Virtual togetherness: an everyday-life perspective

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The objective of this article is to explore some dimensions of the concept of virtual community, which relates to empowering possibilities in the appropriation of the Internet by domestic users. I contend that users' participation in what have been called 'virtual communities' (Rheingold, 1993) over the Internet constitutes a cultural trend of 'immobile socialization', or in other words, socialization of private experience through the invention of new forms of intersubjectivity and social organization online.

When I suggest the term 'immobile socialization', I intentionally reverse Williams's (1974) concept of 'mobile privatization'. Unlike broadcast technology and the automobile that, according to Williams, precipitated a withdrawal of middle-class families from public spaces of association and sociability into private suburban homes, the Internet is being mobilized in a process of collective deliberation and action in which people engage from their private realm. Whether an analyst would decide to call the electronic forums in which this is happening communities or not depends on the notion of community she is operating with. What has to be noted, however, is that by engaging in different forms of collective practice online users transcend the sphere of narrowly private interest and experience. Why do they do that? What does it mean to them? How does it affect public understanding of the Internet? The concept of 'virtual community' has been only of limited help in understanding of this practice and I will try to explain why in what follows.

Few studies of virtual communities (an exception is Turkle, 1995) have attempted to relate online community engagement with users' everyday life situations, relevances and goals. Most of the existing research (see Jones, 1995, 1997) has concentrated on the group cultures originating from the interactions of online participants, thus treating online group phenomena in

isolation from the actual daily life experiences of the subjects involved. In this article, I attempt to initiate an exploration into the experiences and motivations that lead Internet users either to get involved or to stay away from forms of virtual togetherness. I believe it is important to understand what kinds of needs and values virtual communities serve, and under what circumstances. This will open a realistic perspective on the significance of this type of use in the social shaping of the Internet.

My reflections are based on an ethnographic study of the practices of 21 domestic users of the Internet in Vancouver. The respondent group was formed through self-selection. The conditions for participation stipulated that: (1) respondents should not have a professional involvement with the Internet; (2) they pay for their Internet access themselves; and (3) they use the Internet more than three times a week. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews with users and group interviews with their family members where appropriate. Observational tours of the domestic space where the computer connected to the Internet was located and of the computer 'interior' (bookmarks, address books, etc.) were also performed.[1]

On the basis of this material, I offer a typology of different forms of online involvement, which demonstrates that the term 'virtual community' is not always the most accurate way to describe people's actual social activities online. In fact, virtual togetherness has many variations, not all of which live up to the value-laden name of 'community'. This fact, however, does not undermine the idea of collective life in cyberspace. On the contrary, I call for appreciation of the different forms of engagement with other people online (virtual togetherness) that exist, and the different situated needs they serve. In these multifarious practices I recognize new vehicles that allow users to traverse the social world and penetrate previously unattainable regions of anonymity as well as to expand their social reach (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). In light of this formulation of the meaning of virtual togetherness, I question the dichotomy between the private and the public that is at the root of both virtual utopia and dystopia.

The virtual community debate

Raymond Williams, tracing the etymology of the word community, notes that it is 'the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships; or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships' that 'seems never to be used unfavorably and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term' (1985: 76). Williams's account of the historical evolution of the usage of the word reveals its interpretative flexibility and hence its socially constructed character. There is no 'genuine' fact of nature or social history that the word community denotes. There is no consensually accepted definition of its meaning.

Different social actors have appropriated the word at different points in history with different concrete contexts, goals and oppositions in mind.

A similarly complex constructive process can be discerned in the case of the notion of 'virtual' or 'online' community. The engineers and researchers who were the first to build, experience and study the Internet, along with other technologies for computer-mediated communication, employed the concept of community in order to legitimate their project and to demonstrate its significance and nobility (Cerf, quoted in Abbate, 1994:11; Hiltz and Turoff, 1978; Licklider and Taylor, 1968; Rheingold, 1993). They portrayed membership in a virtual community as liberating, equitable and empowering. In response, critics have zealously defended an idealized notion of 'real' community signifying a state of immediacy and locality of human relationships that resists technological mediation (Borgmann, 1992; Dreyfus, 1998, Kumar, 1995; Postman, 1992; Slouka, 1995).

In a recent article, Wellman and Gulia (1999) have pointed out a common weakness of both sides of this debate. These positions are premised on a false dichotomy between virtual communities and real-life communities. Wellman's (1979, 1988) community studies carried out through the methods of network analysis, as well as Anderson's (1983) anthropological studies have demonstrated in their specific ways that the majority of the so-called 'real-life' communities are in fact virtual in the sense that they are mediated and imagined. Wellman and Gulia argue:

> In fact most contemporary communities in the developed world do not resemble rural or urban villages where all know all and have frequent face-to-face contact. Rather, most kith and kin live farther away than a walk (or short drive) so that telephone contact sustains ties as much as face-to-face get-togethers. (1999: 348)

'All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined', Anderson (1983: 18) insists in a curious concord between the two quite distinct schools of thought.

Furthermore, Wellman and Gulia charge, most accounts of virtual community have treated the Internet as an isolated phenomenon without taking into account how interactions on the Net fit with other aspects of people's lives: 'The Net is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact. It is not a separate reality', Wellman and Gulia observe (1999: 334).

These other aspects of people's lives constitute the crucial background against which questions regarding the social and individual significance of online communities can be raised and answered. Thus virtual communities cannot be declared inferior to real-life communities simply because they lack face-to-face materiality. They cannot be celebrated as liberating or empowering by nature either, as people bring to them stocks of knowledge and systems of relevance generated throughout their unalterable personal

histories and social experience. They cannot be studied and characterized exclusively by what is produced online as the cultures enacted online have their roots in forms of life existing in the 'real' world.

Finally, and this is the central thesis that I propose here, the concept of (virtual) community with all the normative load it carries, has led analysis into a not particularly productive ideological exchange disputing the possibility that genuine community can be sustained through computer networks. This has deflected attention from the fact that a continuum of forms of being and acting together is growing from the technology of the Internet. I will refer to this emerging range of new social forms as 'virtual togetherness' in order to avoid the normative overtones present in the concept of community. Community, whatever definition one may choose to give it, would then be one possible form of virtual togetherness among many.

The opposite of virtual togetherness (and community) is not 'real' or 'genuine' community, as the current theoretical debate suggests, but the isolated consumption of digitized goods and services within the realm of particularistic existence. The issue then is not which (and whether any) form of togetherness online deserves the 'warmly persuasive' (Williams, 1985: 76) label of community. The challenge to analysts is to understand and appreciate the significance of these various forms of transcending the narrowly private existence and navigating the social world for individual participants, for society at large and for the shaping of the Internet.

Between consumption and community

In this section I will present an emergent continuum in users' under-standing and actual practice with regard to the Internet spanning the poles of consumption and community. The important distinction between these two modes of Internet use, in my view, consists in the absence in the former and presence in the latter of users' participation and involvement with one another. The degree of immediacy and depth of this involvement, as I will show below, varies in the different versions of virtual togetherness discernible in my respondents' accounts. It may or may not meet a normative standard of 'genuine community'. But in all forms of virtual togetherness, unlike in the consumption mode, users *produce* something of value to others – content, space, relationship and/or culture. I believe that the legitimacy and the practical possibility of this participatory mode of Internet use is what needs to be defended against the assault of consumption and its related practices. By simply denying the value of virtual togetherness (community) critics undermine the strongest alternative to the narrow consumption-orientated model of Internet development.

The infosumer: the rationalist ideal of Internet use

Accounts of participation in virtual groups came up in the stories of some of the people I interviewed without specific questioning. Invited to explain how they used the Internet, they started with their online groups. With others, no mention of any social life online was ever made. My pointed question about whether they took part in virtual groups or forums received sometimes very sceptical and even derogatory/nihilistic responses:

> I am reading a few groups, not much. But again, nothing intrigues me to participate. So I don't know how widespread is that communal thing. I have no idea. I haven't participated. Chats, I find, are a horrible waste of time! I tried it once or twice and said, forget it! [What is so disappointing about it?] Oh, the subjects, the way they talked about it . . . (Reiner, 62, retired mechanical-engineering technician)

> I am aware, like you say, of newsgroups or use-groups, whatever they are called, I tried, two or three years ago, some and I just didn't care. The crap that came back and the depth of the level of knowledge didn't really strike me, it wasn't worth going through these hundreds of notes – somebody asking this or that to find. . . . But I couldn't find any substantive issues and I did not care, I did not want to use it to advertise my own knowledge, so I just left them alone. (Don, 60, psychological counsellor)

Gary, a 65-year-old retired naval radio operator, summed up this particular position regarding Internet group discussions in a useful model. According to him, a good radio operator sends as little as possible, but receives maximum:

> Because the radio operator is there just to get all the information he can about the weather, the time signal, about what's happening in different countries and orders from different places. And if he can get that efficiently without going on the air too much, then it is to the benefit of everybody. If everybody is on the air asking questions, then you cannot hear really anything but miles and miles of questions being asked. That's why the etiquette of the professional radio operator was to say as little as possible. Like telegrams used to be.. . . To me, it is a matter of getting information across.

Coming from this perspective, Gary scorned the 'noisy people out there on the Internet', 'the empty heads' who were there first: 'There are always people who just have their mouth hanging out and they are just talking, and talking, and talking, and just creating a lot of babble.'

These kinds of empty-heads produced 'garbage upon garbage' on the Internet, a low-level content that Gary refused to engage with. He believed that his contributions, had he made any, would have not been appreciated. To post in newsgroups, for him, would have been like 'casting pearls before swine – that means it is pretty pointless to be intellectual when you are dealing with people who just want to talk about garbage'.

A closer look at the 'radio operator' perspective reveals its underlying communicative values to be 'substantive issues', 'information', 'efficiency'. The respondents in this category upheld a rationalist ideal of information production and exchange and expected the content of Internet discussions to live up to that ideal. Their high standards prevented them from contributing to any group discussions because of an 'expert-knowledge-or-nothing' attitude. These respondents repudiated sociability understood as the pursuit of human contact, acquaintance, friendship, solidarity and intimacy, as legitimate motives for using the Internet. The users in this category were turning to the Internet for timely, accurate, reliable information and, quite naturally, were finding it in the online offerings of traditional information institutions such as news agencies, radio stations, newspapers, government sites.

Instrumental relations: rational interaction

In Martha's narrative, one could notice the persisting authority of the rationalist ideal with information as its central value, although acceptance of other people on the Internet, not necessarily experts and expert organizations, as sources of information and ideas was also showing through. Information remained the leading motive stated for going on the Internet, however 'talking to people online' was not perceived as its antithesis:

> My son has an attention deficit disorder . . . and it was really interesting to get online and to talk to people from all over the world about this issue. It was called the ADD forum – a really good way for providing information. (Martha, 41, meat-wrapper for Safeway)

At one turn of the conversation, when Martha admitted that she missed the ADD forum available only through CompuServe, she made haste to emphasize: 'It wasn't chatting to meet people and get to know people. It was chatting about ideas and exchanging information', thus paying tribute to the rationalist ideal.

Similarly, John, a 73-year-old retired mechanical engineer, perceived his participation in a mailing list for motor-glider hobbyists, as a valuable resource in problematic situations when decisions regarding new equipment had to be made or technical problems needed to be solved. He had approached newsgroups in the same way – in cases when he needed a question answered, a problem solved, a new experience illuminated: his wife's diabetes, a new type of apple tree he wanted to plant, his new communication software, etc. He enjoyed the helpfulness and solidarity demonstrated by the people who took the time to answer his queries in

their specifically human and social aspects, but admitted that once the problem was solved, the interpersonal communication would fade away:

> We don't normally communicate socially – how are you, what's the weather.. . . It's usually when a technical question comes up. After that question is solved, we may talk a little bit about how old we are, what we did. But once the problem is solved this fades away. But yet, those people are still in the background. And when I am looking at postings and see their name, a bell rings. (John)

He himself would only respond to questions others had asked on the mailing list when he had 'something positive' to say and believed that this reserved culture of positive, substantive contributions made his mailing list work well.

Merlin, a 58-year-old unemployed mechanical engineer, was also quite scrupulous as far as the quality of information exchange in his virtual group was concerned. He insisted he was on this mailing list in order 'to learn', 'to expand my understanding of the electrical components used in the electric car'. He saw the list as a 'semi-professional community' and only felt the right to contribute when 'somebody says something wrong or asks a question, especially connected to hybrids, because I have thought about it, I haven't done any real calculations, [only] very simple calculations which answered some questions that were asked'. Despite the preponderance of strictly technical content on the list, the personalities of participants had come through and Merlin had developed curiosity as to what kind of people some of the discussant were. When he had happened to be in the locations of some of the guys on the list, he had driven by their houses or shops and had met some of them. Putting a face to an email address or alias, a living image and context to stories told on the list, seemed to have been a transforming experience in terms of how Merlin felt about his list:

> Now, I have met these people, so it actually means a lot more to me, now that I have met [emphasizes].. . . I thought Jerry was a wealthy guy, in fact, you have to categorize him as poor, he is a postman and he hasn't worked for over a year, he is obviously not rich. And I have seen him, and I have seen his wife Shauna, I actually saw his two daughters in passing. I have seen the truck, the car, that had this plasma fireball incinerated inside of the car, I saw the battery – there were three batteries welded together in a T-junction, I mean really, to do that damage, it really had to have a lot of energy . . . (Merlin, 56, unemployed mechanical engineer)

Thus, unexpectedly, the rationalist model of Internet use (Merlin insisted on his loyalty to it) was showing cracks where it would have seemed most unlikely – on a technical discussion list.

People and ideas in virtual public spheres

For Patrick (33, electronics technician) and Myra (28, doctoral student in physics) 'chatting about ideas' was one of the main attractions of newsgroups. In this communication model, the high standing of information, ideas and knowledge was preserved, however it was inextricably linked to interest in people as knowers, interpreters, discussion partners and opponents. The contact between the two of them (Patrick and Myra) was actually established when Myra found in the Albanian newsgroup she was reading a posting from a guy who wanted to 'ask some questions about Albania to an Albanian, to a guy or girl who knew about the country'. Reflecting on a gratifying exchange they had had in an Internet newsgroup, they described it like this:

> We started talking about serious politics.. . . Albanian, Eastern European. We were talking – long, long, long messages – political analysis, how this or that could be. No jokes, no stupidities like oh, I find you attractive, nothing like that. (Myra, 28, Albanian background, doctoral student in physics)

In her description of another newsgroup exchange with a previously unknown contributor, Myra stressed both the quality of the ideas that were articulated in the posting and the relationship established between its author and herself as a reader:

> There is a guy in the Russian group – and I saw a couple of postings of his and, of course, I sent him a message, a personal one and I said well, I am delighted, I like them and he replied – oh, I am delighted that you appreciate them. So you kind of establish a closer contact. We don't write to each other or anything but when I see a posting by him, I will go and read it. (Myra)

Myra used to write a lot in Albanian newsgroups and mailing lists (trying to express her opinion regarding various, mostly political, issues) but the highly controversial nature of the political topics she was addressing attracted flaming and, later, when she responded in a way she thought appropriate, intolerable disciplinary measures. Patrick, for his part, admitted that he was visiting newsgroups to some extent also for the controversy: 'But I like provocative topics and if someone starts flaming me, fine, I get what I deserve.. . . I have been flamed and certainly will be flamed. I don't avoid that.'

Both Patrick and Myra thought of newsgroups not simply as an information resource, but also as a space for intellectual sociability and political debate, a 'public forum' in Patrick's own words, where diverse opinions could meet and clash as a matter of course. The point of being there was to expose oneself to others' perspectives and to argue for your own, to build alliances with like-minded people and to enjoy intellectually stimulating encounters.

An online political discussion that had gone the extra mile to involve subsequent organization and collective action of participants was represented by the mailing list Theodore belonged to. The participants in that discussion had gone beyond the process of collective sense-making of events and issues. An agreement over needs and directions of political organizing had grown out of their exchange and debate. The grassroots Ethiopian National Congress had brought together face-to-face Ethiopian refugees scattered all over the world who had reached agreement over their common cause and course of action in their virtual togetherness:

> Individuals on the list started talking about this thing and said we should do something about it and so it started as a virtual organization and it transformed itself, there was a meeting in July of last year in LA – the initial meeting for individuals to get together and discuss this thing and then there was another meeting in 1997 October where the actual organization was proclaimed and established in Atlanta. (Theodore, 45, parking patroller)

The chatter: sociability unbound

The cases discussed so far derived in a significant way from the rationalist model of Internet communication, albeit implanting in it interpersonal interaction and sociability in different degrees and variations. When one turns to listen to Sandy (35, telemarketer for a telecommunications company), one realizes that a qualitative break with the rationalist model has taken place. Sandy spoke for a markedly different model of Internet communication, one that had sociability as its central value. Ironically, Sandy was introduced to the Internet in relation to a university course she was taking. Thus, for her, finding information was the foremost function of the medium her attention was drawn to. However, it didn't take long before Sandy discovered the chat lines and became fascinated by what they had to offer. In her open and emotional statement Sandy showed no signs of guilt or remorse for abandoning the rationalist model of Internet use. In fact, she did not seem to notice the major subversion to which she was subjecting the medium as perceived from the 'radio operator' perspective. She was happy to be one of those noisy people who were out there 'talking, and talking, and talking' (see Gary's quote above). Her main reason for being on the Net was 'meeting people in there and having a great time talking to them' (see Martha's statement in the opposite sense above).

> I was drawn to the rooms that were like the parent zone, health zone and things like that, just general interest.. . . I would talk to people in there and then I met this guy who lives in Ontario and his wife and they had a room called the Fun Factory. It was about 10 of us. We just hung out there, we went in there and just chatted about life. All kind of fun things – we goofed around, told jokes, stories, whatever. The same ten people. Oh, I still talk to them all. In fact we've

flown and we have met each other and some of us. . . . Lots of times other
people came in, but this was the core. (Sandy)

What started as 'goofing around' ended up having dramatic con-
sequences for Sandy's 'real' life. In Sandy's own reflection, as a direct
result of her hanging out in chat lines, her marriage fell apart completely.
That was because online she met 'really good people' who helped her to
regain her self-confidence: 'then all of a sudden I was reminded that I was
a real person [emotional tone] with real emotions, and real feelings and I
was likable by people'. Furthermore, one of her new online friends was the
first person to whom she revealed that her husband was beating her:

> And he just said – 'Get out! You have to get out, Sandy, you cannot stay there!'
> And he and I became really close good friends and he convinced me that life
> could go on and even that I would lose a lot of materialism, I would gain so
> much more if I could fight this fight and get out. And I did. I left. (Sandy)

Another person who became a close friend and shared a lot in Sandy's
marital problems, was also instrumental in helping her with the techno-
logical challenges of the Internet. He was a computer professional who
taught Sandy the technical knowledge and skills that she needed to move
and act freely online. Thus one can notice how, starting from a close
personal relationship established online, Sandy had gone full circle back to
hard information.

> And he made it easy. I would say 'I don't think I can do that', and he would say
> – 'I remember you saying that about such and such, but if you just think about
> how it works.' And he would explain to me how it worked. And then I would
> go and do it myself. (Sandy)

The chat room Sandy was describing could hardly meet the high
standards of community raised by the critics of the idea of virtual
community. The interactions in that room had been vibrant and yet
superficial, intense and fleeting at the same time:

> In the room it was mostly goofing around, telling cracking jokes. And also there
> was always stuff going on in the background in private conversations and then
> you'd have the public room. And often you would have three or four private
> conversations going at the same time as the room. (Sandy)

What actually was happening in this environment was people meeting
strangers and treating them not simply with civility, but as someone 'like
myself', someone who could laugh at the same jokes, talk about the same
topics of interest and then walk away and go on with his/her own life. That
is, what the room was providing for its visitors was an environment for
'fluid sociability among strangers and near-strangers' (Philippe Ariès, cited
in Weintraub, 1997: 25). Speaking about the sociability of the pre-modern

cities Ariès writes: 'This is a space of heterogeneous coexistence, not of inclusive solidarity or of conscious collective action; a space of symbolic display, of the complex blending of practical motives with interaction ritual and personal ties . . .' (quoted in Weintraub, 1997: 25).

The chat room described by Sandy displayed also social proximity found across physical distance. Sandy's account indicated that the people she was meeting in her chat room were socially and culturally close to her: they liked rock and roll, *Star Trek* and kayaking. They had computers of the same make and similar kinds of marital problems. The spirit of sociability sustained in the chat room was a product of the shared desire of these people to overcome the privateness of their existence, to go out and socialize some of their most personal experiences, anxieties and troubles. The merry superficiality of the chat-room was only the first level of contact where, through the display of one's personality in public, interpersonal affinities were sought and negotiated. The deeper effects of this activity were playing themselves out at the level of the private conversations breaking off from the party and even further, into participants' actions in the offline world. These were effects concerning again the private spheres of the individuals involved. However, the return to the private to deal with its challenges was performed at a different level, bringing in a reaffirmed self, reflexivity, new interpretative frameworks for addressing vital problems of everyday life acquired in the social online relationships.

At the moment I spoke with Sandy, the Fun Factory chat room had died out – its participants had left. Sandy emphasized that she did not want to chat online that much any more, 'at least for now':

> I think I want to establish social relationships in the real world instead of in the virtual world right now. That's important for me where I am right now. I still want to keep in contact with the friends that I have met online and I do that by email now instead of chat rooms.

In Sandy's case, the involvement in a form of virtual togetherness had clearly been a situational phenomenon. The problems of a particular situation in her life, and what was relevant to her at that point – the isolation brought about by an abusive marriage – had led Sandy to seek sociability, recognition, social support, intimacy in the more-or-less anonymous virtual association of people she could meet through the Internet chat programmes. In her virtual togetherness with the other members of the chat room, Sandy had found the means to deal with the problems she was facing there and then. In a changed situation, she was consciously choosing a different route and different means for building togetherness with people. Yet, as one can notice in her statement, she cherished the relationships she had created online and worked to translate them into a different format. Her 'virtual' friendships were in the process of becoming 'real', and as such, notably, sustained through other communication technologies – email

and telephone: a transformation that once again exposes the fragility of the constructed boundary between real and virtual togetherness.

The communitarian

With Ellen (49, former editor), the concept of community dominated the conversation from the first question on. Ellen had hooked up to the Internet from home after she became house-bound and diagnosed with a rare but crippling chronic illness. Her explicit motivation for becoming an Internet user was to be able to connect to a support group. She simply felt 'very desperate for information and help'. 'Getting information' and 'getting support' were two inseparable reasons for her to go online. Thus Ellen joined an invisible dispersed group of people who were logging on every day to get the 'gift of making this connection' with each other:

> . . . to discover that thousands of people are going through exactly the same incredible experience and nobody in their family understands, their husbands and wives don't understand, the doctor doesn't believe them and they have this terrible difficulty of functioning. And yet, there is this tremendously strong community of people who have never met and probably will never meet but who are so loyal to each other and have such a strong support because it is a lifeline for all of us. (Ellen)

The mailing list Ellen described was experienced as a safe environment by these people, a place where they felt comfortable saying:

> I've had a really bad day, I had to go see a specialist and I had such a difficulty and couldn't breathe and it was such a challenge to get there and then the doctor was awful to me. And then I got home and my husband was complaining because the house wasn't clean . . . (Ellen)

And immediately after a complaint like that would pop up in members' mailboxes, there would be a 'flurry' of supportive responses. Loyalty, high tolerance for 'dumping', safety, family-like atmosphere, compassion – these were all attributes Ellen used to describe the quality of interaction in her 'wonderful group'.

The real-life effects consisted in 'a lot of confidence', 'getting my life in proportion again', 'getting a sense of myself' (compare with an almost identical formulation by Sandy) 'feeling much less a failure'. Learning a lot about the disease was among the benefits of list membership; however Ellen took care to distinguish the particular kind of learning that was taking place there:

> I learnt so much from these people who had had the disease for years. I had tried to get hold of some medical information. But getting online is different because there, for the first time you get information from people who have trodden this path already! (Ellen)

For good or ill as the case may be, the victims of the disease Ellen had were short-circuiting the medical establishment and the expert knowledge produced by it and were learning from each other. More accurately, they were collectively appropriating and using expert knowledge in ways they had found relevant and productive in their own unique situations of sufferers and victims. On the list they were creating this culture of appropriation and solidarity.

A similar sense of gain from online support group discussions came through clearly in the comments of Mathew, a 37-year-old amputee. According to him, people with similar health problems learnt from each other about the existence of a variety of treatment options, which, consequently, empowered them vis-a-vis the medical profession. Matthew challenged the very notion of a patient. In his understanding, people with health problems were clients, customers and, in the best case, collaborators with doctors, nurses, prostheticists, etc. To be able to act in this capacity, however, they needed to be informed and acculturated in their disability. Matthew believed that this is what online support groups, such as the list he himself had initiated, helped bring about. 'I learnt more about being an amputee in the one year of being on the mailing list than throughout the 20 years I had had the problem', Matthew insisted passionately.

What distinguished Ellen's experience from other, more detached, forms of learning like those described by previous respondents was the fact that the people she was interacting with over time had come to constitute a collective entity with its own distinctive culture. Her online group had a relatively stable membership communicating on a daily basis and feeling responsible for each others' well-being. Both commonalty of interest and diversity could be found in that group. Most of its participants were people seeking alternative approaches for dealing with the chronic disease they had. In Ellen's estimate, most of them were highly educated and articulate. Women were in the majority. At the same time, members of the group came from different religious backgrounds and life experiences in terms of education, profession, family, etc. Yet, characteristically, they were enter-ing their shared space ready and eager to listen to interpretations coming from viewpoints different from their own:

> Like this woman in Israel, a Hebrew scholar, a convert to Judaism, she has the most fascinating perspective on things. There are amazing things coming from her.. . . But nobody has ever tried to push one point of view above another. There has been very much a sense of sharing. (Ellen)

Ellen's account describes, I would argue, a 'warmly persuasive' version of a robust online community characterized by interpersonal commitment and a sense of common identity. Ellen's Internet was thus markedly different from the rationalist model of Internet communication defended by the infosumers. The users who denied the communal aspects of the Internet

came from a strictly utilitarian and/or rationalist value orientation. They sought positive, reliable, scientific, professionally presented information, and were able to find it in the virtual projections of institutions such as online magazines and newspapers, radio and television stations' sites, government sites, news agencies, and scientific publications online. To most of these users, newsgroups and mailing lists had little to offer and, consequently, communal forms were put in question in principle. The everyday practice of the infosumer, I suggest, is organized by and continuously reproduces the consumption model of the Internet as a social institution.

On the other hand, representatives of disenfranchised groups – such as, in my study, Ellen and Matthew, both disabled, but also in some sense Sandy (a victim of spousal abuse) and Merlin (long-term unemployed) – were using the technology as a tool to carve spaces of sociability, solidarity, mutual support and situated, appropriative learning in commun-ion with others. As I tried to show, these two forms of Internet use were not separated by empty space but by a whole range of intermediate modalities. Martha and John appreciated the empowerment stemming from the opportunity to draw on the knowledge, experience and practical help of otherwise anonymous people in the areas of their specific interests and concerns. Myra, Patrick and Theodore were new immigrants struggling to make sense of the dramatic political events that had befallen their native countries, as well as to sustain a meaningful balance between disparate, and even conflicting, sides of their cultural identities. In this process, they were leaning on both the informational and the communal affordances of the Internet, thus forging a medium for political debate and civic involvement.

Common for all the modalities of virtual togetherness described here is the fact that actions and interactions in online forums were closely intertwined with participants' projects and pursuits in their offline lives. Martha carried over information and advice on attention deficit disorder received through her CompuServe chat room into the discussions and publications of her local parent support group. Jane (35, home-maker) used Internet sources for ideas to implement in her arts and crafts group at the local church. Theodore directed a radio programme for the Ethiopian community in Vancouver drawing on the themes and issues discussed in his mailing list. In many cases, for example with Merlin and Sandy, relationships established online had been followed up with face-to-face contacts. With John, there was no distinct boundary between 'virtual' and 'real' links. He moved seamlessly between involvement in actual events with his fellow hobbyists and the electronic communication that sustained their organization. As much as these banal everyday activities may contrast with the exotic aura of some virtual community accounts, they powerfully demonstrate the artificiality of the split between 'virtual' and 'real'. With Ellen, who felt more at home in her virtual community than in any face-to-

face group, a very specific configuration of situational factors had brought forth this rather extreme form of virtual togetherness: a rare disease, physical and social isolation, a vital need to come to terms with a radically new experience combined with mastery of language and expression (recall that Ellen was a philologist, editor and writer). And it should be noted that, even in this case, online community was not displacing face-to-face community where the latter existed or could have existed. It was rather filling the void left by the impossibility of face-to-face community or the inability of existing face-to-face communities to satisfy important needs of the individual.

Between the public and the intimate: gradients of immediacy

In his *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams (1974) draws attention to the condition of 'mobile privatization' characterizing everyday life in an earlier phase of industrial capitalist society and sees the technology of broadcasting as a resolution, at a certain level, of the contradictory pressures generated by this condition:

> This complex of developments included the motorcycle and motorcar, the box camera and its successors, home electrical appliances, and radio sets. Socially, this complex is characterized by the two apparently paradoxical yet deeply connected tendencies of modern urban industrial living: on the one hand mobility, on the other hand the more apparently self-sufficient family home. The earlier period of public technology, best exemplified by the railways and city lighting, was replaced by a kind of technology for which no satisfactory name has yet been found; that which served an at once mobile and home-centered way of living: a form of *mobile privatization*. Broadcasting in its applied form was a social product of this distinctive tendency. (1974: 20; italics in original)

The lives of the Internet users I talked to did not seem to match this description precisely. First of all, these people were not sufficiently mobile. Their automobiles could not take them to places denied to them through various forms of social exclusion – unemployment, high financial cost and illness, amongst others. Second, they felt ambivalent about the self-sufficiency of the private homes in which their existence was circumscribed. They were ready and eager, each one to a different extent and with different degrees of rationalization, to trade that privateness for human contact, community and broader social involvement. Their Internet-based practices could be characterized as constituting an attempt at 'immobile socialization'. Users employed the medium for associating with other people and social entities without leaving their homes, and this represented a resolution, at a certain level, of the pressures present in their original situations. The practice of immobile socialization, I argue, undermines a second dichotomy that has been employed to frame the discussion of the

social meaning of the Internet – that between the public and the private. Critics like Kumar have seen growing Internet use as contributing to the 'increased privatization and individualization' of existence and the 'evacuation and diminishing of the public sphere of contemporary western societies' (1995: 163). Enthusiasts, on the other hand, have anticipated invigorated public life and a 'network nation' (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978). Neither of these broad generalizations accurately reflects the actual practice of users. What I found in my respondents' accounts was evidence of active and discriminating crafting of boundaries and definitions of relationships between individuals and individuals and groups. These boundaries delineated spaces of social interaction intermeshing the public and the private in ways unimaginable without the new communication medium.

Most of the people I interviewed, especially the women, spoke about an initial shock and fear for their privacy when using the Internet. As new users, they found it hard to imagine exactly how visible and socially consequential their various actions and interactions were. Sandy recollected her early anxiety with amusement: 'I remember when the modem hooked up the first time I was scared. I thought: Oh, no! I thought everyone was gonna know everything about me for some reason.' Jane, a 36-year-old homemaker, was still at the stage where making a comment in a newsgroup or participating in a chat line felt 'creepy': 'So, I just made a comment. But I didn't like the idea because I realized later that anybody could read my comment and send me email.. . . I didn't make any other comments.'

With experience, users had developed strategies for careful control of the degree of exposure they allowed for on the Internet in particular action contexts. Martha's approach involved complex manipulation of two email addresses, one 'anonymous' and the other indicating her real name:

> The address I have at the VCN[2] forwards mail . . . to my home address. When the people I am contacting are a non-profit web site I can contact them either way – from my home address or the VCN one. I like to have that anonymity. Then any mail that goes to the VCN, the people that have sent it don't know where it goes to until I contact them. (Martha)

Similarly, when Myra wanted to respond to a request for information posted in a newsgroup by an unknown person hidden behind a nickname, she reasoned:

> Robert Redford [poster's nickname]!. . . Let's see what his true name is. (I am a scientist after all.) At the same time I wanted to be safe and because I had several accounts scattered around the world, I wrote to him from an account that I had in Italy. And on the next day when I checked that account, I found a message from that guy that I also thought was a Pole . . .

The mystery guy and Myra started a 'serious' political discussion (referred to earlier in this article) which went in concentric circles from public issues to private thoughts and feelings:

> And then after months, because he was always asking questions: how are things over there.. . . After months, I started joking and said, well, the next message I expect something like ten questions from you. And here come ten questions: How tall are you? What kind of wine do you like? Do you like sailing?. . . things like that. So it got more into [I suggest personal, she doesn't accept it, preferring] ordinary human terms rather than talking about big issues. (Myra)

Myra was drawing the trajectory of a fascinating gradual movement between the public and the private, or, as Schutz would put it, between different gradients of immediacy spanning the distance between the most anonymous – 'an Albanian, a girl or guy who knew about the country', 'that guy that I also thought was a Pole' – and the most intimate, as we will see shortly. Communication media varied accordingly. They were used with subtle discretion to carefully negotiate social and cultural boundaries, one infinitesimal step at a time:

> And then it was almost a year after we started talking.. . . I don't know, maybe I was bored again or I had other problems in my life when I decided again, well, what's this guy, let's hear his voice. Let's make him a real thing rather just an Internet header. So I asked him, may I give you a call and he said yes. I was a little shy, because I knew nothing about his *private* [emphasis mine] life. You don't want to intrude into somebody's life and we were just friends, not even friends, not even close friends. But he said 'yes' and I call him, and I talk to this guy who happens to have an accent, we talked about some rubbish, I guess. I don't even remember, nobody would have guessed then that things would get . . . (Myra)

As the story progressed, the phone conversations between the two of them became a regular event, alternated with hours-long Internet chats, emails and again hours-long phone conversations. Then, pictures were exchanged, then a marriage proposal from him came by email in the form of a joke: 'And it was easier to make that joke on the Internet than on the phone' (Patrick). Then, 'things started getting more and more romantic' (Myra). And finally, a visit was arranged:

> *Myra*: At the beginning of March of 1997 I came to Vancouver. We met at the airport and that was it.

> *Maria*: How did you find each other after having had all the correspondence? Did reality change your image of the other person?

> *Patrick and Myra*: No.

> *Myra*: I remember that I was very tense, of course.

> *Patrick*: Me too [unclear].

> *Myra*: I remember I got through the gates. The first thing that I saw was him. He was coming towards me. We just hugged and we kept walking. I was

talking all the time because otherwise I would explode. It was my usual way of talking – making fun of everything including myself. He was used to that, I guess. He wasn't surprised that I was behaving . . .

Maria: How long did it take from the first time you exchanged messages to that moment?

Myra: A year and a half.

As I explained earlier, in Sandy's story the interaction in the semi-public space of the chat room consisted of 'mostly goofing around, telling cracking jokes'. In the private background however joking was turning into deeply intimate revelations:

> Roland's and my relationship was mostly joking around, but we at some point, got quite deep into his relationship with his wife and my relationship with my husband.. . . He was married and going through really tough times with his wife, so he and I got really good friends and we emailed each other back and forth every day and just having that relationship with him made me feel alive! And made me realize how much really I had going for me because after my husband diminished my self worth and self respect so low . . . (Sandy)

Sandy walked all the way from 'cracking jokes' in public to a romantic relationship with one of her new friends from the chat group. The dynamic of the story of that relationship was similar to Myra and Patrick's – long chats, coming to know each other's life stories in detail, exchange of pictures, finally a face-to-face meeting. The ending of it all however was not quite so happy as in the previous case. Sandy's partner, CK, had taken advantage of the manipulative powers of the Internet, to lead numerous women into believing that each of them was the only one he was attracted to and exchanged intimate correspondence with. A discovery Sandy made by accident on his computer, opened her eyes to the fact that CK's compassion and caring had been shared with many other women all over North America at exactly the same time when their romance was in full swing. In a theoretically quite interesting move, Sandy chose to publicize her deeply private pain. Enraged, she sent a message to these women explaining what CK was actually doing, thus creating a powerful, even if short-lived, united front against the trickster: 'None of them [the women she emailed] hated me, they were really angry with him. He took some pretty big flak over it.'

In the context of her disease-related mailing list having hundreds of readers and dozens of contributors all around the world, Ellen also traversed a spiral of public to private and back to public communications. Initially, she was 'intimidated by the very hugeness' of the list and did not feel confident enough to contribute. However, in the midst of the big group discussion, after a while, Ellen would notice people that she 'would resonate with': 'I would find myself looking through the list of messages

for their names – just to see whether they have written that day.' And finally one day, she contacted a couple of people through the so-called 'back channels', sending private emails. This contact coincided with the creation of a new sub-list by one of the women Ellen had gotten in touch with. So, about 17 people, who had found through the big list that they shared similar interests and approaches to healing, formed a 'semi-private' group branching off from the open public forum and initially exchanged carbon copied emails with each other.

As the interest in that group turned out to be quite high, after some time it had to be transformed into a new 'official', as Ellen put it, mailing list based on a server at St John's University in Boston. This meant that from a closed 'private discussion', the list was going back into the public realm where everyone could read and join it. Some members feared that this would compromise the quality of the exchange, as well as the openness and the depth of the interpersonal sharing. The group deliberated on the problem and finally decided that it was 'the idea of keeping it private versus having new blood, and new information, and new ideas. Also importantly, being able to offer what we had to more people.' They chose publicness and initially Ellen was ambivalent about it:

> I felt very uncomfortable with the idea of becoming public. I wasn't sure I could continue posting because I am a very, very private person. I don't like the feeling of being on stage. It is a very personal medium – I find that people write very personal messages. They really reveal themselves very deeply. (Ellen)

Eventually, feeling that the characteristic 'very nice atmosphere and a sense of camaraderie and common ground' of the list was preserved Ellen overcame her reservations and continued to be an active contributor. Thus, after finding reaffirmation of her interests and values in other individuals, and later in a close in-group, Ellen took her deeply private thoughts and sensations out of her walk-in closet (where her old Mac was located) and came out on the stage of the public realm empowered as an actor. After some time on the new list, someone suggested that the members exchange personal biographies. This made Ellen reflect on the dialectic of public and private, self-presentation and knowledge of the other person in the online environment:

> I found it so fascinating to read – first of all, what everyone chooses to say about themselves; and also think about what I want to convey about myself – here I am in this unique online environment where I can't be seen, I can't be heard and yet I want to convey something about myself.. . . I kept them all. So that gave more of a sense of the individual lives and of being a group. (Ellen)

What this public–private–intimate continuum helps us realize is that, as with the consumption versus community continuum, there is no critical point where a person's or a group's behaviour can be definitively

characterized as private as opposed to public and vice versa. People plan and experience their social action as combining privacy and publicness in different proportions. The task typically assigned to the Internet is to bring the determination of this proportion under the user's control. To whom do I want to listen; whom do I want to talk to; whom do I allow to listen to me? For and with whom do I want to act; who do I allow to act upon me; how big and open a collectivity do I want to act with? The different answers individual users give (more or less consciously) to these questions lead them to choose individual, 'private' email or a dozen of 'carbon copies', a posting to a closed or to an open mailing list, 'lurking' in a newsgroup or contributing to one; joining a mailing list, or, in fact, creating and moderating one (Matthew in my respondent group).

If we look closely at the examples of Myra's and Ellen's behaviour, we will recognize the multidimensionality of the notions of private and public that emanate from them. There are at least three senses in which publicness and privacy are perceived and respectively manipulated online – in terms of the forum, or space of gathering; in terms of the content of the communication; and in terms of the action taken – does it affect others or is it performed in perfect privacy within the lair of the skull, as Anderson (1984) has put it describing the act of reading the newspaper. What emerges is a multidimensional scale on which privacy and publicness of social action can me gauged. At all points along the way in the processes of encountering others and interacting with them online people are located in their private homes. From this position, they turn themselves, initially as simple consumers/readers, to forums that are public. Later, they reach out to another private individual, sending him/her content that can itself be classified as dealing with issues of public concern or the opposite – with private issues. Thus all three components into which I have subdivided the process analytically – forum, action and content – can be perceived as either public or private, and people carefully select the degree of openness of each component they want to permit at any particular moment. In this way the practice of immobile socialization allows an infinitely diverse range of forms of interpersonal interaction, collective life and public participation to proliferate.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to display the limitations of a dichotomous understanding of online communication as well as of the normatively charged and vaguely defined concept of community as the standard against which social practice on the Internet is judged. Users approach the medium, as my data have shown, from a variety of situational motivations,

needs and ideologies. In doing that, they generate a rich repertory of use genres, each of which needs careful consideration and evaluation on its own merits. The preoccupation with ideologically constructed standards, such as virtual community versus real/genuine community and public participation versus privatization of experience, blinds commentators to the possibility of new, unexpected, unimaginable and yet humanist and empowering variations of technological practice to emerge.

It is my belief that the careful examination of actual Internet use in its numerous forms should be organized by the task of discerning, recognizing and articulating the empowering aspects of the technology as they arise out of the everyday lives of real people in particular situations. A struggle to direct resources towards the further development and reinforcement of these aspects of the Internet as a technology and a social institution can start from there.

A quote I found in Schutz's (1964) *Collected Papers* helped me summarize what my at times confusing journey through my respondents' social actions on the Internet had in fact helped me discover. In the conclusion of his analysis of Mozart's musical contribution Schutz writes:

> I submit that Mozart's main topic is not, as Cohen believed, love. It is the metaphysical mystery of the existence of a human universe of pure sociality, the exploration of the manifold forms in which man meets his fellow-man and acquires knowledge of him. The encounter of man with man within the human world is Mozart's main concern. This explains the perfect humanity of his art. (Schutz, 1964: 199)

My study of the communicative and communal use of the Internet has uncovered a fascinating variety of forms in which individuals meet their fellow men and women, and acquire knowledge of them opening up thanks to the new medium. The encounter of the person with the Other, in singular and plural, within the human world; the filling of erstwhile regions of anonymity with detailed knowledge of the fellow human is one of the most exciting promises of the Internet. Discovering and promoting these manifold forms of human encounter in a new technological environment is, I believe, the central task of a socially responsible study and shaping of the Internet.

Notes

1. The call for participation in the study and a description of the research procedures can be viewed at < http://www.ucalgary.ca/ ~ bakardji/call.html > .
2. Vancouver Community Network.

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