

# 8: From Virtual to Everyday Life

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*Of all the promises and prognoses made about old and new media, perhaps the most compelling has been the possibility of regenerating community through mediated forms of communication. (Jankowski, 2002: 34)*

## Introduction

About a decade ago, Howard Rheingold (1993) used the term ‘virtual community’ to bring the social aspects of computer-mediated communication under attention. He argued: ‘*whenever CMC technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as micro-organisms inevitably create colonies*’ (1993: 6). Rheingold defined virtual communities as ‘*social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace*’ (1993: 5). His book told the history of a particular online community, the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), and showed how computers were not simply used to transmit information but to ritually connect people. He stressed that online social interactions were not simply based on self-interest but motivated by a desire for commonality.

The online community literature since Rheingold’s book can be divided into three major types: the *utopian and dystopian discourses* from the early 1990s onwards, the *electronic field studies* from the mid-1990s onwards, and the *contextualized approaches* from the late 1990s onwards. These three types will be discussed here, roughly covering 10 years of research into online associations. The focus is on the virtual community as an analytical concept. It should be noted that many researchers have avoided the concept from the beginning. On the whole, however, the notion has had a powerful influence in academic as well as popular discourse.

Before Rheingold, research had focused on the differences between face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication, and it had generally stressed the limitations of the latter. Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* moved researchers away from that perception, and also beyond the political and economic analyses of the ‘Information Society’ that were made in the 1990s (Robins & Webster, 1999). However, the concept also emphasized the distinction between newer online realities on the one hand and older offline realities on the other, associating the former with the global and the latter with the local. As I will later show, this had a narrowing effect on online community research.

Proulx and Latzko-Toth (2000: 7) see the concept of the virtual community as

*a synthesis between, on the one hand, the growing fascination with the very word virtuality – as much on the popular imagination of engineers as on the imaginations of ‘gurus’ like Timothy Leary – and on the other hand, the term online community.*

According to Proulx and Latzko-Toth, the latter was introduced at the end of the 1960s by Licklider and Taylor (1968). It was only in the 1990s, however, that online associations became an important research topic in various disciplines, from psychology to philosophy.

An early and influential collection that focused on the new online associations was *Cybersociety* (Jones, 1995), later followed by *Cybersociety 2.0* (1998). The first edition of *Cybersociety* discussed such topics as social conduct, censorship and moderation on Usenet, and anonymity and identity construction through textual interaction. Baym’s contribution, *The Emergence of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication* (1995), and Reid’s *Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination* (1995), remain relevant introductions to the subject of online community formation.

## **Polemical Beginnings**

Around the time of *Cybersociety*, the concept of the virtual community was turned into a buzzword. Many businesses began to use it as a model to generate profits. They gradually started to build ‘community functions’ into their websites. In popular discourse, almost every electronic system that provided one-to-one communication became a community. Virtual communities were said to exist within online conferences, list server groups, MUDs, MOOs,<sup>1</sup> and other interactive computer systems. These systems were heralded as liberating forms of communal experience, free from the constraints of physical reality and the physical body.

Critical voices reacted against this view, suggesting that computer-mediated communication merely offered a simulation of community or stimulated the development of narrow specialized interest groups. The critics claimed that virtual communities would contribute to isolation, to a decrease of human interdependence, to the decline of local communities in the physical world, and to the commodification of social behaviour (Boal, 1995; Kroker & Weinstein, 1994; Slouka, 1995; Stoll, 1995; Sardar, 2000).

These reactions are not surprising. Western discourses traditionally attach great significance to technological changes, either negatively or positively (e.g. Achterhuis, 1998). Technologies are received in a dystopian way, as a threat to contemporary ways of being, or praised in a utopian way as a liberating force. These extreme views surfaced frequently in discussions of virtual communities in the early 1990s. Utopists described earlier forms of community as too restrictive and welcomed the annihilation of time and space barriers. For them, the Internet offered more freedom, more equality and more prosperity (Benedikt, 1991; Gore, 1991; Negroponte, 1995; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995). Another utopian assumption was that civil society in virtual space would reclaim powers held by the state in geographical space (Barlow, 1996). Some utopists presented the Internet as a unifying force that would produce a single global ‘cyberspace culture’. Although

Rheingold did not believe in ‘*a single, monolithic, online subculture*’ (1993: 3), he also wrote that:

*[t]he small virtual communities still exist, like yeast in a rapidly rising loaf, but increasingly they are part of an overarching culture, similar to the way the United States became an overarching culture after the telegraph and telephone linked the states.* (1993: 10)

In popular discourse, ‘netiquette’ and emoticons were cited as examples of such an ‘overarching culture’ although different netiquettes and emoticon systems exist. Euro-American and Japanese emoticons differ typographically as well as in the ways in which they are written, read and interpreted (Aoki, 1994). Japanese emoticons can be linked to double-byte character encoding, the Japanese typographic tradition, the Japanese *manga* (comic strips), Japanese body language, and other aspects of Japanese culture (Hiroe, 1999–2001; Aoki, 1994). The Japanese generally attach great value to politeness and appropriateness, and this is reflected in the Japanese emoticon system. It contains at least three different expressions of apology<sup>2</sup> for inappropriate behaviour, while the Euro-American system has not a single equivalent. The early utopian rhetoric of cyberspace suppressed these cultural differences by postulating a global culture with properties of its own. It separated the user from his or her locale, and presented this separation as liberation.

Dystopian critics rejected the idea of techno-liberation. They feared a decline of community and attached more value to local *Gemeinschaft*-like (Tönnies, 1979/1887) communities than to the newer online associations. They argued that people in geographical neighbourhoods are forced to live together, while members of global virtual communities can log on and log off whenever they want. According to the critics, the latter is problematic since it does not promote the responsibility, commitment and concern that geographical communities require. Their accounts were often inspired by science-fiction work such as *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984), which introduced the term ‘cyberspace’, and *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992) with its own version of ‘cyberspace’ called ‘Metaverse’. Following the publication of the anthology *Mirrorshades* (Sterling, 1988), these works became known as cyberpunk.<sup>3</sup> Cyberpunk fiction presents a world in which networked computers dominate everyday life. The focus is usually on underground cultures and struggles of alienated individuals against corporate powers. These popular representations stressed the alienating and dehumanising effects of computing technology, a theme inherited from earlier Western fiction (Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, Orwell’s *1984*, and so on).

## Community and Identity

Dystopian critics claim that Internet technologies erode existing geographical communities. Utopian voices agree that communities are in decline but suggest that technologies can help to restore a sense of community (see, for instance, Rheingold, 1993). The idea of a community in decline, however, is a culturally specific and ideological construction. Social histories show that communities of the past were probably never as close-knit and cohesive as people sometimes like

to think (Laslett, 1999). Studies of nationalism (Anderson, 1983) and transnationalism (Hannerz, 1996) further indicate that face-to-face communication is less central to the development of communities than proponents of *Gemeinschaft*-like communities often claim. Indeed, many offline communities could be labelled 'virtual' since they are based on mediation and imagination. For instance, Stone (1995) calls the international academic community and the televisual community virtual too.

According to Thomas Bender (1982) the idea of a lost community recurs in different studies from the seventeenth century onwards. For Nancy, the idea has dominated Western thinking from Plato's *Republic* to Tönnies *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* and beyond. Nancy calls it '*the most ancient myth in the Western world*' (1991: 10). In *The Inoperative Community*, he argues that the desire for an 'original' community is characteristic of Western discourses. These use the disappearance of community to explain the problems of contemporary life. According to Nancy (1991: 9):

*the lost, or broken, community can be exemplified in all kinds of ways, by all kinds of paradigms: the national family, the Athenian city, the Roman republic, the first Christian community, corporations, communes, or brotherhoods – always it is a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious, and infrangible bonds.*

Although the idea of a lost community frequently recurs, most researchers now accept that community is an ongoing process and that the disappearance of older community forms is accompanied by the emergence of newer kinds. Barry Wellman (e.g. 2001), for instance, suggests that community life has become privatized. Community is no longer established by going to public spaces but through person-to-person connectivity. Technologies, such as the telephone and e-mail, are used to establish and sustain these personalized networks. The concept of the 'personalized network' may avoid many problems associated with the traditional concept of community. Communities are often seen as isolated and bounded entities, but anthropologists dismiss such a view because it '*usually masks significant interactions between the individuals of that community and others, as well as the heterogeneity of the community itself*' (Wilson & Peterson, 2002: 455, referring to Appadurai, 1991). Online community studies often tend to focus on the ideational aspects of community only. The interpretive tradition<sup>4</sup> and the work of Benedict Anderson (1991/1983) in particular have stressed these aspects. However, as Amit (2002) notes, the ideational aspects should not be dissociated from actual social relations and everyday performances, something that was often the case in early discussions.

Since face-to-face communication differs across cultures, we may expect to find cultural differences in e-mailing, MUDDing, chatting, and other forms of electronic association. These differences, however, were usually not discussed in the utopian and dystopian discourses of the early 1990s. Both tended to treat the Internet as a single, totalising force and paid little attention to the differences between the various Internet technologies. For instance, the Internet was said to promote 'identity play' in virtual communities. This was heralded as liberation by

many utopists, and dismissed as a simulation of the self by dystopists. However, Goffman's work (1987/1959) suggests that identity play is not characteristic of online behaviour, but a general feature of social life. The differences between offline and online behaviour therefore appear to be of degree rather than of kind. Furthermore, identity performance in e-mail exchange is quite different from identity performance in MUDs or MOOs. In regular e-mail, identities tend to be more or less fixed. The WELL allows multiple representations of self, but these have to be related to a single, fixed user-ID (Rheingold, 1993). MUDs and MOOs are usually oriented towards fantasy and play, and allow for experimentation. These electronic environments have a liminal quality (Turner, 1970), allowing participants to explore roles and activities that are normally impossible or socially unacceptable. As in other liminal circumstances, such as traditional carnivals, identity play and 'gender swapping' are to be expected here.

### The Real/Virtual Dichotomy

Utopian and dystopian discourses assume that social effects flow naturally from the technology employed. This deterministic vision presupposes that technologies can shape social and cultural worlds from scratch. But something has always gone on before. Users inevitably carry with them a particular history, education, gender, class, ethnic background, and so on. Even liminal, role-playing experiences relate to a previous socio-cultural state (Turner, 1970). Thus, social behaviour, norms and values cannot be abstracted from their local, historical and socio-cultural context, as quite a few of the earlier studies seemed to suggest. Agre (1999: 4) argues that

*so long as we focus on the limited areas of the Internet where people engage in fantasy play, we miss how social and professional identities are continuous across several media, and how people use those several media to develop their identities in ways that carry over to other settings.*

Utopian and dystopian discourses presuppose a too sharp distinction between electronic and face-to-face realities. Proulx and Latzko-Toth (2000) call the latter a 'discourse of denigration' because it subordinates the 'virtual' to the 'real'. The former is its reversal since it 'sees virtuality as the 'resolution' of a world overwrought by imperfection as the consequence of its presence, which is but a subset of the universe of possibilities – and therefore an unavoidable impoverishment' (Proulx and Latzko-Toth, 2000: 5). Both discourses fail to see how pre-existing socio-cultural contexts are inextricably intertwined with Internet technologies. Wilson and Peterson (2002: 456) observe that

*[a]n online/offline conceptual dichotomy [for example Castells' (1996) 'network society'] is also counter to the direction taken within recent anthropology, which acknowledges the multiple identities and negotiated roles individuals have within different socio-political and cultural contexts.*

Social shaping of technology studies (e.g. Bijker, Hughes & Pinch, 1987; Latour, 1996; 1999; Law & Hassard, 1999; MacKenzie & Wacjman, 1985) indicate that the

usage and the development of technologies is related to socio-cultural contexts. Rejecting simple causalities, these studies recognize technologies as agents of change, but also point out that technological effects are strongly dependent on the socio-cultural context in which the technologies are used and have been developed.

One social shaping approach, Actor Network Theory (ANT), is premised on the idea that technological, symbolical, and corporeal spaces are co-constructing each other. These constitute a connected space, a complex eco-social system, in which the meaning of an entity depends on its relationship with other entities. ANT proposes a generalized form of material-semiotics, derived from the work of Saussure and Greimas. Objects and subjects are considered as actants (which are simultaneously networks), constructed by each other and linked together in a single, connected space. Each actant is constituted through a web of influences and connections. To study an actant is to describe how the actant relates to other actants (other users, other humans, technologies, localities, and so on), and how powerful actants define and control a network through their various relations. Typically, ANT rejects a human-centred approach and treats all actants – both human and non-human – in a methodologically neutral way. Seen from this perspective, virtual communities are, and consist of, actants within a much broader network or context than their association with the bounded world of ‘cyberspace’ suggests.

## Online Ethnographies

Most of the electronic field studies of the 1990s did not take this contextual view. Contrary to earlier utopian and dystopian accounts, they looked closely at the social interactions inside virtual communities, in an empirical way, and covering a great variety of environments, ranging from health and religious communities to digital cities. Many field studies tried to find out how, and to what extent, these interactions create a sense of community. Textual conversations of e-mail lists, MOOs and MUDs were downloaded by the researcher, sometimes interviews with community members were added, and the data was subsequently analysed in a quantitative or qualitative fashion.

One example of an in-depth ethnography and textual analysis is Lynn Cherny’s *Conversation and Community: Chat in a Virtual World* (1999). Her work gives a detailed analysis of how a sense of community was created, maintained and reproduced in ElseMOO. Cherny, who was a member of ElseMOO before she started her study, used participant observation, a survey, and conversation analysis to investigate her online environment. The major part of her book is devoted to conversation and the formation of social relations. It focuses on general aspects of communication, such as register and turn taking, but also deals with medium specific issues such as ‘emoting’.<sup>5</sup> Cherny’s study, unlike utopian and dystopian narratives, draws a subtle picture of life inside an online community. It shows that online communities resemble geographical communities in multiple ways. Both develop a sense of belonging by establishing common values and beliefs, a common rhetoric, identity and ideology, a (mythical) history, social hierarchies, boundary mechanisms, and so on. Her work confirms the utopian claim that online communities can be more than narrowly defined interest groups. Several aspects of traditional place-based communities can be found in virtual communities,

including ongoing interaction and reciprocity, common rituals, rules, and norms, social memory (for instance, histories told in FAQ lists), chance meetings, a sense of local space, identity and boundary politics, conflict resolution, and so on. Cherny's work focuses on social stratification, power distribution, and the establishment of authority and popularity. Cherny found important differences between ordinary and more powerful community members. The latter had an excellent command of ElseMOO's own register and contributed to the community in important ways, for instance as administrators or 'wizards'.

In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle (1995) discusses how online environments allow for experimentation with the self, and these experiments are seen as potentially liberating. Contrary to her utopian vision of techno-liberation, electronic field research has pointed out various forms of racism, gender and other kinds of discrimination in virtual communities. There is now a considerable body of literature showing that the Internet does not remove individuals from cultural differentiation and existing power structures (Ebo 1998; Escobar, 1996). Feminist scholars such as Wise (1997) discussed gender discriminations and the reproduction of patriarchal forms of oppression. Burkhalter (1999) showed that participants in Usenet groups often want to be known by their 'racial' identity. His conclusion was that '*racial stereotypes may be more influential and resilient on the Usenet*' (Burkhalter, 1999: 74). According to Nakamura (2000), many MUD characters are based on racial stereotypes. She has indicated forms of orientalism, and has pointed out ways in which stereotypical user identities are inscribed into interface designs. For instance, MOO characters may be 'white' by default, making all the others accountable for their 'non-white' identity. A number of these critical approaches were collected in *Communities in Cyberspace* (Smith & Kollock, 1999).

Bodies remain important in online communities, even though they may be re-imagined. One of the common questions in chatting environments, 'asl?' (*age, sex, location?*), illustrates the point that the local and corporeal do matter in virtual environments. Many electronic field studies tend to neglect this pre-given corporeality and assume that the Internet allows for entirely disembodied ways of being. They focus on conversations without a deep understanding of the participants' everyday life situation, and without any certainty about the participants' demographic profile. The focus is predominantly on intra-community behaviour, while the inter- and extra-community dimensions remain absent or underexposed. Analyses of online conversations do not tell much about the ways in which individuals move between communities. Neither do they reveal much about the ways in which this behaviour is embedded in historical and socio-cultural contexts. What has usually been left out is:

*the link between historically constituted socio-cultural practices within and outside of mediated communication and the language practices, social interactions, and ideologies of technology that emerge from new information and communication technologies.*  
(Wilson & Peterson, 2002: 453)

Until the late 1990s, most ethnographies took an '*Internet as culture*' (Hine, 2000) perspective. They dealt with the symbolic construction of online community and treated the Internet as a context for social relations. This moved research away

from an instrumentalist perspective. However, the Internet as a cultural artefact (Hine, 2000), rooted in cultural and historical conditions, remains largely unexplored. The view of technology as context rather than as a cultural artefact is characteristic of much anthropological work (Pfaffenberger, 1992; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Only recently, anthropologists have begun to explore the cultural dimensions of media technologies.

The construction of the Internet as an artefact relates to the ‘social-shaping-of-technology’ perspective mentioned earlier. Bruno Latour (e.g. 1992, 1996) has argued that the values, beliefs, norms, goals, social attitudes and practices of dominant social groups enter into technological artefacts. Consequently, artefacts discipline: they are likely to reinforce the cultural and social aspects that have been entered. Latour calls this prescription. For example, personal computer interfaces reflect the world of office workers, with an emphasis on bureaucratic tasks such as filing. The default ‘white’ identity in virtual environments mentioned earlier is another example of prescription. As this example shows, prescriptions are the politics of an artefact: they tell us what users should do and look like, what the moral codes of the community are, and they define who is inside and who is outside the community. Prescription is never absolute: disciplining does not happen in any deterministic way since prescriptions need not be subscribed to. They can be contested, resisted, and de-inscribed. It is obvious that these politics of prescription, contestation, and de-inscription cannot be explained adequately from interactions within the online community alone. They need to be related to wider contexts.

## Everyday Life Approaches

In the second half of the 1990s, researchers began to contextualize Internet technologies more thoroughly. While community network studies had obviously focused on linkages between online and offline realities, some researchers now began to explore these links in other cases too (e.g. Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002; Miller & Slater, 2000). This marked a shift from cyberspace to everyday realities. This coincided with the ‘*normalization of cyberspace*’ (Margolis & Resnick, 2000) in larger parts of the Western world as a result of longer and more frequent usage of the Internet and the convergence of information and communication technologies, which is oriented towards integration into everyday life.

Researchers who take an everyday life perspective study community ties regardless of their locality, and all the technologies (telephone, Internet, and so on) used to establish them. This seems more productive than the one community/one technology approach of earlier online ethnographic studies. Wilson and Peterson note that ‘*an anthropological approach is well suited to investigate the continuum of communities, identities, and networks that exist*’ (2002: 456, my emphasis). The concept of the ‘*personalized community*’, proposed by the sociologist Wellman (e.g. Wellman 1997; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002), seems well suited for the exploration of this continuum. This concept indicates that individuals in contemporary Western societies do not live in all-encompassing communities in public spaces but spend their lives mostly in networks established in private spaces. A personalized network consists of relations with kin, friends, neighbours,

and organizations, and includes memberships in multiple and partial communities. Internet technologies are means, among many others, to establish and maintain these relations. But they are also more than that. A consideration of technologies as actants avoids their reduction to mere tools as well as to mere contexts. Network analyses, in Wellman's (1997: 179) view:

*trace the social relationships of those they are studying, wherever these relationships go and whomever they are with. Only then do network analysts look to see if such relationships actually cross formal group boundaries. In this way formal boundaries become important analytic variables rather than a priori analytic constraints.*

The turn from studies of virtual communities as bounded units towards a focus on the integration of computer-mediated communication into everyday life contexts carries with it obvious and substantial methodological benefits. For instance, demographic reliability increases. In online textual environments, identities are difficult to verify. Various avatars (characters) may represent a single individual at various times in the same online community. These avatars are hard to link and track from an online perspective, but they can easily be associated with each other when the physical individual is taken as the starting point.

An everyday life perspective also helps to critically examine the common accusation that Internet technologies, by eradicating time and space boundaries, separate individuals from their face-to-face relationships and communities. Contrary to dystopian assertions that virtual communities may be detrimental to the strength of geographical communities, Hampton and Wellman's (2002) everyday life study of a Toronto suburb called Netville states that Internet technologies reinforce existing place-based communities. A recent study by Matei and Ball-Rokeach (2002: 420) further holds that '*a higher level of belonging to real communities translates into a higher propensity for interaction online*'.<sup>6</sup> According to this study, individuals are more likely to make online friends when they know more people in the neighbourhood and believe that they live in an area characterized by neighbourliness.

A focus on everyday life contexts may reveal new social patterns, and will move digital divide discussions beyond matters of access towards a consideration of the integration of communication tools into daily life. For instance, Howard, Rainie and Jones (2002) show that of those with Internet access, more of the men, whites, higher-educated, higher-income earners, and more experienced users are effectively online on any given day.

The studies mentioned above, collected in *The Internet in Everyday Life* (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002), confirm that online interactions are not a substitute for offline relationships but tend to extend the latter and increase interaction between people. Maria Bakardjieva has used the term '*immobile socialization*' to describe the use of the Internet in this '*process of collective deliberation and action in which people engage from their private realm*' (2003: 291). She uses the term '*immobile socialization*' to contrast the Internet with broadcast technology and the automobile that stimulated the withdrawal of the middle class from public spaces, a process described by Williams (1974) as '*mobile privatization*'.

The findings, mainly based on quantitative data, provide a broad overview, but many details of personal lives, practices and experiences are kept out of sight. Thick ethnographic descriptions of how people build and perform social networks in everyday life – with and without the aid of Internet technologies – are missing in this volume. An example of such a thick ethnography is Daniel Miller and Don Slater's *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (2000). Their study focuses on Internet usage in Trinidad and deals with a wide variety of issues, including kinship, national identity, business, politics and religion. The authors reject the assumption that the virtual is disembedding the corporeal. By contrast, they start from the premise that Internet is a collection of '*numerous new technologies, used by diverse people, in diverse real world locations*' (2000: 1), and consequently take into consideration the specific nature of Trinidadian culture as well as the diversity of the technology. Miller and Slater's work is a study of personal communities or networks in which the distinction between online and offline worlds are blurred. Trinidadian social associations, both online and offline, are sustained by multiple means, including the Internet. The authors stress that culture influences the ways in which individuals relate to technologies. For instance, they argue that ICQ fits Trinidadian culture particularly well, because it relates to the anti-structural offline habits of hanging around without a specific purpose, known in Trinidadian culture as 'liming'. In a number of other ways too, Miller and Slater show how relationships on the Internet are closely linked to more traditional forms of association. Contrary to dystopian claims, Miller and Slater argue that the Internet is strengthening private communities, such as the nuclear and extended family in Trinidad. The authors also explain how Trinidadians re-imagine their offline locality on the Internet. Their work demonstrates that Internet technologies are used to reconnect people to places rather than 'liberate' them from their geographical localities.

Rather than innovating a new kind of ethnography, Miller and Slater treated the Internet as part of Trinidadian material culture. Their qualitative work is premised on the same ideas as *The Internet in Everyday Life*: Internet technologies are embedded in local everyday contexts, and do not produce separate, isolated 'virtual communities'.

## Conclusion

In the first half of the 1990s, the concept of the virtual community broadened the view on information and communication technologies. It shifted attention from the technological, communicative, political and economic aspects of computer networks towards the social and cultural ones. The concept of the virtual community, however, also separated the Internet from local everyday life contexts. It stressed the Internet *as a global context for social relations* rather than *a medium used within particular local contexts*. Several metaphors, such as 'the information superhighway' and 'cyberspace', contributed to the perception of the Internet as a separate sphere, and to its mythologization as a world of better social relations, more prosperity, and more freedom. It is probably no coincidence that this discourse of an alternative space emerged at the end of the colonial era and at a time of great uncertainty about the world's ecological system (Escobar, 1996; Sardar, 2000; Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997). Cyberspace and the virtual community can

be seen as the Western middle-class response to these historical circumstances. In the early 1990s, cyberspace and the virtual community created the illusion of a better, entirely controllable, anthropocentric, and a-historical world.

Early utopian and dystopian discourses treated the Internet as an outside force that would shape new, virtual communities. Virtual communities, however, do not flow naturally from the technology employed. Their characteristics cannot be derived in any straightforward way from the possibilities and constraints offered by the technology. Social shaping of technology studies suggests that media technologies are the result of social choices. Using and developing these technologies is a culturally specific process, located in historical and social contexts, although dominant ideologies about new technologies frequently suggest the opposite. Consequently, the online/technological/global and the offline/corporeal/local should be treated as a single, connected, heterogeneous space. A material-semiotic approach, as proposed by ANT, can help us to better understand this connected space and the heterogeneous nature of its entities. ANT focuses on the ongoing process of interaction between technology and society: the Internet, its usage and development as the result of socio-cultural contexts. This aspect has seldom been explored in ethnographies of virtual communities, and the interaction between the 'Internet as culture' and the 'Internet as a cultural artefact' has received even less attention.

The concept of virtual community reduced Internet ethnography in the 1990s to the study of the 'Internet as culture'. The focus was almost entirely on social behaviour in bounded online spaces. Electronic field studies demonstrated how community cultures emerged from online interactions, but they usually did not show how these communities were related to broader social, cultural and political contexts. Since they conceptualized 'community' as something that can be spatially demarcated, they resembled traditional neighbourhood community studies much more than their 'exotic' topics at first sight suggested. Both fixed community and community members in a particular (electronic or geographical) space. This perspective does not reflect the way people incorporate technologies in their daily life, and the perception that people generally do not live in bounded communities.

The alternative, everyday life perspective that is gaining prominence assumes that social behaviour is embedded in wider networks, and that these networks are sustained by various technologies and social practices. This view stresses that the Internet continues, maintains and extends relationships, that it is used to perform one's identity (Goffman, 1959) and to spin webs of significance (Geertz, 1973) in old as well as new ways. People will continue to meet in online environments, but these are not entirely separate from their physical lives and corporeal contexts. The socialization into online communities, the negotiation, reproduction and contestation of identities, and the integration of computing technologies into everyday practices are some of the issues that cannot be understood as long as the online/offline dichotomy is sustained (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). The anthropological work of Miller and Slater and the work of the sociologist Wellman indicate ways in which these issues can be adequately dealt with.

## Notes

- 1 In its original form, a MUD (Multi-User Dimension or Dungeon) is a multi-user fantasy game that simulates the physical world by means of textual descriptions. MUD players interact with each other and with this simulated environment. A MOO (Multi-User Object Oriented) is a further development of a MUD. In MOOs, players can create objects, including characters. MUDs and MOOs are now used for gaming as well as social interaction. MUDs and MOOs have led to the development of commercial multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG).
- 2 These Japanese expressions are: (^o^;>) *excuse me!*, (\_o\_) *I'm sorry*, (\*^\_^\*;) *sorry*. Japanese emoticons are not read 'horizontally' or sideways as Euro-American emoticons are. They are read in the ordinary 'vertical' position. Hiroe, 1999–2001.
- 3 The term is from Bruce Bethke's short story *Cyberpunk* (1980). Cyberpunk literature can be associated with a wide range of popular representations, including those from films such as *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall* or from Masamune Shirow's manga *Kôkaku kidôtai* (*Ghosts in the Shell*).
- 4 See Cohen, who describes communities as '*worlds of meaning in the minds of their members*' (1985: 20 – my emphasis).
- 5 Emoting refers to the descriptions of actions and moods as substitutes for the physical signals in face-to-face communication.
- 6 See Matei and Ball-Rokeach (2002) for a list of other studies that confirm these findings.

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