity to the extent that they are only made possible by computer mediated communication. Additionally they identify the user as having a certain range of interests and lifestyles; and it gives the user a certain amount of social prestige from having an email address and an Internet account. Email addresses and web pages are included in people's business cards, and company's and institution's letter heads. They have become a means of identification, parallel to the home address.

Merging Identities

Virtual personae allow users to play diverse roles leading to processes of self-creation and self- discovery in the relationship between a constructed persona and a real life self. The process of slipping occurs as the virtual personae and real life selves merge. Turkle cites the case of the "electronic lover"as an illustration of an extreme form of slippage, and a story of "real life transgression" (1995:229). This case is based on real events and has several versions. In all versions, a male psychiatrist called Alex becomes an active member of a Compuserve chat line using the name of a woman, Joan. Alex's deception began when using the computer nickname Shrink Inc. he found that he was conversing with a woman who assumed he was a female psychiatrist. He found that the women were more open with him than were his female patients in real life. So Alex begin to regularly logging on as Joan: a severely handicapped and disfigured Manhattan resident. As Alex expected, Joan was able to have relationships of great intimacy with "other" woman online. Alex came to believe that it was as Joan that he could best help these women (Turkle, 1995:229).

As time went on and relationships deepened, several of Joan's grateful friends wanted to meet her in person, and Alex realized that his game was getting out of control. He decided that Joan had to die. Joan's "husband" got online and informed participants that Joan was ill and in the hospital. Joan's online friends told her husband how important Joan was to them offering moral and financial support. Alex begin to panic not knowing whether to kill Joan off. Finally, Alex had Joan recover. Bur the virtual had bled into the real. Joan's "husband" had been pressed for the name of the hospital where Joan was staying so that they could send cards and flowers to her. Alex gave the name of the hospital where he worked as a psychiatrist. One member of the bulletin board called the hospital to confirm its address and discovered that Joan was not there as a patient. The truth began to unravel. The discovery of Alex's deception led to shock and outrage (Turkle, 1995:228-229).

Turkle argues that there has been a distinct shift in people's perceptions of the case: "in the early eighties, close to the time when the event first took place, people were most disturbed by the idea that a man had posed as a woman. By 1990, I began to hear more complaints about Joan's online lesbian sex. What most shocks today's audience is that Alex used Joan to pimp for him". People are no longer shocked with gender bending, "today what disturbs us is when the shifting norms of the virtual world bleed into real life" (1995:230). The transgression is the confusion of the virtual world with real life; it is treating the virtual world as if it were real life. In computer mediated interaction there are many potential areas of slippage. As discussed below the principal areas of slippage in online interaction are: in online relationships, in online affairs, and in cybersex. In all these areas there is a potential for self-discovery and self-knowledge, but this potential is typically not realized.

1. Online Relationships

Carolina experienced the slippage Turkle refers to when she first met her fiancé on a chat channel. The relationship started between "Felicia" and "Cottontail", their handles. As

it developed into a private relationship they eventually met face-to-face. As Carolina puts it; "when I felt I was getting really involved I decided to met him face-to-face, so we did. As soon as I saw him I gave him a big hug and a big smile and from that moment on it was like we'd been together for years". After they met face-to-face their relationship continued to develop online (mainly because he is from a different city), specifically in Harper's Tale where Carolina and her fiancé created characters that allow them to experiment at playing aspects of themselves that Carolina hopes will translate into real life advantages.

The boundaries of computer mediated communication and interaction are fuzzy. The routine of playing them becomes part of their player's real lives. By creating diverse personae, Carolina can experiment with different sets of characteristics and see where they lead. She is also able to play at being a mother and wife something that would be far more difficult in real life. Each of the multiple personae has its independence and integrity, but she relates them all to herself. In this way, there is a relationship between among the different personae, they are each an aspect of herself.

There is also a relationship among the different characters that Carolina created. The slippage Carolina experience between MUD and real life selves has extended to her love life. When I met her, Carolina was engaged to be married to a man she met and courted on chat lines. Their relationship begin as a relationship between their handles and continued in interactive games. Additionally, Carolina talks about her real life self as composed by the characters she plays and talks about her screen personae as a means for working on aspects of her real life. Players, as Turkle (1995) points out, sometimes talk about their real life selves as a composite of their characters and sometimes talk about their screen personae as a way to work out personal problems in their real life.

Carolina believes that, "in that way it's almost better online because you can't be physical, you just have to talk, you just learn who this person is. You get to know somebody pretty good". She also believes that "if you have a relationship online for very long and keep it going, you can have the same relationship in real life". She emphasizes her

online experience as a clear indication that "it takes a lot more trust online than it does in real life, and it takes a lot more communication skills". However, Carolina had previous online relationships that did not work out. She is therefore, cautious in encouraging people to build virtual relationships: "It's a whole different world, I find it to be, and in some cases it's a horrible world for people because they let it ruin their real lives. Some people don't realize that they can totally devastate someone's life, they have no idea how damaging they are". She speaks from her own experience of "being hurt by these guys on there. I never, ever before in my life was so untrusting until after those guys". This clearly implies that online interaction is not emotionally neutral. At the same time, eventually, people are confronted with the degree to which they construct relationships in their own minds. Carolina believes that a lot of people, herself included, experience what she calls "the Romeo syndrome". That is, people get caught up in the illusion that "online they'll find their prince".

Most of those that I interviewed did not believe that online relationships can lead to a healthy long lasting relationship. As Ed claims, "you can't get to know a person over the Net". Participants realize that at an important level, there are social and physical requirements for interaction in order to develop an understanding of each other as individuals. As Ed implies self-knowledge that is based on false or invented presentations of the self turns out to be a deception, or at best an illusion.

2. Online Affairs

Online affairs are another area of slippage where the virtual blends into the real. Carolina offers an example: "I actually know this married guy from England who travels a lot, and is on the Internet a lot. Basically this guy has online affairs, mostly with this one girl from Australia". As far as Carolina knows this man's wife is unaware of his online activities. Carolina explains that "this guy tells me that he lays down with his wife and all he can think about is the girl from Australia". Carolina points out that he has not met the

girl face-to-face: "this is all in his imagination, but when he wakes up with his real life wife he thinks of his virtual love". In fact, "he is thinking of breaking off his marriage". When asked if she believes that online affairs are a form of cheating, she emphatically replies that they are " because it affects you emotionally". She would also consider virtual affairs between characters cheating.

Tony also believes that online affairs are cheating. He points out that, "there's something we call in real life (IRL) and there's something we call virtual life (VL); you have an online identity and an off-line identity. A lot of people have problems separating the two". He believes that having an online affair is cheating because "you are actually doing it to a real person, you're actually doing the same thing as in a real life affair". In terms of sex, Tony sees a marked difference between interacting online and looking at a magazine, for example. The main distinction is that there is a real life human at the other end "you're not talking to make believe people". Like Carolina, Tony believes that "it is dangerous when people do that because it makes it seem like those people they are interacting with are not real". People "tend to lose touch that they are talking to a real person and that real feelings are involved". The real feelings, however, may be based on a false, or somehow deformed presentation of the self.

Tony likes to make virtual friends, but he is hesitant when it comes to the possibility of meeting these virtual friends face-to-face: "we've talked about it but we've never done it". For Tony "it's almost like we don't want to meet, because they have a personality on the Net and you don't want to find that they are different in real life". However, he agrees with Carolina that "people can form good relationships online because when you are in that kind of relationship [computer mediated] you really get to know somebody because you spend a lot of time talking to them". Tony prefers to keep is virtual identity of "Rusty" separated from his real life identity. Yet he does not keep his real life identity anonymous, and yet again he does not want to meet in person his virtual friends. Although he "likes to keep things separate," he believes that "the friendships that I make on

there are as real as what I have here". However, he recognizes that "it's not the same thing as face-to-face relationships. Because we are using only text we have developed a whole new way of expressing yourself, like smileys. In verbal and face-to-face communication a lot of expressions are given out by body language, and we try to substitute but there are times where it just isn't the same". The relationships are real but different, they involve little commitment, and only certain aspects of the self are actually revealed. In addition, there is minimal, if any, merging of the virtual identities with real life identities. Instead of slippage there is replacement.

Many without institutionalized religion or political commitments argue that rigid moral standards interfere with one's freedom and enjoyment of life. If the self is to be free, it must also be fluid, moving from one social situation and role to another without trying to fit life into any one set of values and norms, even one's own. In fact, one's values systematically vary from one social situation and relationship to another. Computer mediated communication and interaction thus conceived has its rules, but they are all instrumental, meaningful not in themselves but only as a means to the participant's enjoyment. Bending the rules makes sense if it elevates participants' levels of satisfaction.

In computer mediated lifestyle enclaves, like in real physical enclaves, the selves are defined by their preferences and needs, but these preferences and needs are arbitrary, and in this way each individual constitutes her own moral world; and in reconciling conflicting claims about what is good in itself, individuals can only ask if the consequences of their actions proved consistent with their own value system. In the absence of any objectifiable criteria of right or wrong the self and its feelings become the moral guide. The individual, being her own source of moral guidance, must always know what she wants and desires, or intuit what she feels. Each individual must act so as to produce the greatest satisfaction of her wants or to express the fullest range of her impulses. The objectified moral goodness of obeying god's will or following nature's laws turns into the subjective goodness of getting

what one wants and enjoying it (Bellah et al. 1985). Acts are not right or wrong in themselves, but only because of the results they produce, the feelings they express.

3. Cybersex

Rather than existing as separate issues thought and sex have always been thoroughly entwined and subtly indistinguishable in many contemporary technocratic discourses. Texts that discuss computation and reasoning in terms of sexual responses discursively erase the Cartesian separation between body and mind. Computer mediated communication intensifies culture's fascination with sexuality. In computer mediated communication and interaction participants are inspired by fantasies that are firmly grounded in current cultural preoccupation with issues on sex, gender, and women.

Whether on MUDs or in private rooms on commercial online services, cybersex consists of two or more participants typing descriptions of physical actions, verbal statements, and emotional reactions for their characters. This sort of sexual activity is very common, an INC search of newsgroups in the alt. domain revealed that there are three times as many sex newsgroups as there are groups on, for example, feminism, or the environment, or gun control. As Carlos points out "an awful lot of current web traffic is based around sex". Indeed Carlos argues that "a way to guarantee a thousand hits[1] an hour is to have the word 'bestiality' in your page. I've known a number of people who intentionally put a couple of words that would imply there's pornography in their key words just so they would get on the top ten sites".

Steve undoubtedly argues that "sex is driving the Internet, you can't deny it. Just look at the type of business that are operating out there. Certainly sexuality is a very product stimulus and it's a huge motivation for people to go online. He speculates that participants maybe be "waiting for the opportunity of having that stimulating conversation". Steve believes that "people are driven by some primal forces and if you want to have a

[1] A hit happens every time someone visits a newsgroup, chat line , web page.

successful software product you integrate sex into it and it will appeal to people". In analyzing the relationships between sex and technological development he states that " the printing press was a great tool but probably the second book printed was about sex".

Similarly, Richard believes that "sex sells everything". In addition, he argues that "there has always been impersonal sex, and cybersex is pretty much the same thing. An old idea in a new context". He adds that cybersex is equivalent to "a one night stand, it's a mutual contract in which you agree to ignore each other the next day". According to Richard: "you're imagining the person, the delivery is the context, the medium really is the message".

Morin defines cybersex as "essentially a short term deal that your fantasies will coincide". In fact he believes it is "crap, sex is in your head, you play games". He rhetorically asks: "what is the difference between that and masturbation? The body isn't there, and intellectually you're not there, you're not sharing anything". Steve believes that the main difference between cybersex and masturbation is that "the real thrill seems to be that there is somebody else involved, it adds an element of unpredictability to it". He makes the analogy to playing chess against himself: "OK I move white, then I go over and move black, but I know what white is doing". Unlike playing chess against oneself, with working out your fantasies over computer mediated networks participants do not know what is going on in the other player's mind. It can become excitingly unpredictable, for some.

Carlos believes that cybersex can be of social value "specially for teenage males, virtual sex is better than no sex, so great go for it. Just don't chase after real life females". He warns that the usual cautionary comments apply to virtual sex that apply to real life sex: "harassment, unwanted attention, initiation of contacts of a frightening kind with other men or women".

Ed believes that cybersex is the same thing as phone sex: "I really don't think there's much satisfaction in that. If you are talking about sex, you think sex is about the

physical body. You can go into ideas of sex on the Internet, but cybersex on chat lines is like phone sex, it is a cyber link. In virtual reality you can have a virtual body suit but even then it's not a real body, it's simulated". For others it is a fantasy world. Keith claims that "I am not inclined to think of people's fantasies as bad. Even what I would consider distasteful is not bad per se, unless they are acted out". Online "I think it's a thrill that wears off before too long". He thinks that concerns about sex online are overblown, "it's there, but I don't think it's anymore on the Internet than it's on any person's mind. It's just easier to access if you have an Internet connection". Cybersex, whether in MUDs or chat lines provides a situation in which individuals can play out scenarios that otherwise might have remained fantasy. However, it is not clear what the status of these fantasies entails. Because they involve other people, they are not pure fantasy. Yet, they are not being acted in the physical world thus offering new possibilities in determining mutually acceptable boundaries for interaction. Participants, however, have a clear idea that virtual sex is not the same as physical sex, although computer mediated sex can be a parallel fantasy world.

The Virtual Self

The appeal of computer existence cannot be separated from the actual cultural crises that humans are confronting in particular the crisis surrounding issues of sex. In a time when sexual contact with other humans carries the risk of AIDs, computer sex can pose an attractive alternative. Sex without the body is safe and convenient but it is not liberating. Sex is being replaced by the computer interface, where the sharing of the body is not necessary for sexual pleasure. Identifying with computers can be appealing on several levels in our fragmented existence. Vulnerable bodies and minds turn to computer mediated communication and interaction to protect themselves from disease and confusion.

In these relationships, participants can perceive an illusory sense of personal wholeness, the computer interface erases the difference between self and other. Additionally, embracing computerized existence creates a sense that one's emotions may be

replaced by rationalized virtual identities. For those unable to cope with the complexity of human emotions, it might seem preferable to replace them with automatic responses. With a disembodied sheltered self, the individual defends against both internal and external threats of dissolution. Haraway (1991) proposes an alternative way of conceptualizing cyborgs in terms of a hybrid subjectivity. Her cyborg would adopt partial and contradictory identities that accept difference, not defend against it. Ideally, Haraway's cyborg would liberate us from the hegemonic structures and social hierarchies that perpetuate sexism and racism. This suggests an idealized state of computer existence that rectifies the inadequacies and injustices of contemporary life. The idea of a cyborg body, feminine or otherwise, arises from the dissatisfaction with current social and economic relations. To be and live through a cyborg body, however, does not offer a satisfactory answer to individuals' search for meaning.

This is perhaps the reason for the surfacing of questions regarding the authenticity of people's online identities in many participants' narratives. Steve, for example, is working on developing some artificial intelligence applications similar to the Turing's test but on a chat line. This would involve creating a bot[2] that appears to be a person responding to queries with apparent autonomy. Steve's objective is to "prove that this stuff is insane". He reports that a group of computer programmers actually created a chat system where half the participants were people and the other half were bots. The test consisted of a variety of topics to be discussed and analyzed by all participants. Then a group of real people was asked to attempt to decipher, based on their answers, who was the real person and who was the artificial agent. The programmers found that the difference between the bot and the real person transpired only in discussion related to the topic of Shakespearean literature. On other topics, however, people could not enunciate any difference. According to Turing, this test would be evidence of artificial intelligence; at some level people cannot

[2] Artificial Agent that can be programmed to do things for the user online, such as compile email messages by priority or importance, filter out information, etc.

recognize the difference between a computer generated program and a real life person. For Steve, this experiment springs another point, it "brings it down to how many people discuss Shakespeare over the Internet?" Steve asserts that, "people discuss mindless babble, and anybody can create a program that would appear to be just another person on the system".

Another question in regards to the authenticity of virtual identities is the level of reality offered by the online experience. Steve alludes to the "caving game" analogy used by Stoll in the book *Silicon Snake Oil* where he describes the difference between a "caving trip" game he played in the late seventies called "Adventure", and a real life trip to the Cave of Bells in Tucson. Stoll argues that while fantasy role playing games are creatively programmed, a real physical caving trip offers a whole different experience: " every time someone mentions MUDs and virtual reality, I think of a genuine reality with muddier mud than anything a computer can deliver" (Stoll, 1995:5-7).

Typical attitudes towards online communication and life in cyberspace are summarized in the following experiment, narrated by Steve: "they took a village and gave everyone in the village a computer. People did their shopping through the computer, paid their bills through the computer, and did basically everything else through the computer. When the experience first started residents were happy with the convenience of not having to leave their homes in order to do mundane everyday things. However, researchers soon realized that residents were faking technical problems in order to have an excuse to go out and shop in person". Clearly this restates the point that people want and need physical interaction in order to find meaningful relationships.

Whether in relationships, affairs, or sex, which are interrelated in many ways, the subject of slippage is controversially discussed and debated online. The relationship between online personae and real life selves has become the focal point of discussion in a forum called "Moolove". Some contributors maintain that they enjoy experimenting with personae very different from their real life selves. Others insist that maintaining a virtual

persona that is very different from one's own self in real life is ethically deceiving. These people note that they want to reveal themselves to the group. Other contributors take a third position, stressing that computer mediated interaction provides opportunities to play aspects of oneself that may be inhibited in real life.

Computer mediated interaction blurs the boundaries between the self and the game, the self and role, the self and simulation. This is the subjectivity theory of the decentered self, according to which individuals do not have fixed, stable identities but assume changing, varying subject positions determined by language, gender, and other social and cultural institutions. However, the fuzzy boundaries with their shifting norms and the resulting confusion between the real and the virtual, does not necessarily lead to slippage, or any form of self-knowledge. An electronically mediated self is not necessarily a liberated self as mentioned, since new constraining possibilities are in the making. Prior constitution of the self, the ideological and cultural specificity of the language, all contribute to the positioning of subjects in electronic interaction. Additionally, assertion of individual identity is demonstrated not in terms of traditional unitary ideas about the self. Rather identity is asserted by anonymity and pseudonymity where spontaneity, imagination and desire are all important constituents of the self expresses in mediated interaction. This situation requires that individuals assert their identities in a normative and a non-normative manner. The normative assertion of identity is based on the real life selves while the non-normative assertion is based on the virtual personae.

Many people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated. But in online relationships, for most, there is a clear distinction between a constructed persona and a real life self. They both, however, constitute the individuals' identity; and they are both based on the prevailing individualistic framework of thought and way of life that permeates contemporary social relations. Separated from traditional sources of morality, the self seeks to work out its own form of action by autonomously pursuing happiness and satisfying its wants. But what are

the wants of the self? By what measure does it identify its happiness? In the face of these questions the predominant ethos of online individualism is more than ever determined to letting go of all criteria other than radical private validation. But, the independence of individuals' ethical and moral standards do not inherently or necessarily require commitment to others. In fundamentally similar ways to individualism in the real physical world, online individualism offers a measure of external success and the intuition of feeling that grounds approval for virtual actions.

Computer mediated communication requires and creates new possibilities for an openness to multiple lifestyles and multiple identities, and multiple viewpoints may call for a new moral discourse. According to Turkle (1995), the culture of simulation helps to achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility and capacity for joy comes from having access to many selves. But as Bellah et al. suggest: "ideas of the self's inner expansion reveal nothing of the shape moral character should take, the limits it should respect, and the community it should serve"(1985:77). A self that is primarily grounded in electronic lifestyle enclaves derives her own morality from the emergent fluidity of access to her own multiplicity. The flexibility is mainly in regards to the self's own multiplicity, not to the multiplicity of voices that acquire importance or social value through computer mediated communication.

The moral discourse emergent on the fluidity of access to multiple selves turns out not to be a new moral discourse. It is the old moral discourse characterized by individualism. Given this individualistic moral framework, the self becomes a crucial site for the comparative examination of feelings that result from the utilitarian acts and inspire expressive ones: "the self must be maintained as the intuitive center of the wants and impulses that define right action, and as the unimpeachable evaluator of the good or bad feelings by which the utility of our acts can be calculated and the depth of their own self-expression intuited" (Bellah et al. 1985:75-77).

As Bellah et al.(1995) argue, this picture of the self seems commonsensically obvious and problem free. Individuals figure out what they want because they intuitively know what makes them feel good. But a difficulty arises to dim the possibility of individualistic self-knowledge. Individuals' feelings, wants, and values may not be uncompromised and absolutely independent of those of others. The evaluations of others are internalized ideas about being good, not as an objective state of virtue, but in conforming to the evaluations of others or deferring to convention. No doubt present and intense at times, the experience of a self whose main objective is to feel good is so extremely subjective that it does not have many distinguishing characteristics. Bellah et al. rightly assert that the touchstone of individualistic self-knowledge proves illusive as a guide for individual action. Participants' multiple selves do not lead to a moral discourse based on the acceptance of multiple viewpoints because the selves are based on their own interests and needs within particular electronic enclaves.

It should be clear that values are in themselves no answer. Values turn out to be incomprehensible, rationally indefensible things that individuals choose when they throw off the last vestige of external influence and reach pure freedom (Bellah et al. 1985). Speaking of values is self-contradictory because values are more than a moral choice. Values based on the premises of individualism presume the existence of an empty and improvisational self, obscuring personal reality, social reality, and particularly the moral reality that links person and society. I want to make it clear that I am not saying that the people to whom I talked have empty selves. Most of them are engaged and involved in the society. But because of the limitations of a language of individualism that forms the essence of their discourse, they cannot think of their acts or masks, and those of others, except as arbitrary exercises of will.

The electronic self is completely improvisational, choosing values to express itself, but it is not constituted by those values as a pre-existing source, and therein lies its absolute freedom. The problems with this notion of self have been the subject of modern thought for

many years. And they continue to be pertinent with computer mediated communication and interaction. The electronic world is inhabited by selves that are, seemingly, in perpetual progress without a fixed moral end. There, as in the real world, each individual is entitled to his or hers own space and is more or less free within its boundaries. In theory, this social and psychic right is extended to everyone regardless of their ethnicity, sex, or value system. But while everyone may be entitled to their own private space only those who have enough money can, in fact, afford to purchase the private property required to do their own thing. Therefore, economic conditions necessarily delimit, and sometimes violate, individual rights to self fulfillment. The apparent tolerance for diverse values and lifestyles online, so vehemently defended, although not really followed, is encouraged by costs and computer skills that exclude the majority of people from getting connected to a computer network.

Conclusion

I have examined in this chapter a process by which the primary emphasis on self reliance has led to the notion of pure, undetermined choice, free of tradition, obligation or commitment as the essence of the self. The self thus defined is characteristic of lifestyle enclaves.

A pervasive myth of the information age is that everything that is important to know is transparently accessible with the right Net codes. As Springer (1994) suggests, this augments two ideological projects of the information age: the construction of social theories narrated by disembodied minds, and the construction of technological histories written without women, workers and politics. It additionally accentuates the ideological individualism prevalent in previous ages.

It seems unnecessary to point out the irony of a technology that in meaning to extend the organs and the senses, supporting fears of mortality and hopeful transcendence, threatens to transform or deform the subjects as they are before their computer mediated

interactions. People discover who we are face-to-face and side by side with others in learning, love, work. People live through relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning. Individualism is one such pattern. But individuals' senses of dignity, worth, and moral autonomy, are dependent in many ways on social, cultural and institutional contexts that hold society somewhat together. People are not simply ends in themselves, either as individuals or as society. They are part of an unimaginably larger whole. Individuals fear that society may overwhelm them and destroy any chance of autonomy unless they stand against it. This fear, however must be accompanied by some recognition that it is only in relation to society that individuals can fulfill themselves and that if social ties are radically severed, life could exist without meaning in the void of hyperreality.

Chapter 5

Computer Mediated Communication and Hyperreality

Introduction

It is evident in the preceding chapters that the evaluation of computer mediated communities and identities as an assessment of the condition of postmodernity runs to extremes: at one extreme there is Turkle's utopia regarding the possibilities of slippage; at the other extreme there is Kroker and Weinstein's dystopia about the replacement of the human. While slippage is about learning from merging real life with virtual life, replacement is about the disappearance of the need for slippage.

Turkle's analysis of the potential of computer mediated networks for social liberation is utopian because multiple communities and multiple identities do not inherently lead to forms of knowledge that permeate real life. Kroker and Weinstein's analysis is dystopian because not all participants experience the need to be replaced, or recline into a virtual life.

Between these two extreme visions of the computer mediated postmodern potential, Albert Borgmann's assessment of the postmodern condition is far from being as utopian as Turkle's and closer to the dystopia of Kroker and Weinstein, but less pessimistic. Between utopian liberation and dystopian replacement there is reality. Borgmann analyzes postmodernism as having two distinct tendencies: one is hypermodernism or the refinement of the modern technological project of realism, universalism, and individualism. Hypermodernism is characterized by hyperreality, hyperactivity, and hyperintelligence (1992:6). The opposing tendency is postmodern realism which highlights Bellah et al.'s questions with regards to community. Postmodern realism avoids supporting aggressiveness, universalism, and individualism, and is part of a communal context that instructs a reality that is locally bound, centered, and divinely constituted (1992:119).

Borgmann argues that physical reality includes the real and the hyperreal. The real offers commanding presence and it is continuous with real life; and it is Borgmann's proposal to restrain hyperreality. Although the hallmark of postmodernism is that there is no universal reality, only particularism, we need reality in order to have some measure of coherence. Postmodern realism is to comprehend modernism and hypermodernism providing a clearing where reality can be present. Borgmann points out that a rich reality is needed to sponsor a sense of community. Reality inspires common pride and pleasure, a shared sense of place.

Hyperreality offers experiences that are disposable and discontinuous (1992:118). Borgmann points out that while experiences in hyperreality may seem to be the same as real life experiences, the fundamental difference occurs regarding the context of these experiences. He explains that experience is not the sum of sensory stimulation over a period of time, but an imminent encounter of a person with the world (1992:95). Hyperreality offers an experience that is indifferent to its context turning out to be disposable and discontinuous. The hyperreal world is at the users' disposal, it can be called up, stopped, replayed, exchanged. To be disposable hyperreality must be experientially discontinuous with its context. If it were rooted in its setting it would be far more difficult to replace it: "reality encumbers and confines" (1992:96). Hyperreality is characterized by brilliance, richness, and pliability (1992:83). Borgmann uses the term glamour to include pliability, richness, and brilliance (1992:87-88). Disposability and discontinuity are marks of hyperreal glamour (1992:96).

Borgmann distinguishes between instrumental and final hyperreality. Instrumental hyperreality obeys the reality principle; it is about utilizing electronic networks to learn or acquire skills that can be used in the real world. Instrumental hyperreality is brilliant in that real world obstacles and confusions can be clarified or eliminated. It is rich in that there are no space or time restrictions. It is pliable in that it allows moments and events to be frozen and replayed. Final hyperreality is not constrained by the reality principle. It does not have

to be about the real world, exhibiting clearly the three characteristics of hyperreality. Final hyperreality is brilliant in that it includes many human senses and excludes all unwanted information. It is rich containing encyclopedic completeness. It is pliable being subjected to participants' desires and manipulation.

Computer mediated communication has been hailed as the technology of freedom: easy access, low costs, and distributed knowledge. The development of computer mediated technology proposes to vastly transform the capacity of global civil society to build coalitions and networks where new social forms can emerge on the world stage. However, this is occurring in a context of hyperreality. Computer mediated lifestyle enclaves and virtual identities are acclaimed for the possibilities they offer for connection and social liberation. This can be seen as an attempt at achieving a postmodern realist society, that is to use computer mediated technology in the service of real life. Participants do use the networks to access information, to participate in discussions, to communicate with others around the world. To that extent email, mailing lists, newsgroups seemingly offer some elements of postmodern realism.

However, evidence from chapters three and four shows that electronic networks really are instrumental hyperreality. The optimism and hope in computer mediated communication leads to advancing a politics of liberation of the self and an ethics that (re)claims community. While the idea of computer mediated politics and ethics may stem from the desire and hope for liberation and community, my data clearly indicates that there is no real liberation, specifically not in terms of sex or gender. Even though computer mediated communication may be regarded as an appropriate medium in attempting to advance solutions to real life problems, the attempts are unsuccessful because participants reject or dispose of any concept of community, or communal celebration. This is why (or because) computer mediated networks are hyperreality. They remain disconnected from a context of real life issues. Turkle's liberating potential is postmodern realism in principle, but because it does not permeate real life, it exists only in the hyperreal realm of ideals.

Computer mediated networks are not used in the service of the real world in terms of building community, reconstructing the self, or leading to a knowledge society. Participants in computer mediated communication are not more connected, or leading more meaningful lives, or acquiring different ways of knowing the world and living social relations, then they did before they went online. For many, computer mediated communication and the apparent interaction that it offers, is an instrument for communication and access to information. To this extent computer mediated communication can only be instrumental hyperreality, where the networks are used as tools.

Borgmann's framework provides a theoretical guide for the positioning of computer mediated communication and interaction within the postmodern condition. Hypermodernism and postmodern realism as the principled tendencies of the postmodern condition do not seem to offer serious advancements in the direction of substantive issues of politics and ethics. However, Borgmann's insistence on the reality principle as curtailing hypermodernistic tendencies merits emphasis. My analysis of computer mediated politics and ethics reveals a state of postmodern knowledge that is not advancing a community ethics grounded in common values of social liberation. This is, in part, because participation in electronic networking is not grounded in the reality principle.

In this chapter, I will use Borgmann's framework for the postmodern condition as a theoretical synthesis of my analysis of computer mediated communities, identities, and knowledge. Computer mediated networks and the interaction within them are analyzed as hyperreality in its instrumental and final versions. Computer mediated knowledge is analyzed as hyperintelligence.

Hypermodernism and Postmodern Realism

Borgmann argues that hypermodernism is "devoted to the design of a technologically sophisticated and glamorous unreal universe, distinguished by its

hyperreality, hyperactivity, and hyperintelligence" (1992:6). According to Borgmann, hypermodernism produces "hypertrophic" versions of the developments of the postmodern economy (1992:82).

Hyperreality overcomes and displaces tangible reality. Information processing becomes hypermodern to the extent that workers, for example, have to enter into the unreal world of computerized information. Some appropriate and learn this world of information, finding power in it. This turns out to be a new reality that appears to be superior to the old reality, conforming more fully to the technological promise of liberation. It is, however, an artificial substitute or a hyperreality.

Hyperreality includes an instrumental and a final version. Instrumental hyperreality obeys the reality principle, it is about utilizing electronic networks to learn or acquire skills that can be used in the real world. Modern computer communication systems were prime for absorption into instrumental hyperreality by rendering the legal and financial world more perspicuous and pliable. Locally in increasing the size and kinds of operations of law firms, accounting firms, banks, and by enlarging the legal staff and financial departments of manufacturers, hospitals, utilities. Hyperreality went global in space and time when financial markets were linked electronically (1992:84). The drive towards instrumental hyperreality is also highly visible in the scholar's workstation, where the screen, the keyboard, the monitor, and manipulating devices open up a world that formerly was composed of typewriters, laboratories, libraries, and conference rooms (1992:85).

Unlike instrumental hyperreality, final hyperreality is not constrained by the reality principle. It is brilliant in that it includes all human senses: vision, hearing, smell, temperature, and so on; and it excludes all unwanted information. Technically this is the absence of noise. It is also rich, offering as its ideal limit encyclopedic completeness. Final hyperreality is lastly pliable by being entirely subject to participants' manipulation and desires, where all demands are adjustable. Technically this is interactivity (1992: 85).

Hyperactivity is the hypermodern proposal for flexible specialization of the postmodern world. Borgmann uses the game analogy to explicate the fit between hyperactivity and hyperreality, where the latter is the game and the former is the addiction to that game. While reality has boundless difficulties a game is bound by the board, the cards, and the rules; at the same time offering limitless challenges within its protective boundaries. The hyperreal world contains no misery and grace as in the real world, but only news and challenges that demand participants' reactions. And "while in reality one may be defeated or redeemed, in hyperreality one can only win or lose. In the real world one may earn affection and gratitude; in the hyperreal framework there are only prizes and acclaim" (Borgmann, 1992:99). Hyperactivity is at the highest visibility in players for whom the hyperreal game has become total and there is no longer a distinction between expanding and playing the game: "reality has been degraded to an adversary within the game, one that loses more often than not" (1992:100).

Hyperintelligence is the hypermodern version of the distinctively postmodern tendency of shared knowledge. The network of computers and communications is the characteristic infrastructure of postmodernism. Borgmann links the postmodern infrastructure to human intelligence as follows: the information links are like the nerves that pervade and animate the human organism. The sensors and monitors are analogous to the human senses that put people in touch with the world. Databases correspond to memory. And the information processors function as human comprehension and reasoning (1992:103). As the postmodern infrastructure becomes integrated it exceeds human intelligence in precision, capacity, and acuity; thus hyperintelligence.

Borgmann identifies the second tendency of the postmodern condition as being postmodern realism: that is to use technology not as a way of life but as a service to the reality of people's lives. Borgmann defines postmodern realism as "an orientation that accepts the lessons of the postmodern critique and resolves the ambiguities of the postmodern condition in an attitude of patient vigor for a common order centered on

communal celebrations" (1992:116). Reality is the principle invigorating this attitude providing the center for the celebration. For Borgmann, postmodern realism is how the distracting forces of hypermodernism can be contained with focal realism, patient vigor, and communal celebration.

Borgmann argues that on the other side of hyperreality is eloquent reality, a reality that is natural and traditional (1992:119). Hyperreality obscures and overlies eloquent reality. Eloquent reality is focal reality: "a placeholder for the encounters each one of us has with things that of themselves have engaged mind and body and centered our lives" (1992:119). Presence in and continuity with the world, and centering power are features of focal things. Focal things warrant themselves and are only focal in human practices. The wilderness, for example, is eloquent reality that becomes focal realism in hiking it: "focal reality is alive in the symmetry of things and practices - of nature, craft, and art entrusted to the care of humans" (1992:121). People engaged in focal practices inspired by focal things see the absence of modern systematic order and principled justification as the postmodern sign of life; and the disappointing lack of glamour as the mark of reality (1992:121). Postmodern realism, then, includes the recognition of focal things and focal practices.

Postmodern realism, like modern aggressive realism shows itself in dureness and firmness: "the duress of reality comes home to us in pain and adversity. We feel the firmness of reality when it inspires and invigorates us" (1992:124). Today's duress is present regarding the environment, the hostility of people, and the frailty of the body. The classic response to these burdens has consistently been a technological fix. And this continues to be the case in the postmodern society. Borgmann argues that, however, part of the postmodern experience is that duress of reality need not be subjected to hard solutions. He believes that the crucial task is "not simply to put up with the recalcitrance of reality sullenly and resentfully but to endure it bravely if not gladly: (1992:124). Borgmann argues that people need to have patience, in terms of endurance regarding the limits of the land, the poor and the helpless, the health of our bodies. He believes that only a shared communal

patience will encourage the individual to endure and society to agree to on explicit and reasoned limits to social justice. In terms of health care, for example, Borgmann states that: "it is only when society becomes something like a community that health and patience will be reconciled". The reward of patience is vigor (1992:125).

According to Borgmann there is an imminent need for a shift from promoting the hypermodern machinery to supporting places where reality, community, and divinity are joined in celebration (1992:139). Borgmann argues that a community of celebration, whether in sports, art, or religion, will restrain hypermodernist tendencies. The interlacing of communities of celebration provides for a community of communities. In this chapter, I use Borgmann's framework, specially his ideas on hyperreality and postmodern realism to analyze how computer mediated communication is positioned along a continuum between the two notions of hyperreality, and how it also tries to have a measure of postmodern realism, but really fails.

The Net as Hyperreality

Computer mediated networks of communication and interaction can be considered to properly represent the tendency of hyperreality that characterizes hypermodernism. And to a limited extent, they also represent an attempt at adhering to some reality principle in attempting liberation and democracy, but postmodern realism is not really achieved.

My analysis reveals an electronic world where participants in computer mediated communication use the networks primarily as instrumental hyperreality. Most of those I talked with used email, the Web, and newsgroups primarily as instruments for communication and access to information. Instrumental hyperreality is creating a Web page with information and links to other sites. It is participating in, or searching for information on diverse topics and issues in newsgroups and mailing lists. It is wanting information on underground music and logging on to the newsgroup on the subject and accessing it. It is wanting an opinion from an expert and emailing her a request for it. It is wanting a journal

article and not having to go to the library. Instrumental hyperreality is wanting to access information and others and going online rather than going to a physical place. Electronic networks allow participants to have the information they want or need and they are instrumental to the extent that they are used as tools.

Email, the Web, newsgroups and mailing lists all demonstrate some of the features that Borgmann identified as characteristic of instrumental hyperreality. These networks are pliable to the extent that individuals are not at all bound by the constrains of time or place. Rather they can email anyone at any time without imposition of the face-to-face contact. Participants can also print their messages, send great amounts of text, view and review the messages, saving or deleting them as they please. The network and its technical applications are entirely manipulated by the user's desires. Electronic networks are also rich in the sense that participants can access any information from anywhere and communicate with anyone in the connected world. Finally, these networks have some amount of brilliance to the extent that such things as real world social clues that may adversely affect face-to-face interaction are removed, such as age or sex. It is not absolutely brilliant, however, since although it is possible to exclude unwanted information or individual participants - by using bots, or by delegating their messages to the kill file as Carlos suggests - it is not yet possible to include all human senses, such as smell or vision (video technology already exists as part of some networks, but most of the networks mentioned here do not include vision, the only thing that people see is the text on the screen).

Although Borgmann presents simulated worlds as the perfectly realized hyperreal universes, it is clear that email, the Web, mailing lists, and newsgroups are also part of instrumental hyperreality that is becoming extensively, if not brilliantly, realized.

Most participants whom I interviewed use the networks as primarily instrumental but, some do use them as final hyperreality. While Turkle's participants tend to interact in networks that fall within this realm, my participants tend to interact in networks that fall within instrumental hyperreality. Instrumental networks are based on the reality principle

while final networks are extensively hyperreal, clearly exhibiting the features of pliability, richness, and brilliance. They are pliable because they are entirely subject to participants' desires and manipulation. On a Mud game or chat line participants can make up any environment they wish. These simulated worlds are highly interactive to the extent that they are constituted by a group of people who participate at the same time. These environments are immensely richer than the real world because individuals can make up characters that do whatever they want within the interaction. The networks also include an element of brilliance to the extent that participants can exclude all the information they deem unwanted or unnecessary. However, the networks are not entirely brilliant, since again they cannot yet include all the human senses. Cybersex is final hyperreality clearly lacking brilliance in its denial of the physical body. Virtual identities are at once pliable, rich, and somewhat brilliant.

Computer mediated lifestyle enclaves are hyperreal, and so are the virtual identities constructed within these enclaves. Electronic hyperreality is a fusion of the real and the artificial. Computer networks represent this hybrid form. To be sure they are installed with the intention of allowing users to communicate with one another and to provide access to information and services. But people also use them to chat, have sexual encounters, for entertainment. Thus seen, a computer network is a highly interactive hyperreality. Within a chat channel or newsgroup participants can say, be, or ask anything they wish. The networks are interactive also to the extent that they are pliable or easily manipulated by the user. They are rich providing all kinds of information and opinions. And they are disposable and discontinuous. Individuals decide what information they receive in their email. They can access this information at any time. They can shut off the computer. Electronic networks are discontinuous with real life to the extent that online activities do not permeate the life of the participants beyond the utility they provide.

Borgmann presents instrumental and final hyperreality as two distinct tendencies of hypermodernism. Some lifestyle enclaves are instrumental, such as the mailing lists that

Carlos and Michael subscribe to. Some networks are final such as the chat lines and MUD games that Carolina and Tony play. However, in practice this distinction is less clear than it appears. Computer mediated networks are better represented along a continuum containing different degrees of instrumental and final hyperreality. Some participants use the networks to find support and relationships; most use them to access or disseminate information and to communicate. Final networks create lifestyle enclaves that are instrumental to communities of memory. The networks and the interaction within them are clearly disposable and discontinuous. One can say glamour is also on a continuum with some networks exhibiting the features of hyperreality more fully than others. Instrumental networks are less glamorous than final networks.

Borgmann points out that glamorous commodities are alluring but not sustaining. An interactive hyperreality may provide participants with lifestyle enclaves and virtual identities that can be a shelter from emptiness and loneliness. But the real commodity is not yet total and people still must step into the real world. A hyperreal setting fails to provide, as Borgmann points out: "the tasks and blessings that call forth patience and vigor in people. Its unsubstantial and disconnected glamour provokes disorientation and distraction, which are both precariously poised between sullen resentment and hyperactive exertion" (1992:96). Borgmann argues that to contrast these symmetries is a task that is at once ontological, moral, aesthetic, theological, and political. Ontological because it raises problems of what is considered real. Moral in the direction it proposes for human conduct. Aesthetic in involving the question of what constitutes enchanting and illuminating human works. Theological in leading to issues of grace and divinity. Political in considering the responsibility for the common order (1992:96-97).

Virtual Knowledge as Hyperreality

Computer mediated postmodern knowledge is not about gaining the ability to think about modern and postmodern concerns, either at an individual or at the community level.

Not one of my participants mentioned liberation, or trying to find new ways of thinking or knowing in their reasons for using computer mediated communication. Or that mediated interaction was superior to real physical contact; just more convenient.

As Borgmann argues, hyperintelligence seems destined to be the final instrument of fulfilling the promise of technology : " we will be the masters and possesors of nature" (1992:104). However, he rightly cautions that the hypertrophic tendencies will lead to a severe diminution of human intelligence. The electronic hyperintelligent system can be so extensive that it will be everywhere curtailing the need to physically go anywhere. It allows individuals to be in contact with everyone else at all times. Ubiquity seems to favor or promote connection and community, but only at a superficial level. With any depth of consideration hyperintelligence disconnects individuals from each other. Electronic interaction as more connection is an illusion. As Borgmann argues: "if everyone is indifferently presented regardless of where one is located on the globe. no one is commandingly present" (1992:105).

Computer mediated communication diminishes individual presence, since any individual can make any other individual vanish if their presence becomes undesired. Here Borgmann is referring to the filtering devices used by Carlos, Jennifer, Michael, and Carolina. Borgmann points out that the diffusion of intelligence into hyperintelligence will lead to disconnected, disembodied, and disoriented sort of life (1992:106-107). The human substance will be diminished through a simultaneous diffusion and individuation of the person: "hyperintelligence is obviously growing and thickening, suffocating reality and rendering humanity less mindful and intelligent" (1992:109).

The hyperintelligent system as a way to appropriate the world apparently leads to the attainment of world citizenship of unequaled scope and subtlety. However, the hyperintelligent networks do not have much force or resistance, as is evident in the lack of democracy of access and content, or views of the self since there is no slippage. The hyperintelligent world is presented to our ears and eyes through the screen, while the rest

of the body becomes irrelevant: "the symmetry of world and body falls to the level of a shallow if glamorous world and a hypermodern yet disembodied person" (1992:108). Borgmann points out that while hypermodern individuals will not be able to function without their hyperintelligent information, traditional knowledge has become absurd with hyperintelligence. Instead of consulting scholars, for example, today's students with electronic hypertext can retrieve more complete and accurate information than the recollections of a scholar's lifetime, in far less time. The Web, mailing lists, newsgroups, email are used for such purposes, and to that extent they are hyperintelligent networks.

Computer Mediated Politics as Hyperreality

The hope and the promise, given such imminent hyperreality and hyperintelligence, is that electronic networks will be used in the service of the real world, its people and its context. The hope and the proposed solution, is that hypermodernism can be restrained by adhering to the reality principle: to be connected electronically in order to improve social and individual life. That is, voices that are at the margins of social and political discourse now have an electronic venue for saying what they want to anyone in mailing lists, email, newsgroups, chat lines. Specifically, this hope is evident in the desire and perceived potential for self-knowledge leading to social liberation and in the hope for electronic democracy.

The issue in computer mediated communication is the genesis of a new politics that goes beyond the modern standpoints of liberalism and socialism. Here lies the computer mediated communications' liberating dream of Turkle, who talks about a simulated world within its boundaries being possible to deconstruct and reconstruct all there is leading to new forms of self-knowledge. In terms of democracy, computer mediated communication could change the balance of power favoring non-governmental organizations on the global level, and individual citizens at the community level. This vision of electronic democracy is represented as the opportunity to vote from home, access information from candidates

online, email political representatives, sign electronic petitions, form ad-hoc interest groups and virtual parties, post grievances, debate the issues, chat with the prime minister on America-On-Line-Canada.

It would seem that an extensive notion of the self, such as Turkle's multiple virtual identities allowing for the construction and reconstruction of the selves, is liberating politically and personally. Donna Haraway (1991), before Turkle, has presented the cyborg body precisely as a liberating metaphor. A cyborg - cybernetic organism - is a product of science and technology. Being a cyborg is to acknowledge the undeniable fact that today's reality, or hyperreality, includes an intimate relationship between individuals and technology where individuals can construct themselves. This, of course, allows for whole new forms of subjectivity, thereby allowing for liberating possibilities. Haraway sees "the Cyborg Manifesto" as an ironic political myth (1991:173). In that essay, the cyborg as an icon of the Cold War industrial-military complex is turned into a symbol of feminist liberation. In the manifesto, Haraway argues that a cyborg, or the fusion of animal and machine, eliminates the opposition between nature and culture, self and the world, that is contained in modern Western thought. Women and men are not natural but constructed, like a cyborg. Therefore given the right technology anyone can be reconstructed, leading one to question basic assumptions of our social relations such as whether it is natural to have a social structure based on forms of domination (1991:176-178)

Being a cyborg is not just about the freedom to construct or reconstruct the selves. It is also about a perspective of seeing and analyzing social relations as collections of networks of information. The immune system figures prominently in Haraway's work in "Simians Cyborgs, and Women" (1991) as an information system: "a potent and polymorphous object of belief, knowledge, and practice" (1991:204). What makes today's cyborg fundamentally different from its mechanical ancestor is precisely information. Haraway explains that cyborgs are information machines. Nothing is a single event but, a constant flow of information. The body is a meat or flesh computer running a collection of

information systems that adjust themselves in response to each other and the environment. To make a better body all that needs to be done is to improve the feedback mechanism, or plug in another system: an artificial heart, an all seeing bionic eye. The immune system is a perfect example of the networked informational consciousness.

Haraway (1991) uses the analogy of the cyborg to represent a general shift from thinking of individuals as isolated in their world, to thinking of them as individual nodes on networks. To be a cyborg is not so much about how many bits of silicon one has under the skin, or the prosthetics in one's body. Rather it is about everyone having a television set, or a VCR; or going to the gym and realizing that everywhere the body is considered a high-performance machine. Information networks are inside individuals' bodies that feed on agribusiness products, or are maintained by pharmaceuticals and altered by medical procedures.

Individuals are nodes in technological complex and complicated networks - part human, part machine: complex hybrids of meat and metal -that lead to a reconsideration of the usefulness of the dichotomy between natural and artificial. Cyborgs are hybrid networks that not only surround individuals but incorporate them. A lifestyle enclave, a virtual identity, computer mediated knowledge, are all cyborg constructions of people and machines.

Haraway's possibilities for liberation are based on the idea that with technology individuals can construct identity, gender, sexuality, as they wish. For Haraway, feminist concerns and political questions are embodied in technoculture. Technology is not neutral, it is inside the objects of the culture and inside the body. The question of natural versus artificial, the ethics of agribusiness, the politics of the immune system, are networked with biology. Clearly, individuals are living in a world of connections, and it therefore matters which connections are made.

It is useful to think of social relations as a collection of networks, but it is less clear how the possibility of reconstruction provided by choosing electronic networks is going to

be liberating in real life. If each individual is only a node in a collection of networks then he is only partly responsible for the whole network. Additionally, if each individual is only a node, how is he or she going to get the whole network to be liberated or to serve as an instrument of liberation? Sure every individual can chose a prosthetic device, a handle, a character, a network, to whom to talk to, but on what grounds are these choices made? Choices are not grounded in the possibility or the desire for liberation defended by Turkle and Haraway, and questioned by Kroker and Weinstein. Rather, choices are independent of and disconnected from real life issues. In order to be liberating thereby leading to social change, interaction must be guided by and grounded in a reality principle which is hardly present in computer mediated networks

While the cyborg body and the networked perspectives seem liberating, the reality of the situation, as narrated by the people I interviewed, is that instead of a symbol for liberation, the cyborg is the perfect vehicle for the diffusion of hyperreality. To be networked is not inherently liberating. Cybersex is final hypereality, not socially liberating, since it does not permeate real life politics. Having a virtual identity, whether a character or handle, is not liberating; pretending to be a woman is not liberating. There is no continuity between virtual and real life. Participants are not attempting to be liberated or to acquire new ways of knowing; rather they want to be physically isolated, and prefer that the interaction not be based on centered power. There is no patience: if participants do not like what someone wrote they can easily ignore it, or hypertext to some other site, or shut off the computer. It is extremely easy to ignore and avoid others, rather than join them in communal celebration.

Technological embodiment, in terms of community and identity, raises important questions about the meaning of social and personal relations, and the desire to transcend physical social identities. In offering gendered descriptions of multiple forms of postmodern embodiment, computer mediated communication sets the stage for the elaboration of a feminist theory of the relationship of material bodies to cyberspace and of

construction of agency in computer mediated encounters. The violation of boundaries seems liberating for it allows historically oppressive constructs to be deconstructed and replaced by new kinds of entities more open to expression of difference. The problem is, of course, that the new constructs are also oppressive in similar ways. In attempting to deconstruct "man" a new idea of "woman" arises. Yet, as it has been defined it represents the writings of white, affluent, heterosexual, Western women. The new constructs tend to exclude the experiences of black women, poor women, and lesbian women. Computer mediated networks are sites for the reinscription of cultural narratives of gender and racial based identities. Computer mediated interaction both disembodies and re-embodies based on sex, gender, ethnicity, and other relations. Thereby the appeal of merging and crossing boundaries between human and machine. So far, however, electronic liberated communities and selves exist only as hyperreality.

Computer mediated interaction is not leading to a history of technology from a feminist perspective, but to minimal rethinking about gender issues. It is still consistent with a sex based history of technology, where technology is not a means to escape or transcend the body, but rather the means to communicate and connect with other virtual bodies. It is consistent with the ideal of a virtual community and environment as an alternative to the social oppression and exploitation that characterizes capitalist patriarchal society.

Interaction in electronic networks is leading to the perpetuation, rather than a rethinking, of gender issues, in part, because of an evident online political tendency of radical Libertarianism. Computer mediated communication attracts strong, male, radical, libertarian types. There is a common perception that computer mediated communication attracts people who are comfortable dominating. Computer mediated communication gives them power to work their will on the environment: "you can shut people by pressing the

"D" key or putting their name in your kill file (Kinney, 1995)[1]. This is the opposite of an "opening up" form of electronic democracy envisioned by Carlos and others.

Electronic democracy also turns out to be hyperreal, not connected to real life or real world issues. The predominant political tendency online is right wing libertarianism, a mixture of extreme liberals and extreme conservatives. The majority of those I talked with did not identify membership in any of the existing political parties. Self-descriptions of political beliefs were broad in scope and some were quite vague. Political voices included: citizens of heaven, liberal anarchist, left wing, progressive libertarian, against government. Despite these wide ranging beliefs, which are interesting given the homogeneity of computer mediated demographics, some political uniformity is observed in the typical belief in freedom of expression and freedom of information in terms of attitudes against government regulation favoring instead internal control of access and content. This only promotes hyperreality by reducing or eliminating possible connections with real life, advancing the notion that only those who have access to computer networks should have a voice in how and what the networks are used for, organized, and managed.

The attitude of internal control among participants is typified by Carlos, for example, who has his own private agenda for interacting online. Part of his agenda includes the expression of his political belief in direct democracy and freedom of expression. Regarding the latter, Carlos believes that "there's hardly a worse evil in the world than censorship". He feels strongly against any kind of government regulation of the Internet or any computer mediated networks. He reads the newsgroups to be "ready to jump in with comments if I get mad at a politician". As a form of protest, when he sees posts by politicians in favor of regulating mediated communication, he actively finds the "raunchiest pictures I can and I fill their [politicians] mailboxes with it". Similarly, during the Bernardo trial because the Canadian justice system requires trials to be public, "I helped

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[1] Personal email.

distribute material in Western Canada". He adds that it would be "utterly impossible without the Internet to disseminate such information".

Similarly, Michael believes that censorship should not be tolerated, "I wouldn't want to censor them [white supremacists, for example] as long as they remain passive", that is as long as they do not actually spread to word in other newsgroups, or become disruptive to online interaction. In addition, Michael also uses computer mediated communication to express his opinion to politicians. For example with the passage of the Communications Decency Act he "blacked out all of the philosophy pages". This simply means that anyone accessing the philosophy homepage would not find any information there, rather they would find a blank screen. Many people protested the act with what became known as "the thousand points of darkness" campaign. While it may have been highly visible this campaign was largely symbolic and did not get the point across to the US government. This reflects frustration with the existing political scene, translated into a anti-government mood: the Libertarian Party which has a sizable presence on the Net. However, favoring internal control instead of government control only leads to the advancement of technocratic political ideologies. In addition, online protests of government politics does not really permeate real life, or seem to make any difference in reality. Computer mediated political acts do not lead to real life changes in existing social relations because they are hyperreality.

In terms of Carlos' agenda on direct democracy, he believes that the political process is going to change as a result of this "new electronic community". Carlos believes that these is no need for representative democracy, and that is where he sees the Net as making a historical mark: "I see the Internet as being very valuable in terms of direct democracy, that's where we can make our mark in history". He observes that "politicians could ignore people like me ten years ago because there were hardly any of us university professors, computer techs. The last few years they could say well, these are the kids getting their toys, the yuppies, but that phase has ended". He cites the fact that the Reform

and other parties, have a Web page encouraging people to interact with their politicians. Carlos is taking full advantage of that opportunity: "they're getting my opinion forty to sixty times a week". This clearly is hyperactivity.

Carlos perceives the political tendencies on the Net as being an opening up: "what I see is more and more points of view not what's being fed down their throats by their local community standards". He believes that the "$500 Web machine" as the medium through which "single mothers, the retirees, people on fixed or lower incomes will be able to express their views". The five hundred dollars Web machine, which does not exist, is a discursive attempt at easing people's fears and doubts about accessibility: with five hundred dollars anybody can be electronically connected. However, the larger the number of those connected in any one network, the more users are likely to advocate small groups, the elitist groups based on similar interests and needs that constitute the electronic enclaves, since it becomes more difficult to find relevant information. The five hundred dollar Web machine is hyperreality.

This is a fundamental political critique of the availability and accessibility of computer mediated information. Participants' "private agendas" and expressions of resistance indicate how computer mediated communication is another medium for expressing individual opinions. However, online activities are not easily reconciled with users' notions of electronic democracy. Both Carlos and Michael see a potential for electronic democracy and an "opening up" of views while at the same time filtering information and subscribing to commercial private lists.

The potential for community and electronic democracy is more virtual than real, those who participate in online democracy and express their views, political or otherwise, are the same individuals who are forming and advocating elitist groups based on similar interests. Carlos understands that those who are connected are "becoming an information elite, we're the techno nerds who are becoming the ones who are directing the politicians and having more influence". By more influence Carlos is referring to the sending of

opinions to the politicians, this influence, however, may be overstated. These techno nerds are the computer professionals that Morin identified earlier. Carlos is a hacker who develops and deciphers methods of encryption, hardly the average retiree, or single mother! It is obviously paradoxical to argue for electronic direct democracy by an information elite. Undoubtedly, this elite of users is an indispensable force driving social change. However, change via computer mediated communication is not occurring in favor of the less privileged, or those who stand on the margins of social politics.

In addition to the skepticism about the Net's potential for the expression and advancement of democratic alternative standpoints, there is the fact that only approximately five percentage of the world's population is connected to the "global village", and interesting contradiction to be sure! Additionally, while computer mediated communication is global in scope it has been dominated by American content and voices.

The association between computer mediated communication and politics has the ring of modernist utopia: if society can be rendered transparent and analyzed, the way engineers may analyze a machine, then people can take charge and make things right. Kroker and Weinstein (1994) rightly assert that there is a stringent "pro-technotopia" movement, specifically in the mass media. Technotopia is the ideological notion that individuals command information for their own purposes and find others with whom to combine to achieve those objectives. Technotopia is the "seduction by which the flesh is drawn into the Net. What seduces is the fantasy of empowerment, the center of the contemporary, possessive individualist complex"(1994:10-11). Individuals save time and energy by having the information they want or need instantly, and are more likely to make better decisions for themselves with that information.

Participants are drawn into computer mediated interaction through the seduction of empowerment. According to Kroker and Weinstein, this reflects an ideology of "bourgeois masculinity" in which man wants to be god: "a public ideology as the fantasy of men". Kroker and Weinstein find it amusing to realize that the "techno-fetishists" are enthusiastic

about how computer technology is going to fulfill the dream, which the virtual class assumes is inevitably shared by everyone. This movement is not democratic but authoritarian. It is also typified by a consistent and deliberate attempt to silence or exclude perspectives critical of technotopia. Kroker and Weinstein argue that the ideology of technotopia is not leading to a wired culture but a culture "wired shut" (1994:4). They believe that people are "compulsively fixated" on computer mediated technology because they see it as a source of salvation from the reality of a lonely culture and radical social disconnection from everyday life, filling in the void with computer mediated interaction. This wired shut culture tends to exclude from public debate any perspective that are less embracing of a realized electronically mediated society. This clearly highlights the exclusionary nature of technocratic culture where virtual identification and exclusion are two sides of the same discourse.

The envisioned grass roots movements remain rarefied and the technopeasants remain on the margins. The state of computer mediated politics is hyperreality: it is pliable, rich, but it lacks brilliance and the reality connection. It is not only discontinuous with the real life context, but it is also disposable. This is politics in computer mediated communication. A politics of hyperreality where there is no liberation, no democracy and no distributed knowledge, because there is no slippage. In addition it is not grounded in communal celebration of any kind, and it does not exhibit very much patience.

Computer Mediated Ethics as Hyperreality

Borgmann believes that hypermodernism is a culturally vacuous and socially insensitive construction. Of course modern aggressiveness was constraining and oppressive and would not restore community and connections: just as electronic liberalism does not alleviate the social injustices of hypermodernism. Borgmann argues that modern liberalism can not solve poverty because even though the liberals support giving everyone good education and good work, they dogmatically reject the fundamental element of

community itself (1992:127). As Borgmann points out without a sense of community, the issue of good work for all will never be put on the political agenda. Quality and quantity of work will remain at the mercy of hypermodern consumption (Borgmann, 1992:127).

In practice hypermodernism threatens to subvert communitarianism. Hypermodern technology cannot specify communitarianism since this is a vague concept in postmodern times. Communitarians' reply to the hyperreal, hyperactive, and hyperintelligent global village is the instantiation of community as virtual lifestyle enclaves; at least for the communitarians I interviewed. But as Borgmann points out postmodern ecology, economy, and community need to be grounded and centered in reality if they are to resist hypermodern disorientation and desiccation (1992:128). Reality provides greater coherence and depth, so that not all is arbitrary, anecdotal, discontinuous, and disposable. Communities gather around reality, specifically the reality of communal celebration around games, the arts, and religion (1992:129).

Borgmann cautions and appeals that people ought to realize that civic membership is substantively and actually enacted in communal celebration. Here the rich are not helping the poor, they join them. Community is a personal relationship that is positioned fruitfully between private intimacy and public anonymity. Intimacy joins relatives and friends who share moral convictions and economic circumstances. Anonymity is the relation among the individuals in a mass society who share no more than economic and political instrumentalities, utilities, and bureaucracies. Community is a relation of good will on definite terms. In a community of celebration, the terms are the reality being celebrated (1992:142-143). Anonymity and computer mediated communication have made it easy for the rich to ignore the poor.

Postmodern realism offers the care of communal celebrations. That care is at the center of communal politics. Its task is to take up the burden modernism has despaired of - destruction, violence, poverty - the obligations of justice, as well as to counter

hypermodernism constructively. The later task is not so much prevention of hypermodernism but fidelity to realism (1992:138).

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The principal issue is not a matter of being pro or anti-computer mediated communication, but of developing a critical perspective of the ethics of hyperreality and postmodern realism; that is of the postmodern condition. Given the emergence of diverse centers of protest, positions in favor of multiplicity deserve attention. Computer mediated communication with its discursive constitution of multiple identities and multiple communities, supports the anti-totalizing aspect of postmodernism. It eliminates centralization by opening up bureaucracies to inspection and criticism by individuals. However, recommendations to give public access to networks where participants indefinitely drift between multiple communities and identities advances little in the direction of postmodern ethics. Postmodernity as expressed through computer mediated communication is about multiplicity: multiple sites, users, topics, lifestyle enclaves, identities. But it invokes a multiplicity of norms without grounding them, and it pursues truth without constituting the individual as grounded in truth.

The issue is whether there are possibilities in computer mediated communication in the direction of substantive human values: economic justice, discriminant, social solidarity, aesthetic creativity. Rather than believing in the inescapability and the need to become wired to a computer culture, Kroker and Weinstein argue that electronic networks are already "beyond good and evil" since the virtual class assumes an equivalence between being connected to a computer network and ethical good. Kroker and Weinstein's analysis is pertinently critical of the computer mediated ethical good. They argue that the ethical good derived from computer mediated communication is equivalent to diminished human experience with electronic interactivity; to the disappearance of memory with databases and

archives; and, of course, to solitary reflection (1994:5). Human experience is reduced to a hyperreal form without being grounded in reality.

At the dawn of the industrial era, Marx argued that every technology releases opposing possibilities of liberation and domination. This old scenario is repeated today in virtual form. There is an inherent contradiction between the vision of a democratic information superhighway and the elitism and disconnection from real life that results from computer mediated communication, under an ideology of technological determinism that praises computer mediated communication as a vehicle for social empowerment.

Instead of empowerment, Kroker and Weinstein posit and anticipate the "death of the human agent". What is apparent empowerment is really a series of seductions leading to entrapment "in a Baudrillardian loop in which the Net elicits information from the user and gives it back in what the selectors say is an appropriate form for that user" (1994:11). The selectors are bots or intelligent agents created by Carolina, Carlos, and others. These autonomous systems are enacted under capitalism where participants must pay for information with money, and where there are many restrictions on accessibility. The democratic possibilities of the Net, with its immanent appeal to new forms of global communication are far from being realized reflecting, perhaps, an intense drive to subordinate society to the myths of a computer mediated relations. The more people are connected the better for technological business, electronics, computers, cable companies, corporations, but also the less important it all becomes.

There is the promise of more and more meaningful connections, but instead individuals are connected globally while alone in front of the computer screen. At the same time real life goes on everywhere in the real world of real bodies. The illusions of liberated reconstructed selves, emergent connections that lead to community building, and a knowledge society are clearly dispelled here: there is no slippage, no thinking through, no real community.

In agreement with Borgmann, Kroker and Weinstein point out that computer mediated communication's system of ethics is inconsistent with economic justice, against democratic discourse, social solidarity, and aesthetic creativity. In terms of economic justice, the promotion of the technology and consumer attitudes insist on restructuring economies neglecting social concerns about employment. Computer mediated communication's ethical views are against democratic discourse because they are based on an ideology of necessity and imminence of being part of the global village. Those who are not online are apparently missing some important aspects of today's life; this is the vast majority of human beings in the world. Politics is about attempting control of intellectual property by means of archiving, filing, all information, including information regarding participants themselves leading to concerns of constant surveillance. Computer mediated ethics are against social solidarity to the extent that they promote a form of social materialism whereby experiences are reduced to their virtual form and the physical body becomes a passive, if entertained, archive of information (Kroker & Weinstein, 1994:5).

Finally, computer mediated ethics are against aesthetic creativity in promoting the value of reducing human intelligence to distributed knowledge and information. Contrary to amplifying the human mind and extending the human body, Kroker and Weinstein provide a hyperreal vision of the socio-political effects of computer mediated communication. The networks promote a radically diminished vision of human experience lacking brilliance: no taste, no smell, and for most no vision, only text. Subjective experience is not heightened but it disappears. It is an experience that does not include a connection to real life or have existence outside the virtual context.

Kroker and Weinstein point out that the ideology of necessity of virtual connections occurs under the myth of facilitation. This is the promotion of an ideology that speaks of how the expansion of data networks facilitates every aspect of contemporary society: heightened interactivity, increased high-tech employment in the global market, and a massive acceleration of knowledge. This is, clearly, not a democratic but an authoritarian

discourse. This ideology of facilitation is presented in a context of social crisis that necessitates computer mediated technology for its solution. Computer mediated communities and identities argue for a politics of pluralism that accepts the conditions of difference and antagonism as the basis of a new democracy. But, plural identities and communities find within themselves the principles of their own validity. Postmodern democracy is the process whereby identity and community is configured as autoconstitutive. There is no reality by which to ground the community, identity, or knowledge. No communal celebration or patience, since you can shut off anyone or anything that is unwanted. It clearly fails any apparent attempt at postmodern realism.

Kroker and Weinstein, like Borgmann and Bellah et al., have a small town nostalgic tone to their perspectives in their insistence on community values and communal celebration. But they all importantly reveal and emphasize the vacuum that a life on the screen can be without some grounding to a reality of physical bodies in a physical society. To attempt to solve social issues, if any attempt is even made, in the context of virtuality, or hyperreality, is obviously not really attempting at solving the world's problems, but to actually disappear from these problems in order not to have to deal with them. Life lived through technology is vacuous and far less liberating or fulfilling than Turkle and Haraway envision. In attempting to praise and live in the virtual world users forget the real world. As well as they can pretend to be of a different sex, they can pretend that social problems do not exist. Both Borgmann and Bellah et al. point out that social and individual problems cannot be solved outside the context of a reality of community. My analysis reveals that a reality of community cannot be attained through computer mediated communication. This is especially evident in terms of politics and ethics, where there is an illusion of liberation and self-knowledge, and in the illusion of direct democracy.

Conclusion

Computer mediated communication with its virtual communities and virtual identities can be interpreted as a primal nature sheltering sky for the twenty-first century individualism. The hailing of computer mediated communication to advance solutions to social problems of community and the individual coincides with the desire for a new ethical system. It demonstrates the limitations of postmodern theory in sustaining an ethics that leads to substantive values. Not the constricting values of traditional forms of repression, but new ways of living with each other that necessarily involve face-to-face relations in communities, relationships, and sex. It is also a general reflection of a lack of meaning in and disconnection from the current social and political system.

This analysis reveals a computer mediated political and ethical scene as the attempt to rescue and transcend the real world with a instantaneous technological fix. Fantasy worlds are genetically engineered environments, with a perfect mixture of personal adventure and high-tech performance, that serve as a model for the genetically engineered virtual citizen: fun simulated culture in a processed world. A life lived through computer mediated communication is suspended beyond grounding referents of community, identity, knowledge, and sex. The computer mediated body delivers itself stripped of vision wanting improved virtual sensors. Of meaning with its floating selves, communities, and knowledge. And of politics in being disconnected from reality.

Despite our diseases and contaminations, our structures of power and our individualism, we primarily live in and through physical bodies in a physical society. That is the undeniable reality. The technological body - Turkle's windowed body, Haraway's cyborg body, and Kroker and Weinstein's data trash - is perfectly hypermodern. Its hyperreality is pliable, rich, somewhat brilliant. Its hyperactivity is to check email messages eight times a day. Its hyperintelligence is not thinking but searching. Computer mediated communication and the emerging electronic networks are entirely disposable and discontinuous with reality. The networks do not promote any sense of patience, vigor,

much less communal celebration. They promote the ultimate form of individualism. Everyone can be their own god. But then what does it matter to be a god if such gods are not concerned with real life issues or possess no centering power by which to ground social and individual conduct?

Chapter 6

A Computer Mediated Society

A computer mediated society may be the ultimate paradox of the technological era. A computer mediated society is a collection of information networks that disposes of the physical element of social relations, replacing physical life with life on the screen. People's bodies do not need face-to-face contact as long as they can be replaced by or have access to a computer network. Clearly a disembodied society has implications. Some of the implications of the impact of information technology are analyzed in this thesis in the relationship between the community and the individual.

The idea that new communication technologies are destined for the creation of new worlds is motivated by an assumption that there is a need for communities and that they can be created with computer technology; and that computer mediated networks are the necessarily appropriate medium for constructing or recapturing the sense of community for which we are nostalgic. Evidence of the expectations for social change and community can be found in some of my participants' assessment that Internet groups and networks are forming communities; in some participants' hope for direct democracy; and in Turkle's and others' arguments that computer mediated communication leads to liberation of social minorities.

My evaluation of computer mediated communication leads to the conclusion that electronic connections are based on the concept of lifestyle enclaves, not on the concept of community. In terms of views of the self, although participating in computer mediated interaction may modify the subject in terms of identity leading to a (re)constitution of the self, this reconstitution does not permeate participants' real lives, leading to little, if any, social change.

Various electronic groups such as email users, newsgroups and private lists subscribers, and role-playing enthusiasts have all been designated virtual communities. This is based on the users' assumption that being online is inherently a social activity, and

on the notion of electronic sites which invokes the illusion of place where people "meet". However, in this thesis, community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices of commitment that are undertaken not as a means to an end but that are ethically good in themselves, and that define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community has a history and so it is a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past, its traditions and commitments to the normative life of the community.

By contrast lifestyle enclaves are formed by people who share patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities. They do not necessarily share a history, are not interdependent and do not act together politically. Lifestyle enclaves are defined by the belief in utilitarian and expressive individualism, where individuals perceive themselves as the primary reality and try to maximize their own self-interests.

Throughout my interviews and online observations, individuals chose to become connected primarily to fulfill their own private needs in terms of personal communication, or as entertainment, or for access to information. Most of those I talked with did not perceive mediated communication as leading to the emergence of communities, nor did they use it for such purpose. Electronically mediated communities, as Michael points out, are based on some shared assumptions of conversation, some shared background information, and some shared perceptions about appropriate ways of mutual interacting. Participants' narratives are constructed with a variety of community metaphors: a community of ideas, a community of interests, a community in the mind, a community of similar thinking, a community of mutual support, but they understand that electronic formations are not leading to the emergence of communities in Bellah et al.'s sense. To form a community members need to share some essential moral and traditional sources of beliefs and practices that bind individuals in a common good.

In computer mediated networks, users' commitments are to their own needs. Participants view commitment in online groups in the form of: "you just ignore those

tendencies or views that you don't like". Participants may "bend together", and find the support they need, and they may access or conversely disseminate information not available in mainstream media; however, individual activities are not leading to the formation of electronic communities. Those who use electronic networks articulate their connections in individualistic terms outside the context of tradition and commitment. Online, the sources of commitment are not the second languages of a community of memory, they are at most the common belief in freedom of expression and information. Electronic, fragile communities are put together to meet the utilitarian and expressive needs of individuals, with only a peripheral survival of tradition, commitment, and community.

Even as respondents speak in a metaphor of community, their beliefs about the connections they are making more appropriately describe lifestyle enclaves. Virtual connections are lifestyle enclaves because membership is based on voluntary participation and lurking, the connections participants make are elitist, the networks provide the opportunity for self-expression, they are based on physical isolation and replacement of face-to-face contact. Additionally, the vocabulary used to describe online activity and those who do such activities does not reflect community building. To surf or to browse is to use the networks of information and communication, not evidence of membership in a community.

Computer mediated communication encourages individuals to choose which virtual groups they wish to identify with, to cut free from social and physiological boundaries, to define and construct their own selves. Computer mediated communication separates ideas of self from family, work, and religion. Virtual communities are made up of such separated selves. The mutability of identity in electronic settings, means individuals exist as persona or personae and that the self is defined by its ability to choose its own virtual identities. Turkle believes that this ability to choose virtual identities can shape ways of thinking thereby changing lives and selves. Contrary to Turkle, however, virtual identities - whether in role playing or creating handles that allow participants to gender swap - are not an

opportunity to explore conflicts raised by one's own sex; they are not leading to reflection on the way ideas about gender shape expectations in social interaction.

My research demonstrates that computer mediated communication labels according to sex thereby continuing a patriarchal tradition of making sex the principal basis for identification. Additionally, even though MUDs, chat lines, and other electronic networks could conceivably provide the grounds for action -based practice of imagining alternatives that can serve as a form of consciousness-raising about gender issues, or that deconstruct gender, this does not consistently happen. Women present themselves either as the stereotypically constructed female gender, or setting aside their sex they present themselves as men. Regardless, virtual personae are not leading to the desired prospect of liberation of social minorities, especially not the liberation of women.

Turkle also argues that mediated interaction makes it easy to present oneself as other than one is in real life. This is a process of shape shifting by which participants can become whatever they want. Turkle claims that computer mediated shape shifting leads to slippage where the virtual personae and real life selves merge in self-creation and self-discovery. While some participants do discover important aspects about themselves, learning from them and carrying them to real life, most of the participants I interviewed do not. In opposition to Turkle, most of my participants' online experiences do not translate into either a discovery of the multiple selves, or the adoption of multiple view points by which to ground the self. Virtual personae are not primarily objects-to--think-with but objects that participants experiment with. I argue that this is because online interaction is based on the same individualist assumptions of interaction that Bellah et al. identified a decade ago as characteristic of lifestyle enclaves. A computer mediated self is disembodied and has fluid access to its various avatars, but such a self is also primarily grounded in its own self interests, needs and desires.

The idea of virtual identities and a cyborg body, feminine or otherwise, arises from the dissatisfaction with current social and economic relations. To be and live through a

cyborg body, however, does not offer a satisfactory answer to individuals' search for meaning. A self that is primarily grounded in electronic lifestyle enclaves derives her own morality from the emergent fluidity of access to her own multiplicity. The flexibility is mainly in regards to the self's own multiplicity, not to the multiplicity of voices that acquire importance or social value through computer mediated communication.

I have examined in this thesis a process by which the primary emphasis on self reliance has led to the notion of pure, undetermined choice, free of tradition, obligation or commitment as the essence of the self. The self thus defined is characteristic of lifestyle enclaves.

Participation in computer mediated communication may be leading to increased electronic connections, but it is disconnecting individuals from each other's minds and bodies. The individuals I interviewed do not primarily connect electronically to form a community or to discover their many selves, therefore they are not thinking about the common order or improving their ways of knowing and changing their patterns of meaning. This is why computer mediated communication and its networks do not lead to the alleviation of social inequalities and injustices.

The vision, sustained by Turkle, that participation in computer mediated communication provides the possibility of acquiring liberating ways of knowing and living is highly unrealistic. The reality of the state of postmodern knowledge is more appropriately captured by Kroker and Weinstein's assessment that computer mediated lifestyle enclaves and virtual identities offer only illusions of connection and liberation leading instead to the disappearance of the human body and mind. Computer mediated networks promote safety and convenience at the expense of social face-to-face contact.

The frequent celebration of computer mediated communication is predicated upon a naïve technological determinism of the potential for liberation of the self and community. Yet I have found in my analysis that, when considered in isolation from physical reality,

from social values and commitment, the technological circumstances predict little about society's ability to advance solutions to social and individual problems.

This analysis reveals a computer mediated political and ethical scene as an attempt to rescue and transcend the real world with a technological fix. But a life lived through computer mediated communication is not grounded in community and identity, thereby it exists in hyperreality. Virtual communities and identities are hyperreal because they lack fundamental requirements for true community, and dispose of reality and the connection to real life issues.

In computer mediated communication there is no access to reality independent of the postings. Borgmann rightly points out that people need to use technology in the service of reality, not as a replacement for reality. To play virtual games, and have different handles may be entertaining at best and lead to self-knowledge in the form of self-expression, but it also perpetuates social inequalities in virtual form. Computer mediated interaction is hyperreality: it is pliable, rich, somewhat brilliant. Its hyperactivity is to check email messages eight times a day; its hyperintelligence is searching. Emerging electronic networks are entirely disposable and discontinuous with reality. There is no promotion of patience, or communal celebration. Instead the networks promote the ultimate form of individualism.

Computer mediated communication is the 21st century silicon snake oil (Stoll, 1995). Using the medical metaphor, online information retrieval systems are used as prosthetics for limited human memories. Online identities are used as prosthetics for limited real life identities. Online lifestyle enclaves are used as prosthetics for the lonely crowd. Online knowledge networks are prosthetics for limited human intelligence.

Some see the use of communications technology as a route to the total replacement of the natural world and the social order with a computer mediated hyperreality. Users of virtuality do not see it as an artificial construct that uses media to extract money and power, rather they see it as reality: the way things are. While a few participants do get better

information, faster, via electronic networks, the majority of the population, as is historically expected, is becoming more precisely manipulated: in people's relentless work day in which they earn money to pay for entertainment and information that tells them what to desire and consume.

It is not a radical critique that the wonders of computer mediated communication skillfully camouflage the disappearance and subtle replacement of authenticity, from democracy to the nature of human relationships, with a simulated and commercial version. The utopian's illusion of liberation, community, and knowledge offered by computer mediated communication, is a distraction from the real power behind the scenes of the new technologies - the replacement of democracy with a global mercantile state that exerts control through the media -assisted manipulation of desire. Instead of torturing people you get them to pay for access to mind and body control. Conventions of computer mediated networks erodes reality in favor of hyperreality. It is clear that we cannot work towards an ideology of liberation since virtual discourses do not lead to a resolution of social problems of identity or community. The purpose of computer mediated technology is not human freedom.

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Current research in computer mediated studies reveals that insufficient ethical guidelines exist for guiding research and that there is considerable debate over how to proceed. The qualitative portion of this research involves face-to-face interviews and some content analysis of the online communication of specific newsgroups and chat lines. Issues of privacy and intellectual property have arisen. It is still an unresolved question whether the researcher should admonish the subjects and then seek their permission for further study to be conducted. It is still uncertain whether computer mediated studies require a human research consent form. It is still debatable whether this kind of analysis is closer to literary criticism than to social science. It is still unknown whether published research

should give the subjects credit for their statements or should withhold their names to protect their identities.

However, fertile ground for research has been uncovered and the process of how it should be paved has began. In conclusion, I suggest several avenues for further investigation. First, if society is dead, as some postmodern thought suggests, how do we evaluate the electronic text from the physical social context? Additionally, how do we evaluate the contradictory claims of participants' responses, in terms of differences in perception and behavior, in terms of the networks potential and the reality of its use? There is a profound disjunction between reality and virtuality, and the question that needs to be addressed is how to evaluate participants' testimony regarding the seriousness of their responses. How do researchers evaluate the statements that participants make about computer mediated technology's impact on their lives, without taking into account that they have already been shaped by the technology. If Turkle is right, and some participants are in fact shaped by the technology, then their opinions already reflect the transformation. People perceive computer networks a certain way because they have already been shaped by them, things make sense to them because they are online. Further research needs to be done in this area in order to better assess participants' testimony.

As I contemplate computer mediated technology I see a wide gap between the real networks that I use daily and the promise of information technology. No technological fix is going to miraculously change the world or the individual without the price of physical isolation, elitism, replacement. In attempting to be conveniently saved by computer technology individuals end up alone in front of the screen.

The clear implication of my research is that a technological solution to social and individual problems must include Turkle's liberation, Bellah et al.'s community, and Borgmann's patience in the specific service of real life issues. Technology is not the end but the means in the advancement of social and individual life. The technology is the tool,

the personal and social advancement is a matter of individual and social choices in the ways people use computer technology in the service and the advancement of their lives.

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Appendix 1
Computer Mediated Communication Networks

1. The Net

The essential elements of what became the Net were created in the 1960's and early 1970's when the United States defense department and some universities linked computers via the Advanced Research Projects Agency, creating the Arpanet network. This network became a very popular means for researchers to share information through electronic mail where messages were sent from one person directly to another. Mailing lists quickly followed which allowed a message to be sent to a central point from which that message is bounced to others who subscribe to the list. This is an important characteristic of email, that is how easy it is to send a message or a fifty page essay to one or one hundred people by making an automatic mailing list that contains the addresses of the people you want to reach. Another significant characteristic of email is that I can reply to any message in my electronic mail box by typing one key stroke, R in most systems. In addition, when I get a message from a person on a mailing list I can reply privately to that person, or I can reply to everyone on the list. Mailing lists became specialized by topic providing information and news to users. By the mid 1980's, the largest global system for exchange of information was, however, Usenet which contains newsgroups.

The Net can serve several purposes but most participants use it for email and the newsgroups. However these are not the only areas , specially as technologies continue to converge. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and other chat lines, Multiuser Domains (MUDs) and other games, and the World Wide Web (WWW or the Web) provide other venues for electronic communication. By the mid 1990's the Internet had developed into a multimedia network. A combination of special software and a way of connecting documents allowed users to browse the network with pictures, sound, and video simply by pointing and clicking a mouse. The Net became not just a way to send and receive email or to download files, but a new medium with the added dimension of interactivity. The Net is a

decentralized network, and its management occurs mainly via the National Science Foundation. However, no one group manages it. Instead a variety of groups such as the Internet Society and Internic, circulate information and resolutions and do research on the network's needs.

2. Mailing Lists and Newsgroups

A mailing list is a collection of email addresses. Any message sent to the address of the mailing list is automatically sent to the address of every member of the mailing list. There are thousands of mailing lists on all kinds of topics, and individuals can join practically any list by sending a specially formulated email message to the system that menages the list. Mailing lists are a quick and easy method of distributing information, whether it is a newsletter or a question from a member of the list. Information received from mailing lists comes in with individuals regular email: no special software is required to read a message sent to a mailing list, although special software is used to manage the list itself.

Internet mailing lists are another convenient method by which people on different computer systems can discuss particular topics or share information concerning specific issues. A mailing list consists of as few as two people, or it might contain several thousand. There are many types of lists. Mailing lists on the Internet differ by their purpose: some are used for discussion, while others are used for newsletters or announcements, and yet others are used to summarize information that has appeared in other lists or in newsgroups.

Mailing lists have emerged as a new method of publishing, with a number of journals, newsletters, and other information summaries, available to anyone with an Internet email address. In other cases companies are establishing customer mailing lists that customers can chose to join in order to receive new product announcements or other information. The types of mailing lists available throughout the Internet are moderated, unmoderated, and

closed. Lists are moderated to ensure that messages sent to that list are tightly focuses on the list topic. In an moderated list, any message sent by individuals goes to the "moderator", who determines if it should be redistributed to the list. This keeps the list on topic. The moderator, who manages the list is an individual who takes on an active role in determining what should be sent to the list, ensuring that only those messages relevant to the topic of the list are received by subscribers. Moderated lists are often used for journals and newsletters.

In an unmoderated list any message sent immediately goes to everyone on the list. An unmoderated list might permit anyone to send to it, or it might be restricted, permitting only members to send to it. The Internet is a very diverse place: this results in some lists that simply are not open to anyone, "closed" lists. Individuals must meet some type of qualification to join these lists, or even to receive messages sent to the list. These lists are often used to restrict access to members of a particular organization.

Usenet is a global system for exchange of information on thousands of topics, referred to as newsgroups. Individuals can subscribe to any particular newsgroup, read information sent to the newsgroup, and "add" or "post" information to the newsgroup. Each posting is referred to as a news article. There are also "follow-ups" and "replies" in Usenet. A follow-up is a comment made to a previous posting, while a reply is an email message that individuals send to someone directly. Usenet is like a massive global bulletin board with thousands of different information resources. Individuals read the newsgroup that they belong to with a "newsreader" software, which also permits individuals to post messages to the newsgroup.

Through Usenet people can join newsgroups of interest, discuss, debate, keep current or ask questions about these newsgroups; receive newsletters and other information through

some of these newsgroups; and retrieve documents known as "frequently asked questions" (FAQ) related to these newsgroups. Although it is useful to participate in ongoing basis in some newsgroups, sometimes people might want to search for information on postings that were made in the past to a particular newsgroup. Some newsgroup postings are automatically archived and stored on various computers around the Internet.

Newsgroups are differentiated by how much control there is within them. Some are moderated, some are unmoderated. In unmoderated newsgroups anyone can post information as long as they stick to the topic. If they do not they may get flamed. Newsgroups within Usenet belong to a series of categories. The major global newsgroup categories are: biz. Business oriented topics; comp. Computer oriented; news. News or information concerning the Internet or Usenet; rec. recreational topics; sci. scientific; soc. Sociological issues; and talk. Debate oriented issues. Each category consists of several thousand topics organized into sub-categories. For example, the newsgroup category rec. includes the sub-category of rec.arts or rec.audio, rec.music; which are further sub-divided into rec.arts.poems, or rec.arts.music.

Even though Usenet reaches thousands of sites and many thousands of readers, no central authority controls Usenet. It is run by cooperation between sites, and a set of customs and conventions that have grown during the years known as "netiquette". The word anarchy has been used regularly to describe the lack of a central authority on either policy or technical levels.

Although the mechanics of mailing lists and newsgroups differ, both permit individuals to join a particular group and receive information or "converse" with people concerning a topic within the group. Newsgroups are not much different in concept from mailing lists. Since participants can obtain Usenet news through most Internet service providers,

individuals can chose to subscribe to the newsgroup that interests them. Given the amount of information volume individuals have to be selective with respect to which newsgroups they subscribe to.

The major difference between newsgroups and mailing lists are the following: newsgroups information is more structured, with individual postings filed into particular newsgroups. In contrast, email messages from mailing lists are part of individuals' general email box, unless individuals have some type of special filtering software. Most newsgroups undergo a series of steps of approval before they become widely distributed through the Usenet system. On the other hand, anyone can start a mailing list on any topic if they have the right software. Newsgroups have a culture that frowns upon networking for commercial purposes. Mailing lists can be used for anything, as long as participants do not abuse the primary purpose for which a particular mailing list was established. Usenet news articles have a limited life span. Because of the large number of Usenet messages, many sites will delete messages beyond a certain date, usually two weeks, and sometimes less. Messages sent to mailing lists will last as long as messages last in the mailbox. Usenet news articles are not sent to personal mailboxes but are received in batches of postings, which are then made available for reading through news reader software. Usenet was designed as a mechanism to permit the rebroadcasting of information on a very wide basis. Any Usenet article goes out to all Internet hosts on the planet that wish to receive that specific newsgroup or that do not refuse that newsgroup. Email, on the other hand, was designed as a point-to-point method of communicating, and even with mailing lists, suffers from some problems when trying to be a broadcasting tool.

3. The World Wide Web

Millions of individuals and organizations around the world are participating in the Web. On the web individuals can find a little bit of anything and everything. There is information

about Galapagos turtles, and tarantula spiders, comics and cartoons. People can find information on movies, books, records, videos, social theory or economics, on computers and dishwashers. You name it, it is probably on the Web somewhere. On the Web one can start anywhere and end up anywhere. Any web page can link to any other web page, hence you can start anywhere and end up anywhere. The Web does not really have a starting point and it does not have a finishing line. And it changes on a daily basis, minute by minute. Additionally, the Web supports graphics, images, text, sound and video.

You use software known as "web browser" to view information on the web, the most popular of which are currently Netscape and Mosaic. The Web browser is told how to get to a particular site and page in one of two ways: either you tell it where to go, or it is told to go somewhere by a "hypertext" link that you chose from a page. The information at the place you travel to is in what is known as HTML format- hypertext mark up language. The Web browser interprets the HTML information and gives it to you in a simple form: pictures, text. sound and video if the browser is configured with sound and video. The home page is the first page that you access on a Web site that contains information. The location you travel to is known as a URL or uniform resource locator. There are many Web indices such as Yahoo, Open Text. and others which help to navigate through the Web.

4. Internet Relay Chat (IRC)

IRC is best described as the CB radio for the Internet. Using IRC, you can participate in online discussions in real time with other Internet users. Discussions are either open or private. To use IRC you must either have a direct connection to the Internet or have the IRC client software on your own system. Or use a version located on your Internet service provider. In both cases you will also need an IRC server location to access. The Internet service provider may automatically link to a site.

When participants are in an IRC session, they join a "channel" or topic that interests them. If you key in something all other members of that channel will see what you keyed within seconds, and you will see what they have input. This permits you to have an interactive or real time discussion through the Internet. The interesting thing about IRC is that it is populated by what is known as "bots", programs that automate some of the interaction within various IRC channels. IRC discussions have a "anything goes" mentality. But there are many IRC applications as well. Aside from its use as a disaster recovery tool for communication (Oklahoma bombing), IRC is used as a support tool by some companies and is also used for training courses. This application is also becoming more mainstream as it becomes integrated into the Web. For example. Netscape has released a chat program integrated in the Web, which allows participants to take part in IRC discussions.

5. Multi-User-Domains (MUDs)

MUDs refer to all the multi-user environments: Multi-user Domains or Dimensions. All MUDs referred to here rely entirely on plain text. All users are browsing and manipulating the same database. They can encounter other users or players as well as objects that have been built for the virtual environment. MUD players can also communicate with each other directly in real-time, by typing messages that are seen by all players in the same "room", but messages can also be designated to flash on the screen of only one player. Characters communicate by evoking commands that appear on each other's screen.

On the Internet there are two basic types of MUDs. The adventure type is built around a medieval fantasy environment. The objective of the game is to gain experience points by killing monsters and dragons and finding gold coins, amulets, and other treasures. The second type consists of relatively open spaces in which you can play at whatever captures your imagination. These have been called social type of MUDs, where the point is to interact with other players and on some Muds to build the virtual world by creating one's

objects and architecture. "Building" on MUDs is an hybrid between computer programming and writing fiction. One describes the objects with words but some formal code description is required for the objects to exist in the Mud world as an extension of adjacent objects and for characters to be able to manipulate the objects by pushing a specially marked button. On some MUDs all players are allowed to build; sometimes the privilege is reserved to master players, or wizards. Building is made particularly easy in a class of MUDs known as "MOOs" - Muds of the Object Oriented variety - what seems to hold players interest is operating their character or characters and interacting with other characters. Even in adventure type of MUDs one can be an elf, a warrior, a prostitute, apolitician, a healer, a seer, or several of these at the same time. As this character or set of characters, a player develops relationships with other players also in character. For most players these relationships become central to the mudding experience. The characters one plays are referred to as one's personae. All MUDs are organized around the metaphor of physical space. When players first enter a MUD they see the description of the environment in a list of objects and characters present in the "room". Players then examine and try out the objects, examine the description of the characters and introduce themselves to them.

The social conventions of different MUDs determine how strictly one is expected to stay in character. Some encourage all players to be in character at all times. Most are more relaxed. Some ritualize stepping out of character by asking players to talk to each other in specially noted "out of character" (ooc) asides. People's impressions of the character will be informed by the descriptions players have written for themselves, as well as by the nature of the player's conversation. This description is available to all players on command. In MUDs, virtual characters converse with each other, exchange gestures, express emotions, rise and fall in social status. A virtual character can also die, either of "natural causes as when a player decides to close down, or they have their virtual lives snuffed out.

Appendix 2

Interview questions

- year of birth

- sex

- occupation

- income

-what networks do you use on the Net? why those? what topics?

-how long are you on the Net daily?

-how many people interact any time you are on-line?

- do you understand the channels and newsgroups you frequent as a form of community?

- what needs do you feel are being met in your mediated interaction?

-describe your political beliefs

-what political tendencies do you think are evident on the networks you frequent?

- does mediated interaction substitute for f2f contact? to what extent?

- do you believe that the words on the screen can actually hurt, make people laugh, etc.? "real" emotions?

-do you use your real life name? why?

- do you identify your real life sex? why?

-why interact through a computer rather than f2f: what attracts you to mediated interaction, what attributes does it have? What benefits?

-do you think that virtual networks have a role to play for members of the community at large?

-what do you contribute to the networks you frequent?

-how anonymous do you think you are online?

-you want to say something about cybersex?

Appendix 3
Request for Participants

Read only if you live in Calgary, AB, Canada

My name is Maria José and I am currently doing a masters thesis exploring issues involved in participating in computer mediated communication and communities. I am interested in people's reasons for choosing to interact on the Net and form communities; and how Net communities relate to and affect real life issues, such as politics, environment, feminism, sex, arms trade, human rights, etc. Additionally, I want to explore how Net interaction affects people's expression of their selves and their sense of identity. For this purpose I am looking for individuals to interview f2f, if you are interested email me at mjmferre@acs.ucalgary.ca I very much appreciate your participation without which this project would not be possible. I am looking forward to your reply. Thank you for your time, Maria José.

Appendix 4
University of Calgary
Consent Form

Research Project Title: Information Technology and the Postmodern Community

Investigator: Maria José M. Ferreira

Funding Agency: The University of Calgary

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Please take the time to read this form carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The purpose of my research project is to explore issues involved in participating in computer mediated communication and communities. Specifically, I am interested in people's reasons for choosing to interact on the Net and form communities. In addition, I want to explore how Net interaction affects people's expression of their selves and their sense of identity. Here the objective is to ascertain the extent to which computer mediated interaction reconstitutes our selves.

You are being asked for an interview because you participate in discussions on Net channels and/or newsgroups and other networks. You were selected from mailing lists available on-line. This interview is expected to take approximately one hour and thirty minutes. It will consist of some specific questions, but feel free to elaborate on any point of interest to you. You should be aware that answers to some questions may be considered personal, requiring you to reflect and talk about your own sense of self identity. You may decline to answer at any time.

In my thesis I will not use the real life names of the individuals involved. Confidentiality and anonymity will always be maintained. However, you will be quoted, and some quotations could identify you to some of the readers of either the thesis or subsequent publication using the interview data.

My supervisor and I will be the only people with access to any data from the interviews, either in taped or transcribed form, except as it appears in the final draft of the thesis. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my place of residence. A copy of the results of my project will be available to all interviewees on request.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview. I am looking forward to this opportunity to meet and speak with you.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you have any further questions concerning the matters related to this research, please contact:

Maria José M. Ferreira
220-3213
243-3538

If you have any questions concerning your participation in this project, you may also contact the Office of the Vice-President (Research) and ask for Karen McDermid, 220-3381.

_____ _____

Participant Date

_____ _____

Investigator/Witness (optional) Date

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

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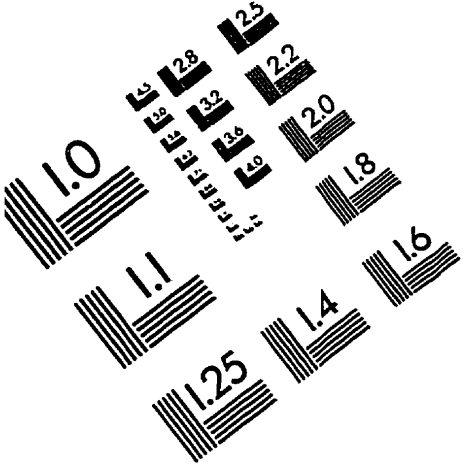

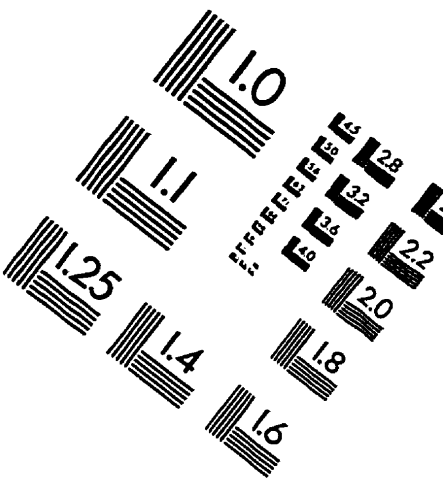

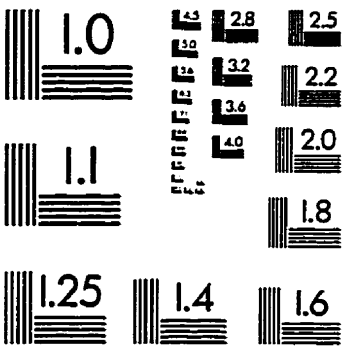

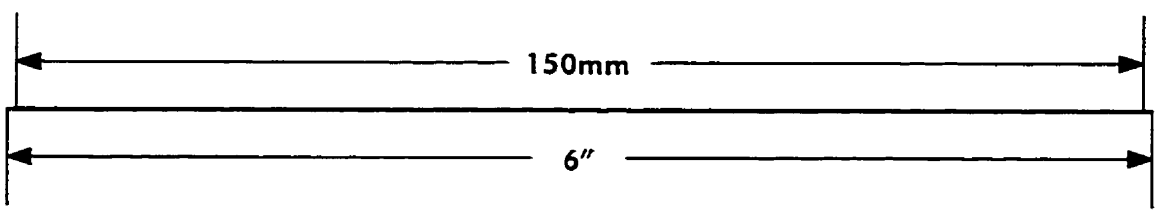

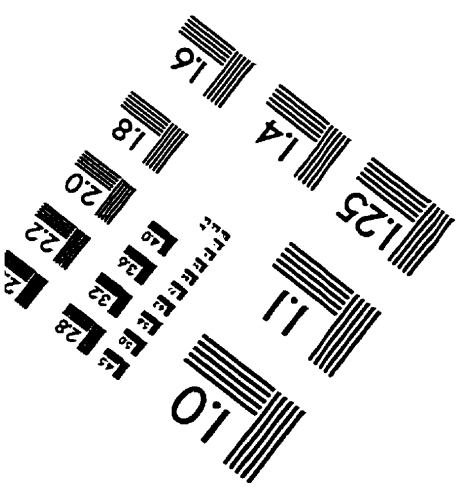

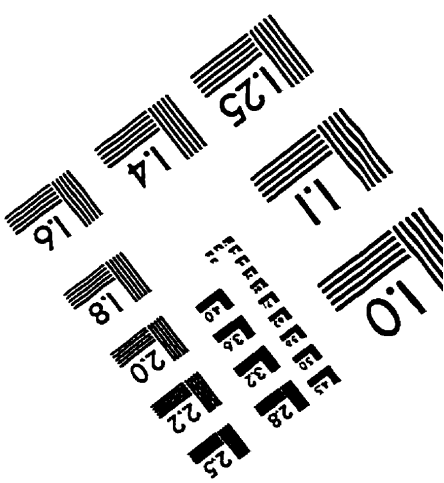

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