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Relationships, Community, and Networked Individuals

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The 'I' in community

The internet and mobile phones are intertwined with social relationships. In this chapter, we focus on relationships with neighbors, strangers, Twitter-folk, romantic interests – and in particular we emphasize relationships with friends. Friendships function as a social glue of contemporary Western society. Friends and friendships are a popular choice for song titles from as far back as Joseph Scriven's 1855 hit 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus' to Kate Nash's 2010 release of 'My Best Friend Is You'.

As people increasingly use both online and in-person means to connect with each other, a recurring theme emerges both in the popular press and in academic discourse on whether technology is making us better or worse off as communities; this is also known as the 'community question' and persists even today. We maintain that, while community has never been lost, there is a need to understand what kinds of community flourish, what communities do – and do not do – for people, and how communities operate in different social systems. As the internet and mobile phones have infiltrated contemporary life, analysts have had to move from seeing these technologies as providing alternative or external worlds for people to seeing how they have become integrated into the complexity of everyday life (Rainie and Wellman, 2012).

Relationships in personal communities

Personal community research invokes a certain understanding of 'community'. Instead of regarding communities as bound up with organized institutions such as family, neighborhood, work, or voluntary organizations, personal community research treats communities as the network

of personal relationships to which a given individual belongs and that he or she manages. When we think of relationships in the everyday sense, we initially think about the people in our personal communities who are close to us – those people with whom we are intimate and share deep affection, those with whom in the vernacular sense we are *in a relationship*, like our boyfriends, girlfriends, spouses, and partners. We recall persons with whom we have a longer history and memory, such as our *relations*, including parents, siblings, and in many societies extended family, who may not be blood relatives but whom we still call ‘aunt’ or ‘uncle’ as markers of the role that they play in our family life. And we may think of some people who have shared specific and significant experiences with us so that we are associated with each other in *relation* to something, like sorority sisters, hockey team members, or work colleagues.

Authenticity of online relationships

Along with the rise of the internet and mobile communication in relationships (including social networking software applications), some have questioned whether online relationships are authentic; that is, how do they measure up to the gold standard of face-to-face interaction which is the ‘real’ thing? Even the Pope (Benedict XVI) expressed his viewpoint in his World Communications Day message 2009 when he recognized the power of the internet for spreading information but cautioned that people need to get away from their computers and meet in person. In the Philippines, the Catholic Church sends text messages to community members to keep the flames of the parishioner–church relationship going while at the same time encouraging parishioners to attend services.

For a while, many viewed the internet as a realm separate from the concreteness and realness of the physical world. For example, some pundits imagined the internet as a sacred forum of interaction that would make socio-economic status markers arcane and time constraints irrelevant while simultaneously bringing together diverse people with shared interests (Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 2005; Wellman and Hogan, 2004). Although we still deal with media queries about the supposedly isolating nature of the media (Anderson, 2006), consistently research has made it clear that the internet is in fact seamlessly integrated with personal communities and is rarely a separate second life in itself.

While much of the effort involved in forming, maintaining, and even terminating relationships takes place in the offline spaces of school

cafeterias, shopping malls, and homes, virtual places assembled by information and communication technologies (ICTs) increasingly provide fertile ground for sociality. Virtual places are constructed via instant messaging, text messaging, wikis, blogs, social networking software (e.g., Facebook, MySpace), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and other social media like Twitter. They offer unstructured environments for 'hanging out', and the content of social life enacted virtually mirrors that of the offline world. This is particularly true of young people, who 'gather in networked publics to negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, flirt, joke and goof-off' (boyd, 2008, p. 170).

Increasingly, people do not generally differentiate between offline and virtual places in an overtly conscious way. Expressions such as, 'See you later', or references to conversations like, 'He told me that...' could as easily refer to face-to-face encounters as they could an instant message (IM) exchange or a turn in the game World of Warcraft (WoW). These places are just alternate spaces for people of all ages to connect with their friends and peers; technology-enabled interaction fits seamlessly into their everyday lives and complements other practices (Abbott, 1998; boyd, 2008; McEwen, 2010; Osgerby, 2004).

These online interactions are perceived to be as real to people as their offline contacts and are valued as authentic. Socializing using communication technology and socializing face-to-face result in an altered conceptualization of 'community' especially relevant to young people. Relationships are created, maintained, terminated, and recalled in both sets of places. The rapid emergence of computer-mediated communications means that relations in cyberspaces are combining with relations on the ground (McEwen, 2010; Wellman, 2001). These different forms of interaction should be considered as complementary, and taken together they represent the channels selected by an individual for sociality. For the networked individual, 'community' is not geospecific but is defined as networks of personal communities that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity, managed on and offline using ICTs (Rainie and Wellman, 2012).

Forming relationships online

This leads us to briefly consider the ways in which relationships are formed online. The current body of internet research indicates that the internet has not caused a widespread flourishing of new relationships that are disembodied, existing only in the realm of an immersive online

world. In reality, only a relatively small proportion of internet users have ever met someone new online. Two large-scale national surveys conducted in 1995 and 2000 indicate that only about 10 per cent of internet users have ever met someone new online (Katz and Aspden, 1997; Katz and Rice, 2002). It is probably safe to assume that at least some of these relationships were short-lived, fizzling over time. Many of the relationships that do continue to exist for a longer duration tend to migrate offline. Evidence for this has been found in two studies of relationships formed through online newsgroups, showing that the desire to meet internet friends in person is common among those who make new friends online (McKenna et al., 2002; Parks and Floyd, 1996).

This is not to deny that an online forum might be important to making new friends, especially when physical or psychological barriers make in-person meetings difficult. Research indicates that people who felt physically isolated or dissatisfied with their own self-image were more prone to use an online forum for making friends. Nevertheless, once the friendship was established, there was a common desire to meet in person, implying that people wanted a broader range of interactions than online communication could easily supply (Boase and Wellman, 2005).

These findings can be summarized as follows. First, a relatively small minority of internet users actually use the internet to communicate with people whom they do not already know from their everyday lives. Second, of the minority who do form relationships online, those relationships often become incorporated into offline life. In other words, it is not the case that the internet has immersed people in a new world of social relationships with others whom they never see in the flesh. While the internet does create a new venue through which people may form new relationships, at present, this venue represents only one small aspect of the internet's role in personal relationships for the majority of its users.

In many parts of the world, social networking software such as Facebook and MySpace has often superseded email and instant messaging as the main way for students and young adults to keep track and stay connected to their personal communities (boyd, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2005; McEwen, 2010). In Canada, Facebook adoption within urban centers is especially high. Twenty-two per cent of Toronto's population (aged 18+), 16 per cent of Montreal's population, 32 per cent of Vancouver's population, and 54 per cent of Halifax's population have a Facebook profile (Zinc Research and Dufferin Research, 2009). By contrast, in the US at the same time, 80 per cent of visits to all

social networking sites were to MySpace (Zinc Research and Dufferin Research, 2009), while elsewhere in the world Bebo, Hi5, Orkut, Cyworld, and Friendster were also popular.

The evidence demonstrates that romantic, kinship, and friendship relationships continue to exist and flourish with new forms of media to facilitate communicative exchanges. Absolutely you may still see distant cousins over a Thanksgiving weekend, but you may also be sending photos of the turkey dinner on Pinterest, Instagtam, or Flickr to Aunt Judy working abroad in Kenya. Teens may still be surly and monosyllabic on the telephone with granny, but she can still keep up with their more lively moments on Facebook. The focus is no longer, or should no longer be, on whether or not relationships are rising or falling in a hyperconnected world, but on the interplay of online and offline relationships for the networked individual.

Multiplexity: when your neighbor is more than a neighbor

Creating relationship categories such as friend, family, coworker, and neighbor is not only helpful in considering network structures and analyzing forms of interaction but is part of the way we make sense of our everyday lives. In the transition from place-based to person-centered networks, in a certain sense there is a broadening of definitions that in the past have held location-specific meanings. A prime example of this is the term *neighbor*, which conjures up images of people chatting casually over a backyard fence in the style of Tim Allen of the TV series *Home Improvement*. However, for many of the relationships that we have with others there is more than one category that could simultaneously characterize a single individual, and this is especially so in the age of the triple revolution, where a neighbor may be more than a neighbor. Your boss may be someone with whom you socialize on a regular basis, your spouse may be your closest confidant, and your neighbor could be your archrival in the online fantasy hockey pool. When in a relationship with someone who takes on multiple roles in different social arenas of your life, we say that the relationship is multiplexed.

Relationships, both on and offline, exhibit multiplexity. For networked individuals, significant amounts of communication with another person over a period certainly contribute to the broadening of the relationship, so that the weekly chats over the fence with the neighbor can grow into a friendship. Increased interaction also strengthens the relationship so that it becomes a natural progression to invite the

neighbor over for a coffee or take his dog for a walk when he, now your friend, is ill.

Communicative intensity across multiplexed media drives us to share more of ourselves with overlapping audiences. Apologies for multiple cross-postings are sympathetically accepted as the cognitive load of remembering who is in which groups or who is on only some lists becomes too much to manage. The networked individual finds some relief in using social media aggregators like TweetDeck, Flipboard, or Glossi. Yet the pressing urge to connect with all groups while reducing the number of communicative transactions to maintain your sanity, leads to a glomming together of groups and media types that may be less than you were hoping for.

When the networked individual manages relationships through a wide variety of media, such as email, landline telephone, instant messaging, Facebook, Twitter, mobile phone, and so on, we describe both the relationship and the media as being multiplexed. Multiplexity is very often a good thing; however, there are sometimes good reasons why you don't want your rabbi to be your MySpace friend or your step-mother to start texting you daily. Some relationships are better when confined to a specific arena.

One of the complications of the networked society is the growing difficulty of intentionally keeping people in separate roles. A significant part of the problem is that the networked individual is publicly accessible from many different media routes, is searchable via browsers, and often does not know how to delicately navigate requests from persons in their lives who wish to extend the relationship by virtue of being part of another media group. While it is true that we use different media to communicate with the same individual, there is evidence that we associate certain types of relationship roles with certain media. For example, while mobile phones are predominantly used in communications with strong, personal, and intimate relationships, email is associated with more formal and work-related relationships. So, when an undergraduate student asks for a professor's mobile phone number, a small butterfly takes flight.

Demultiplexing relationships is complicated and often technically impossible given system design. Some systems remember too much, and really erasing the memory of an individual in a specific role requires a major effort. After developing a relationship based on reciprocal messaging, it is difficult to delete your brother from your Twitter feed while trying to keep your sibling relationship intact. People know when you have deleted their number from your mobile phone contact list or

blocked their forwards on email. And then it becomes an all-or-nothing scenario as the relationship hits a socio-technical bump.

Ephemerality: here today, unfriended tomorrow

The triple revolution is accompanied by new ways of expressing relationships and relations. The use of the word *friend* expanded significantly in this decade. The proliferation of social networking software such as Facebook, where the word 'friend' is used as a way to indicate a count of the numbers of people associated within the application, reflects a shift in the meaning of the word among the general population. For example, Oxford University Press chose Facebook's 'unfriend' as the word of the year for 2009.¹ It is a way to express a relationship change in a way that previously did not exist in a single word. 'I broke it off with Frank', 'I dumped Belinda', 'I got rid of Terri' are now simply represented by a status change from 'in a relationship' to 'single' and a missing person in the friend list. Gone, dismissed, simply – unfriended.

In a comedic ditty, Garrison Keillor strums the following verse on his YouTube video rendition of 'Unfriended': 'the hourly updates on your activities, Your joys, your pain, your sensitivities, All of the parties you have attended, No, I've been unfriended' (*Unfriended* by Garrison Keillor, 2009).

In a few keystrokes, it is possible to rid oneself of a former friend and announce this to everyone else in the group. Of course, it is more complicated than that. When relationships break down, whether and how the connection is severed depends on multiple factors. Also, for close relationships, unfriending someone at the technological level does not necessarily cauterize the emotional process of dealing with the loss. No matter how good it feels to slam the Facebook door on them, it is still a relationship damaged. Having a fight and deciding not to deal with someone in the future can now take place on a stage that is an order of magnitude more public than before social media.

Unfriending is a public statement that the relationship has been compromised, and communicates volumes not just to the unfriended but to the networked audience as well. An unfriending kicks off a wave of support, queries, and interest from the network. Also, since the unfriended person more likely than not knows others on the list, they witness first-hand some of the spectacle via the connections of other network members. Depending on the centrality of the unfriender, this

information may flow quite quickly to even far-flung networks. What we find curious is that, although applications such as Facebook model the real world by creating a system for both parties in a relationship to consent to being connected, there is no system-generated way for both parties to communicate a mutual unfriending. There is no proxy for 'we decided it was better for both of us to go our separate ways'.

The transitory nature of many relationships implies that social relationships are not only being lost, they are also being formed. High turnover creates a demand for the internet as a means both to form new relationships and to build upon existing relationships. For example, Hampton and Wellman found that people moving to a suburb in Toronto, given the pseudonym 'Netville', used the internet to maintain ties with former neighbors (Hampton and Wellman, 2002). As the research discussed above indicates, it appears that the internet is being used for both purposes, although more often for the latter. Although online forums are not particularly common ways to meet new people, they nevertheless aid those who might have trouble forming relationships by typical means offline. For the rest of the population, internet use provides a way to maintain new relationships by 'keeping in touch' and arranging times to meet in person. The Netville project also indicates that the internet can be used to form new relationships among neighbors. Moreover, we theorize that computer-mediated communication might also be particularly useful in ending relationships, as it may be emotionally easier to ignore digital messages than to ignore people in face-to-face situations.

Virtuality: the person behind the avatar

Relationships for the contemporary networked individual include those with persons to whom we feel close as well as to those persons considered more distant, and they cover the range from those whom we see face-to-face daily to those with whom we primarily interact online. Relationships with persons whom we have never met are called virtual, distinguishing them from, for example, those with persons with whom we have previously had face-to-face contact but who are now geographically far away. These are not *virtual*, just physically removed.

By applying the term *virtual* to a relationship type, we introduce some bias about the substantiveness of the connection. Virtual speaks to something or someone that exists in essence or effect though not in actual fact (Boellstorff, 2009). The term conjures up a feeling that there

is something imaginary about the connection, that it is a more insignificant form of relation, and is somewhat artificial. This likely stems from the use of the word virtual in other fields to reference the building of artifacts that simulate animate objects, such as FooPets² that wag their tails and pant with their paws on the screen, or the advances in the technologies that construct virtual realities complete with faux landscapes and science fiction imaginary.

Chris Shorow, a senior pastor at a First Christian Church in Edmonton, Canada, said, '... apparently, many people in our society are longing for a community, even if it means being a virtual community online. At the same time, many of us long for meaningful, face-to-face relationships.'³ Shorow echoes what has become a dominant perspective for many North Americans, particularly those in the 40+ age range. The assertion is clear – there are the meaningful face-to-face relationships and the ... well, less meaningful virtual ones. Supposedly, virtual relationships are the poor stepsisters to the real deal that we all really want to have – the physical connection.

Yet, if you ask persons who regularly engage with communities of others who have never met each other in person but engage in online activities, often they do not consider these people or themselves to be artificial approximates of the real thing. Virtual relationships may be distinguished from virtual FooPets in the sense that there actually are real people behind the avatars. And because there are real hearts, minds, and hands on the other end of the connection, for all parties in the virtual community it is as much a relationship as any other – with some differences. Teens online do not distinguish between relationships on and offline, but see them all as relationships perhaps bounded by activity types, such as online gaming or school sports.

There are hundreds of massively MMORPGs, such as WoW and Dungeons & Dragons. The players are located around the world and range in age from 7 to 70, although most are in their twenties. Most MMORPGs are highly structured environments with distinct roles and goals. The players interact over online terrains and communicate by chat, text, voice, and email. Nardi and Harris reported that, in their participant observation in a WoW guild, leaders and their guild members formed cohesive and close-knit communities (Nardi and Harris, 2006).

As in the real world, much of the communication in virtual communities is about creating and maintaining feelings of connection between people rather than trying to convey specific messages. Virtual community members are often a mix of people whom the networked individual knows offline as well as people whom he or she may never meet

outside the virtual environment. Affinity, commitment, and attention are aspects of virtual relationships. According to Nardi and Harris,

they are active fields of connection between dyads that are constantly negotiated and monitored. These fields 'decay' or grow inert without interaction. While face to face interaction is especially rich in ways to establish connection (touching, eating together, making eye contact, sharing common space, informal chitchat), people also establish connection through mediated communication.

(Nardi and Harris, 2006)

One aspect in which virtual relationships are different from other more tangible forms is that, because the interaction is mediated and abstracted away from the physical person, people may experiment with different aspects of their personas in a manner not easily executed in face-to-face interaction. For example, there are instances of gender inversion, whereby a man may use a female avatar to participate in an online community and vice versa (Cooper, 2007). Also, depending on the application or game, age, weight, skin color, and other phenotypes can be altered so that the player may try out a different look and see how he or she is accepted by the community. Although there is evidence that many people will adapt their virtual selves to look a lot like themselves offline, there is an understanding among those in the virtual community that it is acceptable practice to experiment.

Thus, virtual communities provide spaces for some networked individuals to connect, interact, play, and experiment, and for their participants they are a source of meaningful interaction and purposeful relationships.

Conclusion

The internet revolution has opened up and renewed ways of communicating and finding information. The power of knowledge is no longer the monopoly of professionals, since common folk can now engage the internet and compare research notes with their healthcare and financial experts. This internet revolution is bound up with the mobile revolution which allows individuals to communicate and gather information while on the move. With greater connectivity all around, people can engage their networks and access information regardless of their physical location. Home bases are still important as sources of ideas and inspiration, but the mobile revolution ensures that people never lose touch with

either home base or their other important social worlds. These technological changes are in reciprocal acceleration with the social network revolution. While social networks have always been with us, the internet and mobile revolutions are both weakening group boundaries and expanding the reach, number, and velocity of interpersonal ties. Modern individuals have become networked individualists managing their personal communities with the help of communication technologies as social affordances. Taken together, the personal community approach accurately reflects the habits of modern people, who are profoundly and individually mobile and networked.

Changing social connectivity is, after all, neither a dystopian loss nor a utopian gain but an intricate, multifaceted, fundamental social transformation.

Notes

1. *Globe and Mail*, Josh Wingrove, 24 November 2009.
2. <http://www.foopets.com/>
3. Shorow quoted in *The Edmonton Sun*, 25 November 2009.

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