31

Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline

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The very idea of approaching the new media in terms of a sharp distinction between the online and the offline has given research in this area a peculiar profile. In contrast to the typically panicked reception of older new media technologies (telephone, television), fearful of their ill effects on social relationships and identities, the Internet has posed the possibility of entirely new relationships and identities, constituted within new media, and in competition with ostensibly non-mediated, older forms of relationship. In this respect, the new media have been studied less as media that are used within existing social relations and practices, and more as a new social space which constitutes relations and practices of its own. The research agenda from this point of view focuses not on the characteristics and uses of these media as means of communication but rather on the kinds of social life and cultures that they are capable of sustaining, and how these specifically online socialities relate to the 'offline world'. Even more broadly, the 'online' side of this distinction has often been understood not simply in terms of what its 'inhabitants' do but as something like a unified 'cyberculture' with patterns of sociality that seem automatically to flow from the nature of the technology itself.

This kind of language characterized the early literature on the Internet, to a greater or lesser extent, up to the late 1990s, though it is now in decline. As a result, the burden of this chapter is not so much to present what has been 'discovered' about the difference between online and offline, or their impact on each other. Rather, it needs to show how and why that distinction has coloured the new media research agenda, and how and why it is being deconstructed. That is to say, the distinction has not been sustained, and is probably more symptomatic of an historical period than fruitful as a methodological presumption. Moreover, it is possible that the reasons the distinction has not been sustained have as much to do with actual changes in the nature and social place of the new media as they have to do with analytical weaknesses in the distinction itself.

Distinguishing Life Online

Christine Hine (2000) distinguishes between regarding the Internet as a culture and as a cultural artifact. The latter perspective, as developed through the sociology of science and technology, involves investigating the co-configuration of objects and social contexts, and hence considering how a technology may be interpreted as to its social and technical potentials. In this case, one is looking at how a means of communication is used within an offline social world. On the other hand, to study the Internet as culture means regarding it as a social space in its own right, rather than as a complex object used within other, contextualizing spaces. It means looking at the forms of communication, sociality and identity that are produced within this social space, and how they are sustained using the resources available within the online setting. Mark Poster (1995a; 1995b) has made a related distinction between the Internet as a tool, and hence part of a modernist orientation to the new media as something used instrumentally within wider social projects; and the Internet as a postmodern space of transformation, in which the subject of communication is transformed within

the process of communicating. Poster usefully contrasts different uses and media within the Internet (e-mail used at the office is not likely to have the same identity implications as intense involvement in a MUD [multi-user dungeon]), but his distinction, like Hine's, implies that both analysts and participants can orient themselves to what might otherwise be just another medium as if it were a meaningful social space or cyberspace. There is a strong argument that, although past media have also seemed to constitute new forms and spaces of sociality, even virtualities (McLuhan, 1974; Standage, 1999), they have quickly been absorbed into everyday practices as utilities, or that they lacked some qualities that render the new media more capable of sustaining complex social spaces. Certainly, it is this feature of the Internet – mythologized as 'cyberspace' – that has been considered unique and revolutionary to new media, and therefore its key characteristic to be investigated. It is not a medium but a place to be or to dwell.

Ironically, early studies of computer-mediated communications emphasized how their apparent lack of online cues as to offline settings and identities resulted in an impoverished and anarchic asociality, reflected in poor social order and group efforts (see, for example, Baym in this volume; Hine, 2000; Jones, 1995). The irony is that this detachment from offline context is precisely what grounded the greatest claims for online sociality as both a vehicle for liberating social order and facilitating group effort. The latter is exemplified not just by mundane intranets, but also by the kind of shareware and open source software efforts that led a Microsoft employee to acknowledge that Linux could mobilize the 'combined IQ of the Internet' to solve its technical problems.

The claim that the new media sustain online social spaces that can be inhabited and investigated relatively independently of offline social relations has been advanced on quite various grounds, and from the earliest days of the Internet. We can summarize them in terms of four properties: virtuality, spatiality, disembedding and disembodiment. Each of these emphasizes a radical disjuncture between online and offline relationships and identities. However, we need to be clear from the outset that each of these dimensions has often been put forward as a characterization of the new media: they are generally stated as if they were intrinsic properties of the media themselves, and hence ways of investigating their specificity as new mediations of social life. The problem, as we will discuss later, is that they attempt to specify the properties of the new media independently of the particular social uses and networks in which they are embedded, as things in themselves from which particular uses (or effects) naturally flow. Two obvious fallacies arise from this. The first is a technological determinism. The second is an assumption that the Internet is a unified phenomenon, whereas it is in fact quite a diversity of software and hardware technologies which can be used differently and in different combinations. Quite simply: the use of ICQ or other chat systems by Indonesian parents as opposed to American teenagers is likely to be determined by more than simply the technology; while the same American teenagers or Indonesian parents may regard ICQ as opposed to websites completely differently with respect to virtuality, spatiality and so on.

Virtuality

First, the ideas of virtuality and simulation evoke the construction of a space of representation that can be related to 'as if' it were real, and therefore effects a separation from, or even replacement of, the 'really real'. It therefore contrasts with several terms that might characterize the offline world: 'real', 'actual' and 'material' being the central ones (Shields, 2000). The extreme point of virtuality, which exercised much of the early literature, is the idea of 'virtual reality': a space of representations in which all one's senses are exposed to coordinated representations such that the experience is completely immersive (though not mistaken for a 'real' one) and the participant can respond to stimuli as if to a real world that behaves consistently, in a rule-governed, non-arbitrary manner. Paradoxically, this literal notion of virtual reality as immersive multimedia (for example, Springer, 1991) was contemporary with an Internet whose virtuality was almost entirely textual, immersive not because of its sensory but rather because of its social and intellectual character: cybersex, for example, was a virtual reality not because it literally simulated sexual experiences but because it allowed for absorbing interactive narratives based on the quasi-presence of the other and their participation in constructing a text. Moreover, this sense of the online as a virtual space was largely exemplified by MUDs and MOOs which in fact descended very directly from offline role-playing fantasy games in which a limited number of rules could constitute a bounded, shared world and generate an unpredictable infinity of behaviours which nonetheless made sense as part of a consistent shared reality (Fine, 1983). We might also compare the notion of virtuality with theories of film realism, which also focus on the textual generation of internally consistent and hence absorbing worlds (Kuhn, 1982; MacCabe, 1985).

Hence, the focus moved from the virtual as simulation to the virtual as a coherent social space, and one in which new rules and ways of being and relating could emerge precisely because of the separation from the constraints of the 'really real'. We can flesh this out through the remaining three terms: spatiality, disembedding and disembodiment.

Spatiality

Closely related to virtuality was the apparent ability of the new media to constitute a place, or places. 'Cyberspace' captures the sense of a social setting that exists purely within a space of representation and communication – software, the network – and therefore does not map clearly onto offline spaces. At the same time, cyberspace itself can, and indeed must, be mapped.

Virtuality is a spatially ambiguous experience. *Where* is cyberspace? It exists entirely within a computer space, distributed across increasingly complex and fluid networks. An experience of early Internet users was the difficulty of understanding that clicking on a hypertext link could take you to a file anywhere in the world – it could be on your own computer or in another hemisphere – and it did not matter: a new and integrated space was being encountered whose coordinates related to a different physics. Indeed, the spatiality of cyberspace largely resides in the connections which make up the network. However, the boundaries of the network are themselves ambiguous and converge with other technologies, relations and information. Hence, some of the literature (Imken, 1999) prefers to talk of the 'matrix' to indicate an extended electronic and informational space that is considerably wider than the Internet, and one less easily split into offline and online. The spatial qualities of the online are in any case highly variable and contradictory (Crang, 1997). For example, on the one hand there is a stress on its complexity, its seemingly inexhaustible range and speed of movement, its unmappability (Dodge and Kitchen, 2000), which seem to render it a space to explore or discover but never comprehend. This enhances metaphors of the online as a truly new domain. On the other hand, the representations through which the virtual is constructed and experienced are famously domestic and simplifying. Far from the abstract data representations which inhabited Gibson's (1984) original vision of cyberspace, the real virtual is talked about in terms of rooms, places, sites; and accessed through browsers and portals intended to make the space coherent in terms of individual and largely consumerist interests.

Finally, the network organization of new media itself implies a new kind of spatiality which might be separate from yet transformative of offline social organization. Based on point-to-point communication rather than broadcast models, the new media appear both as non-hierarchical and as evading offline hierarchies. There appears to be an inexorable technological push in the direction of horizontal connections which are uncontrollable: for example, there is the rise of peer-to-peer networking (e.g. Gnutella) in which connections are entirely distributed to individual users, thereby bypassing any central organizing technical or social institution and hence any physical, real-world location that can be held accountable.

Disembedding and Community

The most obvious feature of computer-mediated communications is that it allows communications between people who are spatially dispersed. The important factor in a chat room is not where in the world you are, but how you are using the communicative facilities at your disposal. The irrelevance of geographical position to Internet communication is often referred to as 'disembedding'. For example, in using a MUD or a chat facility such as ICQ one is effectively removed or separated from one's immediate locale ('disembedded'), which becomes irrelevant to the ongoing interaction. At the same time, the MUD or ICQ channel constitutes a new context of communication. It is inhabited by people who may be widely dispersed, but they share a context, rules and often a history of communication, and can properly treat their interactions as real, as having consequences (at least within the Internet context) and as valued.

The notion of 'disembedding' arose prior to and outside new media debates as a characterization of central features of modernity. In the work of Giddens (1990) and Thompson (see also Slevin, 2000), in particular, it is related to two communications-related developments: time–space compression, whereby increasing speed of interconnection (whether by penny post or electronic instant messaging) shortens the effective social distance between any connected points; and time–space distanciation, in which local times and spaces are melded into increasingly homogeneous global units of measurement which coordinate highly dispersed activities to a unified beat (attempts to establish a single 'Internet time' are a very literal version of this, characteristically the initiative of a private watch-making corporation, Swatch). In fact, it could be argued that the most prestigious model for understanding the Internet in these terms long predated it: Marshall McLuhan's (1974) idea of 'the global village'. McLuhan argued that electronic media (radio and television in his time) created a sense of simultaneity: an event portrayed on TV was happening in every living room where a TV was turned on, at the same time. This, along with the properties of the specific media, produced new forms of involvement and participation in which, as in the village, everyone could be present at the same event at the same time. Time was obliterated and spatial separation no longer had any impact on communication. The Internet added to the simultaneous reception of television the interactivity of online social relations (Kitchen, 1998: 15). The apparent annihilation of space online promotes a sense of co-presence, that people can be

present to each other in a way that corresponds to face-to-face interaction. To the extent that this co-presence is a function of the technology, it makes sense that it is socially enacted through media-specific communicative conventions, for example, flaming, smilies or 'netiquette' (e.g., Danet, 1998).

The notion of disembedding gave rise to one of the largest sets of claims about life online: that new media could sustain communities whose existence was largely or entirely virtual. Rheingold (1993), for example, argued that cyberspace was capable of constituting all the diversity of offline interaction and exchange:

> There is no such thing as a single, monolithic, online subculture; it's more like an ecosystem of subcultures, some frivolous, others serious. The cutting edge of scientific discourse is migrating to virtual communities, where you can read the electronic pre-preprinted reports of molecular biologists and cognitive scientists. At the same time, activists and educational reformers are using the same medium as a political tool. You can use virtual communities to find a date, sell a lawnmower, publish a novel, conduct a meeting.

This disembedding could be seen as highly positive in many respects. Above all, the process of disembedding could be interpreted as freeing one from the confines of one's immediate location, empowering participants to connect with anyone from anywhere in the world on the basis of common interests or pleasures. A specifically postmodern politics and sociality was enacted in these elective communities, mobile sociality or neotribes (Bauman, 1990; Maffesoli, 1996). This capacity for online community could be variously framed: as transcending and overcoming the fragmented and anomic character of contemporary offline life through the postmodern equivalent of utopian communities; as reinvigorating qualities such as democracy, debate and self-organization in offline life (e.g. the use of the Internet to foster political participation, knowledge and accountability); as vying with offline life by claiming greater reality or value; or, negatively, as contributing to processes that drain offline sociality of its remaining communality (by replacing, disembodying, mediating, increasing fragmentation).

Disembodiment and Identity

Just as going online seemed to detach one from place, it also seemed to detach one from the body. 'Disembodiment' signifies that a person's online identity is apparently separate from their physical presence, a condition associated with two features: textuality and anonymity. Although new channels of communication such as voice over IP and video conferencing are becoming available on the Internet, most communication between people has thus far been textual, at most complemented by some graphics. In a chat channel a person is only known to others through what they type and their claims about themselves cannot be verified or contradicted by their body and its expressions. Indeed, the phrase 'you are what you type' summed up the sense that a person's online performance of identity had to be taken at face value, if only because there is no other information to go on. This conspicuously includes such visible markers of sex, 'race' and age which, in offline interactions, fix identities in bodies. At the same time, online presence is apparently disembodied in the broader sense that it can be detached from other ways in which offline presences are held stable and accountable: names, addresses, one's past relationships and biography as they are fixed through e.g. law, credentials, memberships (including marriages). Simply, online identities are potentially anonymous with respect to one's offline identity, to which it might be very difficult to trace one's online performance.

Hence, much experience and discussion of online relationships is framed by the simple issue of deception and authenticity: on what basis should one believe that anyone online is who they claim to be; and can relationships that are plagued by this degree of doubt (or gullibility) be treated as serious and 'real' relationships? The alternative position, which characterizes the 'cyberlibertarianism' that dominated much of the early experience of new media disembodiment, is to treat it as an occasion to deconstruct the entire notion of authenticity, particularly in so far as it involves fixing the reality of identities through their embodiment (a manoeuvre that is fundamental to essentialisms such as racism and sexism). In this reading, the new media provide a space for four kinds of separation and liberation from prior identities and relationships: first, one can perform whatever identity one chooses (I can be a man, a woman or an extraterrestrial toad); second, one can create entirely new identities that are impossible or inconceivable in offline worlds constrained by social and bodily physics (famously, I can be one of seven different sexes on Lambda-MOO); third, because all presences online are textual they are also self-evidently *performances*, and therefore one can be liberated from the concept of authenticity itself, and enter a different ethics and politics, that of performance; and, finally, this ethics and politics, in its most prevalent version, is carried out by 'cyborg' or 'hybrid' identities: they are defined not by a fixed and monadic individualization but rather by fluidity and interconnection. Cyberspace appeared as the site of a sociology of the future, in which identities are mobile, fluid and openly experienced as performative rather than authentic.

This programme is incomprehensible if not related to poststructuralist traditions, particularly in their conjunction with feminism. That is to say, new

media spaces appeared as locations in which to practise and observe operations of deconstruction and performativity that long predated them, as will be discussed below.

Investing in Life Online

All of these claims need careful critique and qualification, as we will argue. However, it is also crucial to recognize that the online/offline distinction that they underwrite is not simply an academic one: it also has a powerful cultural and political status. A wide range of constituencies have had a considerable investment in establishing the alterity and newness of the new media as a social space. The very notion of 'cyberspace' was a screen onto which were projected many potent fears and hopes.

First, historical accounts of early Internet users reveal a strange counter-cultural world that comprised remnants and echoes of 1960s libertarian counter-culture; the emergent nerd culture of university engineering and computer science departments; and an unusually wide range of youth subcultures (including games subcultures) (Kitchen, 1998; Turkle, 1984). This very characterization of the origins of 'cyberculture' should cast doubt on the online/offline distinction. Cyberculture did not spring out of the intrinsic characteristics of new media, but arose from possibilities in virtuality that were recognized by games-playing cultures (e.g. 'Doom' and 'Quake', but also pre-Internet, BBS experiences of online poker; and before that 'Dungeons and Dragons'); science fiction and fantasy (cyberpunk); fashions in subcultural music and dress such as techno, rave, postpunk grunge and feminist music (e.g. riotgrrrls); new decentralized models of political organization; and many more. 'Cyberculture' was never a unified online culture but a highly diverse amalgam of cultural conjunctures, not all of which originated in the new media.

What these loose strands of cyberculture certainly converged around was an ethos that focused on a wide range of (often incompatible) freedoms. Net libertarianism involved a claim to total freedom in two senses: the civic sense of the right to any kind of speech, interaction and association, and an opposition to all censorship (which, unlike in offline life, seemed to be technologically guaranteed under the notion that the net treats censorship as 'noise' and routes itself around it, rendering itself invulnerable to offline sources of regulation and prohibition); and the sense of the free circulation of things, without conventional property rights or *prices* (Ross, 1998; Slater, 2000b). The latter was exemplified in such notions as the Internet as a 'gift economy' (an inexorable wave of the future that would engulf the older offline economy e.g., Barbrook, 1999), and in a disregard for intellectual property rights in favour of shareware and open systems. As in any libertarianism, the net version could bring together populisms of the far right and left in an agreed opposition to any form of hierarchy, governmental or corporate. There could be no clearer or wilder invocations of the online world as a place of freedom and alterity than John Perry Barlow's famous Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace or the fight against the Communications Decency Act. It is no surprise that this libertarianism, like so many previous ones (Brown, 1997; Ross, 1998), saw itself as inhabiting a new frontier territory or Wild West, embracing a claim to defend a new *space* (Rheingold, 1993, subtitled his book *Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*). It was both ungoverned (or self-governed) and in principle ungovernable by any but its own inhabitants.

Second, cyberspace as different converged with another agenda: new economy and the dematerialization of economic relations and flows. Again, it is ironic that postmoderns and business consultants alike, and odd figures in between such as *Wired*'s Kevin Kelly or Demos's Geoff Mulgan, could all assert that the new media constituted a vanguard socioeconomic space in which the principles of the future could be discerned: connectivity (or 'connexity', as Mulgan (1998) put it), networking, disintermediation, dematerialization, etc. Online would come to engulf and overtake the offline.

Third, as indicated above, the online/offline distinction offers the space for a practical exploration or even realization of an intellectual trajectory that draws on poststructuralism, postmodernism and (post)feminism. The agenda is to deconstruct the notion of real and authentic identities (particularly notions which anchor them in nature, reason or the body) in favour of a model of identity as performance. As a corollary it has generally involved an embrace of decentring or fragmentation: if a depth model of real identities generated by a core reality is rejected as oppressive and false, then an embrace of fluid identities defined by shifting associations, connections and boundaries constitutes both a politico-ethical strategy and a new kind of truth. For example, both Butler (1990; 1993) and Haraway (1990) are centrally concerned with the critique of conventional politics of representation which presumes 'real' identities ('woman', 'black', 'gay') that can be more or less truthfully represented (in politics or discourses). New media point to other forms of representation and corresponding organization in which people identify themselves through performances structured by their interaction with constantly changing, and not necessarily human (machines, networks, objects), others. Haraway's 'cyborg' has wide currency as the hero of new media politics: an ever monstrous structure because it challenges the authenticity of all identities by existing, fluidly, at the borders between them. A further step, exemplified by Sadie

Plant's (1995; 1996; 1997) work, has been to identify this performative and connective model of identity, and its privileged enactment online, as an essentially feminine modality, and hence interpret the Internet as a fundamentally feminine space, a femininity evoked and discerned through metaphors of weaving, networking and diffusion. Indeed, Plant's imagery was largely a rendering of Irigaray's brand of psychoanalytic feminism, transferred from the act of writing to the interactivity of the new media. In all these versions, new media appear as a space apart from offline life from which can be launched both critiques of the conventional world and explorations of alternative ways of being, acting and relating.

This political-intellectual investment in a separable cyberspace is highly paradoxical, particularly in respect to the issue of bodies and identities. Amidst much celebration of a deconstruction or liberation from identities fixed in bodies, often traced to modern materialism and scientism, cyberlibertarianism nonetheless also seems to proclaim the technical realization of the Enlightenment dream of mind/body dualism, and a liberation of mind from body (Lupton, 1995), a separation which is experienced as both pleasure and terror (Hayles, 1999). Moreover, in consonance with the same Enlightenment relation to the world, cyberspace seems to promise a technical mastery, or transcendence, of mind over body, in which you can really be whatever you conjure up or type; the limits of offline physicality are escaped and remade by mind and desire. Several authors have interpreted this extravagant fantasy as a compensatory and escapist response to experiences of fragmentation and loss of control within people's broader social life. Robins (1995: 136), for example, argues that in much cyberutopian and cyborg literature, cyberspace appears as a place untouched by 'the social and political turbulence of our time', to which its inhabitants respond either by conjuring up a 'unified subjectivity', fusion and unmediated community, or alternatively by celebrating the dissolution of all unities as an occasion for pleasure, play and fantasies of creative mastery and total gratification.

This paradoxical relationship of online transcendence to offline fragmentation seems somewhat confirmed by the widespread observation that much, if not most, online behaviour does not conform to cyberlibertarian expectations. That is to say, it may well be that poststructuralist deconstructions and postmodern diagnoses of bodies and identities are completely correct, as are the hopes they place in practices which alter the terms of identity performance, but this does not mean that actual new media users are in fact engaged in anything like this. Springer (1996) and Bassett (1997) both offer an analysis in which the experience of disembodiment not only does not produce experimental identities but actually results in hypergendered performances. In the MUD self-descriptions analysed by Bassett, although participants were offered a wide choice of genders (far more than two) they almost invariably described themselves in hypermasculine or hyperfeminine terms. If anything, the lack of constraint on online performance provided an occasion to realize, in fantasy, the most conventional offline gender aspirations. Slater's (Rival et al., 1998; Slater, 1998; 2000a and b) work replicates this finding of conventionality: the concern of participants in an apparently unconstrained social scene for sexually explicit fantasies and representations was overwhelming the maintenance of a conventional normativity which included both ethical conservatism and sexual boundaries drawn from the conventions of offline pornography (homophobic, woman as sexually insatiable); moreover, even where there was creative exploration of sexuality it was highly regulated and strategically wedded to issues of authenticity (performance was treated as untruth). Claudia Springer analyses the hypergendering of identities not only in cyberspace but also in popular culture generally as a reaction to the problematization of the body and sexuality that is completely opposite to that expected by cyberutopians: it is precisely because the production of unambiguously sexed and heterosexual bodies is at the centre of social identities (not just sexual but national, racial and so on) that any problematization of the body will provoke fear and retrenchment. The body is indeed becoming more problematic as the essential ground of identity: it really is becoming more cyborg and merged with technology, revealed as performance, reconstructed through feminism and new sexualities. It is precisely *because* various new technologies such as the Internet make the body problematic that people exaggerate, rather than abandon, gender. The response is not an embrace of new possibilities but an attempt to act out these threatened identities on an intensified scale through a renewed assertion of mind over body. None of this should be surprising on the basis of a more reasonable reading of Butler (and Haraway) than is typical of much of the more utopian literature. Butler's work, after all, stresses the regulation of performance through discourses and powers such as compulsory heterosexuality, which bolt the entire normativity of sexuality–gender–sex in place, and might be expected to do so ever more urgently as this regulatory structure is technologically challenged.

Virtuality as Practice

Much discussion of online social relations and identities seems to seek a highly generalized answer, and therefore tends to technological determinism: the impression is that by virtue of going online one

is automatically involved in new social processes. It can be quite difficult to avoid this kind of logic. For example, Baym, in this volume, argues against the early research assumption that media characteristics will have determining effects on interaction, asserting that 'there are many other contributors to online interpersonal dynamics'. This apparently uncontroversial statement unfortunately entirely misses the problem about arguing from media characteristics: how can we possibly identify the properties of a medium independently from how people use and understand these facilities? (The case of short text messaging on mobile phones will surely count as the classic case: this 'medium characteristic' simply *did not exist* – for the phone designers, telecoms companies, industry analysts and government regulators – until it was 'discovered' apparently spontaneously by hordes of teenagers.) Reducing 'media characteristics' to one 'variable' amongst others simply underwrites, rather than deconstructs, the crude positivism of such approaches. How can 'media characteristics' be counted as one variable lined up alongside 'contexts, users and the choices those users make' when I, for one, cannot identify the former except as it emerges through the latter? Baym instead treats 'users' perceptions of CMC and their 'desires' as just another variable (however 'central') rather than as a core analytical issue. Moreover, Baym treats the move from the earlier assumption to current research as if it were a move from simplistic thinking to an appreciation of diversity, which also misses the point. The problem was not that the earlier approaches were simplistic, and that complexifying them by throwing in more 'variables' would solve anything. Rather, what we need are more rich and integrated accounts of the social relations which generate and might make sense of these 'variables'. Such integrated accounts will only emerge from deep ethnographic studies of particular social groups with real histories, and cannot emerge from abstract, mechanistic and culturally impoverished social psychological typologies of 'group differences'.

What is really required, therefore, is a move from asking about 'the nature of online relationships and identities', to asking the entirely different question: 'What do people do online?': the former already presumes a difference and a specificity (it presumes 'media characteristics'), the latter is an open-ended investigation. Above all, it leaves open the possibility that the relationship between online and offline social processes is an issue *for participants* or users and that they may come up with quite different responses to it. Hence, concepts like 'virtuality' or 'cyberspace' can be treated as (one possible) result of people's practices.

The classic example of this approach is also one of the earliest: Sherry Turkle's (1995) *Life on the Screen* gives a view of fairly extreme involvement in simulated environments – MUDs and MOOs – which are bounded and contained but allow for intense attachment to constructed identities, both of self and other. At the limit point, 'real life' (RL) is simply one 'window' on the screen, equal in investment and validity to any of the virtual lives going on in other (mudding) windows. What is interesting about Turkle's work is that, largely by virtue of her psychological orientation and interview-based material, she focuses less on presumed intrinsic features of the media and much more on how (and indeed why) participants construct and invest in these online lives. She construes these involvements as a developmental or therapeutic stage in the overall development of a participant's identity and social capacities. The value of immersive online participation to the participant is linked to the notion of a 'moratorium': a time, and in this case space, in which actions are protected from the realities of consequences, commitments and accountability (at least to outside agents: there is clearly an often intense ethics internal to the scene). Participants in her account may not be aware of the therapeutic or strategic function of their involvement: it's simply an absorbing game, played with gusto. On the other hand, interviews consistently raise a sense of liberation from the confines of real-world identities which are often self-characterized as inadequate – shy, geeky, unattractive, unassertive, etc. The projective space of online life is a relief.

Turkle is therefore observing how participants are using certain communicative potentials and constructing social spaces according to the need for a strategic separation from real life. Her work has a clearly normative dimension: identification with online life has a therapeutic potential but this is entirely compromised when participants confuse online experimentation with real life and as it were refuse to re-emerge. In contrast to much cyberculture which refuses to give greater ontological, ethical or social status to 'real life', Turkle is clear that the distinction is essential to mental health.

From Turkle's book one can build up a very simple and common-sense view of a normative relation between online and offline experiences and their valuation by participants: immersive experiences, in which identity and sociality are treated with deep seriousness, give way to, for example, more instrumental uses of the Internet, clearly integrated into everyday life (Poster, 1995a); or playful uses of virtual spaces but with greater irony, less involvement or seriousness.

In this approach, virtuality is not a premise or assumed feature of the Internet; on the contrary, it is a social accomplishment – something that participants may or may not choose to do or to value, and which they need to accomplish through highly reflexive skills in using the communicative potentials of the various Internet media. The important questions then become: why and when do participants choose to construct 'cyberspaces' as separate

from other spheres of social action, and to what extent; how do they accomplish this; and how do they understand the ensuing relationships?

We might contrast the world Turkle investigates with Miller and Slater's (2000) ethnography of Internet use in relation to Trinidad. By starting from people's practice, rather than presumptions about media characteristics such as virtuality, it became clear that the online/offline distinction played little if any role in people's use or experience of the Internet: people integrated the various Internet media into existing social practices and identities. For example, rather than using the Internet as a vehicle of disembedding from local context and Trinidadian identity, they consistently used it as a means of enacting and furthering their 'Trinidadianness'; indeed, it was the site for a considerable intensification of their awareness of themselves as 'Trini'. Entirely online relationships were often treated as being in the same plane as offline relationships, and were integrated with them; or relationships (e.g. amongst schoolchildren) were pursued seamlessly from offline to online and back again. On the other hand, we were able to interpret the Trinidadian use of the Internet as part of a desire to overcome the virtuality of Trinidad *prior* to the Internet. As a highly diasporic country, as well as one forged through dislocations of slavery, indentured labour and economic and political migration, it was always an identity that had to be constructed virtually, over distance, as an idea or 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1986). The Internet was widely experienced as a highly mundane tool for sustaining Trinidadian relationships and identities in very concrete ways: a family dispersed across several continents could use e-mail to keep a constant, everyday contact and hence sense of a 'household' that was previously impossible; Trinidadians living 'away' could perform key aspects of their culture in chat rooms (the verbal banter of 'ole talk'; the fluid sociality of 'liming'). Hence, far from being virtual, Trinidadian use of the Internet aimed at realizing concretely a *previously* virtual identity (Slater, in press 2002).

The minimal place of the online/offline distinction in Trinidad is not an argument against this distinction as such (any more than the cyber literature can sustain an argument for it). Rather it is an argument that virtuality is one possible, but not necessary, emergent feature of people's assimilation of a new medium, and has to be established empirically in any given case. It is also crucial to recognize that the question of virtuality and the status of online identities and relationships are frequently a matter of extensive, articulate and reflexive discussion amongst participants in particular Internet settings. For example, Slater (1998; 2000a and b) looked at complex understandings and negotiations over the meaning and value of online relationships and 'objects'. One of the most vivid case studies of reflexive understandings of the ambiguity of online realities is Julian Dibbell's (1994; 1998) 'rape in cyberspace' article. The female-presenting avatar of a long-term female participant in a MUD is textually 'raped' by a male-presenting character. The woman involved is extremely upset and at the same time feels distinctly odd about being upset over a virtual event, something occurring in a purely textual space with no bodily or offline consequences. She is absolutely clear that this was not a real rape, and should not be treated as such; she is equally clear that as a virtual event it has serious consequences for herself and for the online social order in which she and others have made significant personal and social investments. This involvement in the virtual is socially new and unexplored: its meaning has to be framed both in its own right (much of the discussion is about how the MUD responded as an online community) and in relation to other realities. Finally, Dibbell's article posed the issue of the textuality of online life. Libertarian arguments are frequently based on a radical separation between what one says/portrays and what one physically does (e.g. pornography as textual space of fantasy is something other than an act of rape). Investment in virtuality seriously clouds this issue in that the constituted reality of the place arises from texts as shared actions: they do not represent something else, but constitute something new. The question Dibbell's article raised is about the ambiguous status of that something. (For a further discussion of the framing of online 'rape' in relation to different brands of online feminism, see Ward, 2000.)

Methodologies

The lines are drawn between the online and the offline as much by methodology as by theory, politics and culture. As previously indicated, the question originally addressed to the new media was, ironically, whether or not they were so situationally impoverished as to render them unfit for sociality; and comparison with face-to-face interaction, as if it were a normative standard ('pure', 'unmediated'), persists. Hence, methodological tools for investigating the means for achieving sustained interaction and understanding have been crucial. As it became apparent that interaction not only was sustained but evinced a seemingly unique and emergent culture specific to these media as social spaces, the research agenda became extremely skewed towards phenomena that were, by definition, internal to online relationships and identities. Some of this research has focused on analysis of the textuality of interaction (e.g. Danet, 2001, looks at the playful use of signs, graphics, timing, indexical references and staging in what she treats literally as theatrical performance). There has been a great interest in

phenomena such as smilies and netiquette which attempt to, respectively, compensate for absent physical cues and regulate interaction in situationally appropriate ways. The conversational and contextually detached character of chat has also been ripe for ethnomethodological treatment, though less than one might expect.

However, the overwhelmingly dominant approach has been loosely ethnographic or participant observation in character. This has significantly been in part a result of the fact that the literature was generated by both academics and non-academics who were themselves learning the new media by exploring them and therefore could not (or would not) detach their analysis from the participation that generated it. More than this, however, the claim that CMC settings can sustain rich, durable and new forms of sociality invites the claims to community we have already investigated and, following closely on their heels, the correlate claim that ethnography is the way to study community. Ethnography carries with it assumptions about community and bounded social spaces that both seemed appropriate to the Internet and at the same time framed it in a very particular way, as a social space that could be examined in its own right, as internally meaningful and understandable in its own terms. The invocations to both community and ethnography arose very early indeed and arose in similar spaces (examples might include: Reid, 1991; Bruckman and Resnick, 1993; Jones, 1995; Reid, 1995; Baym, 1996; Hamman, 1996; Kling, 1996; Agre and Schuler, 1997; Borden and Harvey, 1998; van Dijk, 1998; Markham, 1998; Cherny, 1999; Smith and Kollock, 1999): MUDs, virtual communities such as the WELL and crossovers such as LambdaMOO. Ethnography meant participation in online communities, often supported by online interviews, with a view to learning online ways of being and doing: just as with a bounded face-to-face community, one could understand the history, language, rules and values of a newsgroup or MUD by participating in it. This version of online ethnography took literally the extrapolation of 'community' to 'cyberspace', and therefore made two assumptions that rested on a radical separation between online and offline: that online sociality really had this kind of cultural coherence; and that either describing or accounting for it entirely in its own terms was a valid and fruitful enterprise. The first assumption seemed to presume what had to be established (cultural coherence), and the second accepted a very limited notion of explanation.

It is well to point out that just as claims to community invited ethnography, so too the choice of ethnography could *presume* the existence of online community. Ethnography as a methodological tradition of hermeneutic engagement with lived cultures is always already wedded to the notion of a bounded community in which such cultures are grounded. There are interesting ironies here: in the early literature, ethnography was closely linked to the claim that online life could be investigated as an integral culture or social order in its own right; later uses of the term have pointed in exactly the opposite direction, to the need to contextualize online within offline (Hakken, 1999; Miller and Slater, 2000; 2002). The relation between ethnography and the online/offline distinction was further complicated by the deconstruction within anthropology of the very notion of a community that could be treated as bounded and 'other' to the observer (Clifford and George 1986; Clifford, 1988). In so far as the idea of virtual community either draws on romantic notions of a bounded community, or is contrasted with it (virtual communities replace or displace real organic face-to-face community), it adopts a version of community that is no longer current in the study of offline ones. The objects of contemporary ethnography are not bounded communities inhabited by people who are quite separate from 'us'. Rather they are distributed, multi-sited cultures, which are already highly mediated (rather than organic, face-to-face) and in profound contact with 'others' rather than bounded and pristine. This also means that both online and offline the relation between culture and place is not something that can be assumed (here's a culture: now study it); rather the complex construction of relations between culture and place are central to what an ethnography has to study. How does its object come to be defined in the first place?

These critiques have a two-pronged implication for ethnographies of online life. On the one hand, they cut the ground from under the assumption that Internet communities exist in any unproblematic sense or that we can know in advance what one is and then study it. On the other hand, they open up the field to notions of ethnography that are far more appropriate to the Internet as an object. A clear and sophisticated example is Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), which tries to investigate the formation of an online network of participants in a political issue (the Louise Woodward affair) as an emergent and fluid property of social practices. For example, she highlights what could be termed a dialectical relationship between Internet as culture and as cultural artifact. Hine describes the various Internet media (newsgroups, WWW) as 'potentially diverse but locally stabilized' (2000: 12). The stability of these media as cultural artifacts is partly bound up with the fact that participants regard them as a social space in which they reflexively monitor their own and others' performances. One's sense of what a good website or newsgroup communication is depends on monitoring what other people are doing *online* as well as on the place of these technologies in one's offline life. Her study looks at how:

> The Internet has routinely been employed by its users to monitor their own interpretations in the light of other users' interpretations. It has been treated as a performative space in which users need to act appropriately. Through this, the technology is stabilized by users themselves. The social relations which form on the Internet stabilize the technology and encourage its users to understand it in particular ways. (2000: 12)

Nonetheless, the question of whether a purely online ethnography is methodologically defensible is fraught. On the one hand, the grounds for rejecting it are often seriously wrong-headed. For example, they often rest on misguided and romantic comparison with face-to-face interaction. This has a long history within ethnography: the authenticity and even heroic encounter of the ethnographer with the Other is treated as a direct and unmediated relationship with their brute reality. Yet it is obvious that physical presence is no guarantee of truth, nor is mediated presence necessarily untrue – especially if that is what one is actually studying. This connects with a second issue, the veracity and verification of claims made online: informants may lie about various aspects of their identity, undetectably. This is obviously a more serious problem in a context which is famous for identity play, in which distortion of identity has little negative consequence for participants. In fact, however, it is entirely unclear and unproven that this is a good characterization of cyberspace in general: it is precisely what needs to be studied, not presumed (see Baym, Chapter 4). So long as it is presumed by critics of any online study, it can mean applying far higher standards of reliability to investigating this object as opposed to others. One could question every returned form in a mailed survey as to whether the respondent really was a man, or a teenager, etc. The common-sense assumption would be that doubt only arises where there is some reason to lie or pretend. In the case of cyber ethnographies, similarly, questions arise where there might be some point in lying about one's gender, and where the truth or falsity of that claim has some bearing. A simple example: if one is studying how a particular discursive space is organized in cyberspace, the gendering of the performed identities might be crucial, but not their offline identities. On the other hand, if one were trying to understand *why* certain performances arose, then actual genders might be crucial. And the fact that it is crucial to the researcher is still to be distinguished from the question of whether it is salient to the participants and therefore might give grounds for doubt. The point here is not to argue for or against giving anyone the benefit of the doubt but simply to say that – as in any research situation – the researcher has to make judgements and rules on the basis of situation-specific knowledge and thinking.

The crucial methodological question about the online/offline relationship, however, lies at another level: questions about the adequacy of descriptions and explanations. Do we need offline information in order to make sense of so-called online sociality? And the answer is: it depends on the question. An investigation into the question of 'How are cyberspaces sustained?' is obviously capable of widely different constructions. Rather like the distinction between macro- and micro-sociology, at one extreme, it might take in the political economy of access, differential IT skills and the kinds of material and symbolic power that enable only some people to participate, under particular social conditions, hence structuring the kinds of communication and sociality that go on there. At the other extreme, we can legitimately bracket these questions in order to describe (rather than explain) the mechanisms by which those who are able to participate sustain an internally coherent sociality, following them outwards to other media, or offline, as this seems ethnographically relevant. The relationship between online and offline is therefore methodologically negotiable in terms of criteria of relevance and levels of analysis.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that ethnographically the distinction between offline and online does not clearly map onto the distinction between actual and virtual (as discussed further, below). Participants may treat some of their online activity as virtual, some as real. For example, it is a commonplace of using the new media that in one window one may be telling someone about what is happening in another window; the former is accorded a reality status from which the participant can comment on the 'virtual' action going on in the latter. Rather than a single online/offline or virtual/real distinction, what we are dealing with is more in line with Goffman's (1986) frame analysis.

Deconstruction and Convergence of Online and Offline

The issue for this chapter has not been the 'effects' of the online on the offline or vice versa. Rather, the issue is how the distinction between the two has been constitutive of so many understandings of the Internet and its sociological significance and social innovation. What has been interesting is that both proponents and critics of the Internet have largely encountered it as something which stands outside offline realities. This focus has had good and bad points. On the one hand, it focuses attention on the media-specific and is a way of unearthing the radical potentials of the new technology (shall we become posthuman?); on the other hand, these very gains have also been losses in trying to understand and explain how the new potentials are actually used, for that requires attention to the continuities

between the offline and online: a focus on the conditions and contexts of Internet use.

The implication of this discussion is that virtuality should be investigated not as a property of new media (indeed, any media) but rather as a possible social accomplishment of people using these media. The important questions are *whether* new media users make a distinction between online and offline, and if they do, *when* and *why* do they do it, and *how* they accomplish it practically. It is the making of the distinction that needs studying, rather than assuming it exists and then studying its consequences. An obvious corollary of regarding virtuality as practice is that any boundary drawn between online and offline will always be contingent, variable and unstable. This is true both historically and within specific interactions. We will take up this contingency under three different aspects: first, connections between communicative channels; second, the relation between medium and context; and third, changing social structures.

Use of the online/offline distinction often assumes, bizarrely, an opposition between CMC on the one hand and face-to-face, embodied interaction on the other. At the same time, there is an assumption that 'virtuality' maps onto the former, 'reality' onto the latter. This is obviously far too simple: conversations and MUDs hardly exhaust the communicative contexts of modernity. In fact, new media exist within a far wider mediascape that already blurs the online/offline distinction in diverse ways. For example, in Slater's sexpics research, informants who engaged in cybersex relationships often also engaged in phone sex. This could mean that virtuality is not restricted to being online, but can embrace, and even link, several media (the same point is made by those who cannot see any difference between penpals and cyber-relationships). Conversely, people moving from Internet chat to phone sex could regard this as a move from the virtual to the real. The move to telephone was seen as rendering the relationship more embodied and 'real': the 'grain of the voice' gave an authenticity to the other's presence, but also allowed verification of some identity claims (yes, she really is a woman, doesn't seem to be American, sounds like she could be twenty-something). Finally, different media within 'the Internet' might be integrated with other media in different ways in different relations to the online/offline distinction: erotic use of IRC was compatible with entirely non-sexual use of e-mail and ICQ (or, more often, people set up separate accounts, channels, lists, etc. for different activities).

That is to say, first, virtuality does not adequately capture the variety of online/offline contexts, and does not map onto them in a stable way. Second, even the term 'online' might not map consistently onto a single media technology. The telephone could legitimately be seen as part of the online experience in some circumstances, and that experience might or might not be regarded as a virtual one. This complexity is obviously compounded both by technical change and by users' increasingly sophisticated assimilation of new media into everyday life. For example, the merging of the PDA and the mobile phone, or of Internet and television, or of telephone and computer through voice over IP, might make it impossible to use the term 'online' meaningfully in the sense that was employed by the first generation of Internet research. These real potentials for convergence might be argued *either* to broaden what we mean by online, or – quite the opposite – to reduce any sense of 'the online' by integrating new media into a broader mediascape. This blurring of the online/offline distinction by producers reconfiguring technologies is complemented by users' often unpredictable ways of relating technologies to everyday life (as well as there own re-programming of technologies).

To move to the second aspect, we can also put this in broader methodological terms. The relationship between online and offline is sometimes interpreted as the relationship between phenomenon and context. Hence putting the Internet in context might mean placing the online into the offline (e.g. Hakken, 1999). This can be quite reductive: the offline is treated as that which makes sense of, or explains, the online. Again, this would seem to travesty both ethnography and most contemporary science studies (e.g., Bijker and Law, 1992; Latour, 1999; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992; see Miller and Slater, 2002). Putting the online into the offline reifies both: it assumes a thing called the Internet and a thing called society, or community, or social relations, and at best investigates how one affects the other. The point developed above is to break down the dualism and see how each configures the other. We might take as an example a place that looks like a self-evident context in which the offline meets the online: the cybercafé. And yet the cybercafé is not a simple context in which the new media are used; it is in fact a diverse social field which reconfigures the Internet in different ways and is in turn reconfigured by it. For example, Wakeford (1999) examines the production of different Internets in terms of the different socialities enacted by different kinds of cybercafés, in particular in relation to gender. We can compare this with Miller and Slater (2002), in which two different cybercafés involved the construction of quite different relations between the online and offline. In the first, the Internet was largely regarded as a tool of community development and skilling which prioritized offline projects and relationships and focused on the instrumental use of websites, multimedia software and e-mail. In the second, the focus was on extensive sociality through chat systems: online and offline relationships seemed to exist on one seamless plane.

Different contexts, different Internets; but also, different Internets, different contexts.

Finally, while various forms of convergence and interpenetration of media and contexts destabilize the online/offline distinction, there are also powerful regulatory forces operating on it. For example, many of the central political measures which are currently reformulating Internet use are being implemented specifically *in order* to remove the distinction between online and offline identities and social relations. Commercial and political use of the Internet requires that online participants are established as legal subjects with rights and responsibilities. Their unity as legal subjects needs to be verified through such things as electronic signatures and encryption; secure means of payment and financial verification (e.g. credit card transactions); definition and enforcement of copyright, taxation and the honouring of contracts. In contrast to cyberlibertarian discourses, it seems clear that the potential to establish multiple, mobile, fragmented identities, and to treat them as real, is in fact decided by offline regulatory regimes and generally in the direction of legal fixity. That is to say, the general tendency is to to assimilate online to offline and erase the distinction. The reality status of an on-line relationship is therefore complex in any particular instance and subject to broader institutional/legal arrangements. Offering your credit card number and clicking 'submit' makes for a legally binding transaction, as 'real' as if it were face to face. On the other hand, it would be hard to imagine law courts awarding palimony to an online sexual partner after the relationship ended. Or not just now; there is a widely shared prophetic assumption, which might be self-fulfilling, that relationships which are treated as virtual today will become increasingly accepted and end up being regarded as real and binding. This may be true, but we need to understand the particular social grounds upon which ontological, legal or ethical status is accorded to such relationships.

Business organization, taking up the possibilities of e-commerce, also seems to move in the direction of integrating online and offline. The term 'clicks and mortar' – denoting a company that has both online and offline presence, both websites and shops – indicates that firms are having to rethink their relationship rather than assume their separation. Some companies are concerned to translate their offline symbolic and material capital (brand name and stock) into a significant online presence; others move in the opposite direction, capitalizing on web-based reputation and turnover. As in general, virtuality is a matter of social practices, and in the case of e-commerce the existence of an online/offline distinction may well be the result of marketing strategy: for example, there are new online banks that erase visible connection to the well-established offline banks that own them, in order to attract a different clientele. Similarly, the buzzword of 'disintermediation' is about using web-based facilities to bring consumers directly into the management systems of the firm: querying inventory, order tracking, customer services and so on. Although this invokes the rhetoric of a frictionless, dematerialized economy and virtual relationships, it is a very material knitting of the consumer into communications systems, which happen to cut out the 'middlemen' and hence massively reduce transaction costs. On the other hand, the fact that much political and commercial regulation moves in the direction of integrating online and offline does not mean that it simply reduces the online to *pre-existing* offline relations and identities.

Conclusion

The line of argument advanced here is certainly not specific to Internet studies: radio, television and telephone have equally to be understood through their particular appropriations. Television watched by an isolated Euro-American couch potato is arguably rather more virtual, for example, than a television in the communal setting of a Mexican taverna or a student common room. Further, as noted above, there is some evidence that new forms of mediation are historically first experienced as 'virtual' in that they seem to replace or mediate other forms of mediation which have historically been established as 'real'. Why *do* people seem to think that telephones are more real than internet chats? At the same time, the enormous social salience of notions of virtuality and cyberspace in relation to the Internet indeed seems to point to something media specific. Not media-specific characteristics, but rather (as noted earlier) a historically and geographically locatable convergence of politics with an investment in defining the Internet as a 'space apart'.

It seems perfectly valid to treat the online/offline distinction as part of a transitional phase for both users and researchers. It was a way for both to think through the communicative potentials and specificities of a range of new media in the process of seeing how to assimilate them into a wide range of social practices and institutions. It is more than likely that the online/offline distinction will be regarded as rather quaint and not quite comprehensible inside ten years. Users and researchers are already well advanced in the process of disaggregating 'the Internet' into its diversity of technologies and uses, generating a media landscape in which virtuality is clearly not a feature of the media but one social practice of media use amongst many others.

Moreover, as we have stressed throughout, the shift away from 'virtuality' is not merely a matter

of research agendas, but also of the evolving practices of users as well as of commercial and legal regulatory structures. Real social diversity and change in the shaping of the online/offline distinction means that there is a desperate need, firstly, for ethnographic research that is attentive both to rich particularity and 'holistic' understanding of social relationships; and, secondly, for comparative and historical ethnography. It is fairly pointless to look abstractly for correlations between the variables of media 'characteristics' and communicative practices when participants are busily redefining both across times and places.

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