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SCHOLARSHIP

KEITH N. HAMPTON

LIVING THE WIRED LIFE IN THE WIRED SUBURB: NETVILLE, GLOCALISATION AND CIVIC SOCIETY

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Since the mid-1850s, scholars have debated how technological innovation would affect community (Durkheim 1893). Today, the debate continues as a combination of Internet use and home computing increasingly moves activities, once almost exclusively ascribed to the public realm, into the private home. It is increasingly possible to socialise, shop, work, learn and participate in leisure activities, all from within the refuge of the private residence. The growth of personal computers and computer-mediated communication (CMC) has ignited a debate into the nature of community and the effects of cyberspace on social relations.

Critics argue that new technologies, such as the Internet, contribute to an incomplete lifestyle that withdraws people from in-person contact and disconnects us from our families, friends and communities. On the opposite side of the debate technological utopians suggest that the widespread introduction of the Internet, and its corresponding connectivity, can only serve to benefit the individual and society through the creation of new "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993). Primarily, anecdotal evidence emphasises the ability of computer networks to connect people in strong supportive relationships that blindly extend beyond characteristics of ethnicity, religion or national origins.

This research argues that CMC encourages the growth of social capital in the form of community involvement and in the expansion and strengthening of social networks. Whether home-computing and Internet use contributes to a loss of community, or a dramatic increase in social involvement, the ideal setting to view the effects of home-computing and Internet use on community would be a neighbourhood equipped with the most advanced technology available. Following in the tradition of research pioneered by urbanists like Herbert Gans (1967) this study provides an in-depth examination of life in a new urban form, the wired suburb.

Netville was one of the first residential developments in the world to be built from the ground up with a broadband high-speed local network. Netville's local computer network reliably delivered network access at 10 Mbps, data transfer speeds 300 times faster than conventional dial-up Internet access and 10 times faster than what is available through most high-speed commercial cable and Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) services. Netville residents had access to services that included high speed Internet access (including electronic mail and web surfing), a videophone, an online jukebox, online health services, local discussion forums and a series of online entertainment and educational applications.

Shortly after the construction of the first homes I moved to Netville where I conducted an ethnography for nearly two years. The opportunity to live and work

amongst Netville residents provided an in-depth understanding of what life was like in a wired neighbourhood. The qualitative perspective of the ethnography was reinforced with a cross-sectional survey, administered to a sample of Netville residents, which provided a more detailed look at the effects of computer-mediated communication. The consortium of companies who provided Netville with its technology intended to connect all of Netville's households to the local network, but unforeseen organisational problems ultimately left 45 of Netville's 109 homes unconnected. The existence of a local, demographically similar, group of non-wired residents provided a natural comparison group.

This research takes the perspective that people belong to networks and not groups. Previous studies looking only in localities or at groups have ignored the multitude of social relations that extend across boundaries and through multiple social settings. Only by recognising that people have social ties of various strengths in multiple foci can a clear picture be formed of the effects of new communication technologies on social relations. Similarly, in maintaining supportive communities of social support people rely on multiple methods of communication. CMC and "face-to-face" communication are only two possible forms of social contact. The Internet should not be privileged as a distinct social system, online relationships are intertwined with social ties maintained through other means of social contact. Ignoring the potential for CMC to facilitate companionship and the exchange of support fails to examine the multistranded nature of social ties.

This study finds that Internet use is associated with increased social capital. Using the Internet is associated with high levels of social contact and supportive exchange with distant social ties. At the local level CMC encourages public participation, community involvement, the growth of local social networks, and the spatial dispersion of local networks. In a situation where there was near ubiquitous access to CMC Internet use encouraged visiting, surveillance, neighbour recognition, collective action and the maintenance of local social ties. There is no indication that Internet use inhibits or substitutes for other forms of social contact. Contact leads to contact, CMC encourages additional social contact through multiple means of communication: online, in-person and over the telephone. Findings are related back to existing Internet and community research, theorising that the growth of home-based information and communication technologies could lead to a "glocalisation" of community relations. Glocalisation is described as the growth of social capital, locally and with ties at a distance, as a result of CMC. The ultimate growth of which may bring about a return of the civic society argued to be in decline in the Western world.

References:

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DAVID SILVER

CYBERSPACE UNDER CONSTRUCTION:
DESIGN, DISCOURSE, AND DIVERSITY IN THE BLACKSBURG ELECTRONIC VILLAGE AND THE SEATTLE COMMUNITY NETWORK

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This dissertation is a comparative study of the cultural, social, economic, and aesthetic construction of two "online cities" or community networks: the Blacksburg Electronic Village and the Seattle Community Network. An interdisciplinary combination of historical analysis, rhetorical analysis, interface design, and ethnography, this project seeks to better understand the promise and perils of community networks, their development and design, recruitment and outreach, content and configuration, and members' meanings through an intensive case study and comparison of two drastically different community networks. In particular, I investigate how and to what extent the developers of the Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) and the Seattle Community Network (SCN) encourage and foster — through development, outreach, content, policy, and design — particular participants and privilege select kinds of participation. Finally, I conclude by offering a list of suggestions that can be used to encourage and foster more diverse and democratic community networks, and I situate the dissertation within three larger academic discourses.

By taking a proactively interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation raises a number of significant issues. First, as we learn from our historical analysis of the community networks, a key element in promoting diverse and democratic community networks is the concept and practice of participatory design. Throughout the processes of brainstorming, developing, and implementing community networks, developers should invite and welcome members of the community to lend their ideas, concerns, and efforts. As I show with the SCN, by including community members, groups, and organisations in the process, community network developers can derive a more diverse and collective vision of what their projects can and should become. Moreover, by being part of the process from the beginning, users of the community network gain a sense of ownership of the project, as well as develop a greater sense of commitment to it. Conversely, as I reveal with the BEV, by excluding such members, groups, and organisations from the planning and developing processes, the BEV project team has created an online community with very few opportunities for community building, save online commercial transactions between community network users and local businesses.

Second, although positive and exaggerated rhetoric about a community network can serve, at times, to foster enthusiastic interest and participation in the project, it is important to accompany such rhetoric with a series of collectively developed and agreed upon policies. As I uncover in my discourse analysis, translating the rhetoric of a community network into a set of acceptable use guidelines can foster a code of behaviours that encourage and make explicit the kinds of interac-

tions and communications deemed acceptable, allowable, and unallowable within the online community. By requiring users to review and accept such policies before entering the community network, developers can offer and insure a safe (online) space for members, as well as provide a means for addressing what some users may believe to be violations of acceptable use of the community network. Returning to the practice and concept of participatory design, such policies can and should be collectively derived.

Third, acknowledging that a community network's interface is the "place" where users enter, congregate, and communicate, developers should take proactive measures to design culturally diverse interfaces. As I show with the SCN, this can be done by designing interfaces that reflect a diverse spectrum of users — and potential users — with respect to race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, age, and occupation. Moreover, challenging the assumption that English is the *lingua franca* of cyberspace, developers should incorporate translation software into the community networks' interfaces to insure a more diverse dialogue. Further, returning once again to the concept and practice of participatory design, developers should design interfaces that afford users the ability to actively and creatively transform the design of the community networks within which they congregate.

Fourth, developers should strive to encourage, establish, and maintain public "spaces" within the community networks where communication and participation rather than commercialisation and consumption are privileged. Similar to the ways in which public places in "real" cities are constantly being encroached upon by commercial interests, online cities like the BEV are dangerously close to becoming nothing more than localised portals for e-commerce. At the same time, community networks like the SCN that refuse corporate funding require extra efforts from its members to insure sustainability. By balancing civic-based resources with commercial-based opportunities, community network developers can test new models of online discourse and dialogue while experimenting with new forms of sustaining possibilities.

Another key point I have raised throughout this dissertation is that space — or, to be more precise, multiple, overlapping spaces — matters when approaching the Internet in general and community networks in particular. Here, I use the term space in the broadest way and refer to discursive, media, and physical spaces. As I reveal, when studying community networks like the BEV and the SCN, we must acknowledge that they are more than merely zeroes and ones on the screen. They are discursive spaces shuffled about, constructed, and deconstructed within press releases, vision statements, popular media outlets, and readers' minds; they represent physical spaces, be it post offices or elementary schools, public parks or bowling alleys, town halls or shopping malls; and they are accessed through geographic spaces, ranging from a computer at home to a laptop at the office to a workstation at a public library. As I argue in this dissertation, we gain a better understanding of particular segments of cyberspace by approaching and situating them within their larger spatial contexts. While the nascent field of cyberculture studies offers such glimpses in piecemeal Paulina Borsook, Dawn Dietrich, and Melanie Stewart Millar on, for example, gendered discourses of cyberspace; the contributors of *Virtual Culture* and *Internet Culture* on the communications and interactions that take place within cyberspace; and the work of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration on social and economic access to cyberspace — it is my hope that this dissertation suggests a means to study them more holistically.