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LIVING IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

An ethnography of human relationships in cyberspace

This paper outlines some of the issues involved in the development of human relationships in cyberspace. Set within the wider context of the Internet and society it investigates how geographically distant individuals are coming together on the Internet to inhabit new kinds of social spaces or virtual communities. People 'live in' and 'construct' these new spaces in such a way as to suggest that the Internet is not a placeless cyberspace that is distinct and separate from the real world. Building on the work of other cyberethnographers, the author combines original ethnographic research in Cybercity, a Virtual Community, with face-to-face meetings to illustrate how, for many people, cyberspace is just another place to meet. Second, she suggests that people in Cybercity are investing as much effort in maintaining relationships in cyberspace as in other social spaces. Her preliminary analysis suggests that by extending traditional human relationships into Cybercity, they are widening their webs of relationships, not weakening them. Human relationships in cyberspace are formed and maintained in similar ways to those in wider society. Rather than being exotic and removed from real life, they are actually being assimilated into everyday life. Furthermore, they are often moved into other social settings, just as they are in offline life.

Keywords Internet; ethnography; friendship; trust; cyberspace

Introduction

There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections.

(Giddens, 1999, p. 51)

We are living in a constant state of transformation. Contemporary relationships both online and offline are changing. Yet, this change is nothing new.

Classical theorists like Durkheim maintained that the process of industrialization undermined community, bringing about changes in the quality of personal relationships. The eighteenth-century philosophers Adam Smith and David Hume both predicted changes that would create distinctions between instrumental and affective categories of relationships. This condition of transformation is not therefore a result of the advent of New Media Technologies like the Internet and cyberspace. These technologies do, however, provide an arena increasingly acknowledged by contemporary sociologists like Miller & Slater (2000) and Wellman & Haythornthwaite (2002) as one that facilitates the study of these transformations.

As such, the purpose of this study was to examine how people are living life in online or virtual communities. In short, my research was an ethnography of one particular virtual community, Cybercity, and my objective was to arrive at an understanding of Cybercity culture and, more particularly, the performance and meaning of human relationships there. My ethnography explored three basic questions: what kind of relationships are formed online, do relationships formed online migrate to other social settings, and how are real life and virtual life interwoven in terms of lived experiences? One of the key themes to arise out of my research is that of friendship, the main subject of this paper.

I begin with a brief introduction to debates around cyberethnography. In particular, I examine notions of trustworthiness and authenticity of data. I counter notions that the online environment is by nature hostile, impersonal and shallow yielding little valid data, suggesting instead that it is liberating and facilitating, generating a rich field of data (Markham 1998, 2003; Hine 2000; Rheingold 2000; Schaap 2002). In both these arguments it appears that time spent online is a key element (Parks & Floyd 1996; Whitty 2002). These issues of trustworthiness and authenticity also impact on the ways in which the residents of Cybercity negotiate and develop social relations, an argument I draw on later in the paper.

After a brief introduction to Cybercity itself, I continue with an examination of contemporary theories of friendship (Rawlins 1983, 1992; Jerome 1984; Allan 1989, 1996; Bell & Coleman 1999; Pahl 2000), in particular Giddens (1991 1999) notion of the free-floating pure relationship. Continuing this theme, and developing a more in-depth analysis of friendship in Cybercity, I reveal the complex interaction between trust, intimacy, disclosure and time as complex relationships develop (Parks & Floyd 1996; Clark 1998; Whitty 2002). I ask whether Giddens's ideas about pure relationships are the most relevant to an analysis of relationships in Cybercity, and consider the unique 'friend-finding' expeditions that I witnessed there.

Lastly, I look at moving friendship offline. My findings support the view that relationships that begin online rarely stay there (Parks & Floyd 1996). As such, cyberspace provides ways to widen individual webs of personal

relationships, transforming the ways in which we meet, negotiate and reproduce friendship. These relationships are often sustainable offline, suggesting that cyberspace is becoming increasingly embedded in everyday lives. Indeed, Cybercity is not a place outside of everyday life.

Methodology

Doing ethnography on the Internet involves learning how to live in cyberspace and how to account for events there over time. Agar suggests that identifying patterns of behaviour is an essential feature of ethnography, and those patterns must be learned gradually over 'direct, prolonged contact with group members' (1996, p. 243). Accordingly, my ethnography in Cybercity took place over three and a half years between September 1999 and April 2003. During that time I visited the community at least once every day. Because this was a community with citizens from all over the world that crossed all time zones I often varied my visiting times, sometimes getting up in the middle of (my) night. As a result, I met people from the UK, USA, Germany, France, Israel, Canada, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, and Australia – a predominantly Western sample.

My ethnography was more than simply participant observation. As well as living and working in Cybercity, I used as many methods as I could to collect a wide variety of rich data. Therefore, as well as practising ethnography, I carried out other qualitative research methods including questionnaires and offline semi-structured interviews. Towards the end of my research I also met four of my informants face to face. Although my primary objective was not to compare online and offline contexts of social interaction, I saw these offline meetings as providing useful backup when discussing authenticity and truthfulness. For a discussion of this notion see Markham (2003).

The questionnaire contained a mixture of open and closed questions. Its purpose was to capture the motivations, interests and perceptions of the respondents with regard to various issues: primarily how social networks are created and reproduced in cyberspace. Second, it would provide an insight into the creation, negotiation and reproduction of the sociality of their online experiences as they shift between being in cyberspace and being in the physical world. It consisted of approximately 50 questions arranged in five sections. The five sections were general background information; second, questions around communication, language and technology; third, the nature of community and belonging; fourth, the nature of reality and virtuality and finally cyberspace sociality. In all, I had 86 responses from a total sample size of 130 individuals who occupied one particular neighbourhood in Cybercity. Within Cybercity, its residents live singly in private homes arranged in blocks of about 40 houses. Neighbourhoods consist of five

blocks, or 200 houses, of which only about half to two-thirds are occupied at any one time. As well as comparing experiences, other variables such as age, gender and length of time visiting Cybercity were also considered. Respondents ranged in age from 15 to 63 years, and had lived in Cybercity between six and 57 months. The typical respondent was liable to be female (59 per cent), about 29 years old, and had been living in Cybercity for 30 months.

In addition to the questionnaires I asked 22 of the inhabitants to write me short stories or monologues about their personal relationships in Cybercity, thus simulating an open-ended interview process. By encouraging participants to write about their experiences in detail I was exploiting their storytelling as a form of narrative inquiry, because as Connelly & Clandinin suggest, 'Stories are the closest we can come to experience when we and others tell of our experience' (1994, p. 415; 2000). Twenty-one people wrote me stories describing their experiences. Their narratives were based around four themes that were specifically aimed at actively involving participants in the creation of data concerning their everyday lives. For example, I asked them to tell me about their best friends, worst friends, old friends, having fun, supporting, loving, laughing, falling out, making up and anything else they could think of.

Yet how could I know if my informants in Cybercity were truthful? One major debate of Internet research relates to the authenticity and trustworthiness of the data gathered (Jones 1999; Hine 2000; Mann & Stewart 2000; Markham 2003). However, it is also useful to remember that verifying truth is just as necessary in real life as well as in cybercommunities. For example, Wallace suggests that psychological research indicates that we are all poor judges of truthfulness anyway (1999). This indicates that verifying the authenticity or truthfulness of the data I have collected is no more problematic in this particular environment than in any other. Yet as Donath (1998, 2000) reminds us, new ways of producing or of hiding identity are evolving in cyberspace. However, since my research set out to discover how human relationships online are experienced in their own terms, I have tended to follow Hine's line of thought, in which she suggests that verifying the authenticity of data is not a topic that can be divorced from the ethnography itself. In other words, it is an ongoing reflexive process that is situationally negotiated, rather than an objectifying process to be undertaken only when analysing the data themselves. As Hine observes, there is no point in establishing whether what someone says is the truth because authenticity should not be seen as absolute:

The point for the ethnographer is not to bring some external criterion for judging whether it is safe to believe what informants say, but rather to come to understand how it is that informants judge authenticity.

(Hine 2000, p. 49)

Not only Hine supports this view. Whitty's (2002) study of chat rooms reveals that people who spend less time in chat rooms 'are more likely to tell lies'. Conversely, the more time people spend in chat rooms the more open they become about themselves. Whitty (2002) suggests that this follows a similar pattern to face-to-face relationships where trust develops gradually as people become familiar with one another. Mann & Stewart (2000) also address the problem of active deception. They point out that associating deception with Internet research is no different from suggesting that any data collected through indirect means such as questionnaires are untrustworthy. Concluding that large amounts of energy are necessary to sustain deception and suggesting that it might not be worth the effort, Mann & Stewart's deductions are supported in Markham's (1998, 2003) work. Schaap (2002) makes an interesting observation in his ethnography of a MUD, when he says MUDs are not real or authentic but they mirror reality and in doing so reveal everyday life to us. Furthermore, in a discussion of nicknames, Mann & Stewart suggest that by keeping the same nicknames participants in online communities create relatively 'consistent personae' that allow researchers to test truthfulness against regular patterns of interaction (2000, p. 210).

My own research yields similar insights. By living and working in Cybercity for more than three and a half years I came to understand how my informants themselves judged authenticity. As a result I learned to recognize the consistency of individuals in the presentation of themselves in Cybercity itself, and therefore to interpret their data as trustworthy. Yet as I said earlier, this process was intrinsic to my ethnography in Cybercity, and is therefore situationally negotiated. However, the evidence from other Internet researchers such as Hine, Markham, Whitty, and Mann & Stewart suggests that determining truth may be no more problematic in online research than in offline research, and that my own experience is not unusual.

Even so, my contact with Cybercitizens was not limited to being in the city itself. I also belonged to an email discussion group that existed outside of Cybercity but was restricted to people from the neighbourhood within which my research was situated. Indeed, its 23 members formed the basis of my sample population of 86. The email group itself yielded some interesting data as asynchronous debates about incidents in both Cybercity and Real Life occurred indiscriminately. Hence people relate to each other in more ways than simply the reduced cues arena of Cybercity (see Parks & Floyd 1996).

Ethically, cyberethnography is similar to conventional ethnography because the four main moral obligations of dealing with human subject research are the same: the principle of non-malificence, the protection of anonymity, the confidentiality of data, and the obtaining of informed consent. However, the global reach of the Internet and the use of pseudonyms combined with the duty to fully inform the research subjects about my research and myself increased the complexity of ethical considerations. In

this respect membership of the Association of Internet Researchers gave me access to a set of ethical guidelines that proved invaluable.

Whilst using nicknames on the Internet might be seen as automatically protecting one's own anonymity, this is not necessarily the case. The tremendous range and accessibility of information on the Internet poses a very great risk to individual privacy and confidentiality (Mann & Stewart 2000; Carter 2002). As Kendall (1999) explains, anonymity does not equal an absence of identity, for example entering my own nickname of dutypigeon into the Internet search engine Google returns 10 hits, each one specific to me. Dutypigeon is a very specific identity. The same search on my real name Denise Carter came up with over 180,000 hits, making personal identification impossible. This pattern was repeated when I used the names of my informants. Therefore the names used in this paper are not the actual ones used by Cybercity inhabitants, apart from my own.

Not only did I have to honour the ethical code of traditional ethnography, but also the various international laws regarding Internet privacy, especially in regard to those under the age of 13 years, who cannot give informed consent. In part this problem is intimately bound up with the lack of visual clues about age that would ordinarily inform ethnographic research. I solved this problem by actively asking people below the age of 13 years not to respond, and by including on my questionnaire a note that I attempted at all times to adhere to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA), the US legislation, and to the recommendations of the Internet Crime Forum (IRC) sub-group, the European recommendations.

Yet while focusing on protecting the identity of my human subjects, the opposite applied when it came to my own. My informants had to deal with a cyber researcher called dutypigeon, and presenting myself as both open and informative professionally was essential to the process of building a rapport with them. One major element in achieving this was constructing my own website at www.denisecarter.net, and as part of my obligations to inform research subjects I always gave them this address as well as giving verbal explanations. Reaping the rich rewards of open and insightful comments about their private and social worlds more than compensated for the vulnerability I felt from having my identity on global view.

Cybercity

Cybercity is a virtual community on the Internet, a social world that is no less real for being supported by Internet technologies, with residents drawn from countries all over the world. With 1,062,072 registered inhabitants by June 2004 it is slightly larger than Dublin, Ireland (Brinkhoff 2004) and its design is similar to that of other large cities in the world. It also has many of the same

amenities, for example, a plaza, a beach, a café, a funfair, a post office, an employment office, a jail and suburbs where the residents live. It is the city where I lived and worked for three years while engaging in ethnographic fieldwork. People visit the city by switching on their computers, logging onto the Internet, and presenting their unique nickname and password at the city login page. They can choose to move around the city in 2D or 3D, the former being simply text based, and the latter a three-dimensional representation of real space. Cybercity is interesting because it was designed to be a copy of a more traditional geographically based city.

This is important for the inhabitants, because as they move around the city they behave in a manner informed by their own subjective experiences of place and their own cultural practices, both towards each other and towards the place they occupy. For example, meeting a stranger on the public Plaza is different from meeting a friend in your own private home, much the same as in everyday offline life. Lefebvre's (1974) notion about social space being a social product is useful when examining this relationship between individuals, behaviour, place and function. The names 'Plaza' and 'Home' are spatial codes that not only assist in the construction of meaningful places, but also suggest the appropriate social behaviour for each place. Consequently, for example, there are different social rules regulating behaviour in the Plaza or the Home. Similarly, the performance of this appropriate or acceptable behaviour also reinforces the status of these social landscapes, and as such contributes to both their construction as a social space and their position among other social spaces.

An exploration of this behaviour in the landscapes of Cybercity, therefore, is central to my research because it promises to capture the essence of life online and to inform us how real life and virtual lives are interwoven in terms of lived experiences. As such my research reinforces the premise that:

... technologies are not self-contained entities that impact on the social; technologies are constituted by the social relations and discourses of everyday life because they are embedded within that life.

(Crang *et al.* 1991, p. 2)

As such Cybercity is not a technological construct but a cultural construct, mediated through experience rather than through technology. It is that experience that I sought to capture by doing ethnography.

Friendship: a brief outline of contemporary theories

During my time in Cybercity I came to understand how deeply important friendship was to many of its inhabitants. In general, much of

the day-to-day conversation revolved around discussions of what a friendly place Cybercity was, and meeting friends was an important social occasion. It came as no surprise therefore, that when I began to collate and analyse my data using a NUD*IST software package friendship emerged as a major theme. In fact at least two-thirds of my informants considered either making new friends or meeting friends was their most important reason for living in Cybercity. As Bell & Coleman (1999) point out, friendship is often characterized in terms of Western/non-Western distinctions that loosely follow an informal/formal dialectic. This calls into question the usefulness of a cross-cultural comparison of friendship patterns. However, since my sample population was predominantly Western I have confined this preliminary analysis to traditional Western sociological and anthropological notions of friendship.

Studies of friendship are, according to Jerrome (1984), Allan (1996) and later Bell & Coleman (1999), long overdue. In part this is due to the difficulties involved in describing exactly what constitutes friendship. However, by looking at contemporary sociological and anthropological texts on friendship it is possible to identify a number of common threads, for example friendship is often categorized as being voluntary, informal and personal. Friendships are chosen; they are voluntary as opposed to kinship ties that are imposed. They are not enforced by social sanctions, and according to Bell & Coleman's view friendship thus 'becomes a special relationship between two equal individuals involved in a uniquely constituted dyad' (1999, p. 8). In addition, the ties of friendship remain in place only as long as sentiments of closeness are reciprocated for their own sake (Giddens 1991; Allan 1996). Some theorists like Willmott (1987) tend to look at friendship in terms of informal support networks and their focus is on the influence of class, age and gender in the development of these friendships. Anderson (1991) goes further and suggests that the notion of friendship itself is changing. He describes it as becoming diluted as it is increasingly pushed out of the social institutions such as business and increasingly seen as belonging to recreation. When Jerrome suggests that 'friendship offers relief from the strains of other role performance', she explains how friendship has become a luxury whose benefits are social as well as personal (1984, p. 696). This sentiment is echoed by Pahl, who sees the function of friendship as acting as an important 'social glue' (2000, p. 5). Bell & Coleman (1999) suggest that by teaching us how others see us, friendships enable us to view ourselves. Thus friendships in general provide informal emotional support, advice and material help, and yet, as Allan says, 'friendship is 'essentially a personal matter' (1996, p. 107). It is not institutionalized. Even so, although friendship appears to possess a range of qualities, in practice not every element is always present in every friendship. It is instead open to individual negotiation and appraisal. As well, someone we acknowledge as a friend in one setting may be denied the label in another. Movement between social

settings may also disrupt their innate qualities. Although friendships mature over time they sometimes also 'run their course' and changes in friendship ties are routine and normal (Allan 1996, p. 95). In addition, what seems to be implicit within a definition of friendship is the notion that there should be no sense of social hierarchy between friends: it is essentially a relationship 'of equality' (Allan 1989, p. 20, 1996, p. 90; Giddens 1991, p. 89).

Suggesting that intimacy is replacing the old social ties, Giddens (1999) explains how the transformation of intimacy is affecting ties of friendship. He uses the notion of 'pure relationship' to elaborate on these changes, describing three core elements involved: freedom, commitment and intimacy. Giddens explains that a pure relationship is not anchored in the social and economic conditions of everyday life but is 'free-floating' (1991, p. 89). In pure relationships the second element, commitment, replaces these external anchors, where Giddens describes commitment as a 'particular species of trust' that has to be earned (1991, p. 93). By contrast, the dynamics of trust in traditional relationships are embedded in criteria outside of that relationship, for example, 'kinship ties, social duty or traditional obligation' (1991, p. 6). The third of Giddens's core elements is intimacy. He maintains that a pure relationship is also 'focused on intimacy' (1991, p. 94). Again it is 'active trust' within the pure relationship that is important, since active trust brings about disclosure, and disclosure is the basic condition of intimacy (1999, p. 61). Intimacy, Giddens explains, is not the same as privacy; it is one of the rewards that can be gained from the pure relationship (Giddens 1991, 1999). However, at the same time the only incentive to develop a pure relationship is the rewards that can be gained from it. Hence, although commitment is always actively given it must always be part of an effort bargain (Giddens 1991) that depends fundamentally on satisfactions or rewards generic to that relation itself. Consequently individuals commit to the values and practices of a particular friendship, and the friendship is reflexively organized (Giddens 1991). The pure relationship is a social relation which is internally rather than externally referential.

Yet intimacy and disclosure have been discussed elsewhere. As Rawlins (1983, 1992) and Montgomery & Baxter (1998) point out, if intimacy is the defining feature of friendship, then they are in a constant state of conflict or 'dialectical tension' as each individual continually faces contradictory impulses to be protective of him/herself, and to disclose personal information. Hence as Asher *et al.* (1996) explains, it is the skills of safe disclosure that are important. Bruneau (1983) suggests that when continued disclosure has raised the relationship to a particular level of trust and intimacy friendship reaches the commitment stage. It is only after reaching this stage that longer and more frequent interactions in other settings can be sustained, and that friends become more relaxed and expressive with each other (Bochner 1984, cited in Rawlins 1992).

Friendship in Cybercity

Even though Giddens was not specifically referring to online friendships, his ideas regarding pure relationships seem at first to be the most relevant to an analysis of relationships in Cybercity. There, friendships start out by being free-floating because they do not initially rely on any external social conditions like gender, race or age. In this respect my analysis also initially appears similar to Clark's (1998) study of teenage chat rooms in which short-term pure relationships appear to exist with no need for trust or commitment. Instead, making friends in Cybercity is often seen as a means of escaping those limitations that gender, age and other cultural roles impose, a theme Olsen (1996) explores in her paper on Hungarian academic women.

Like Thabit, who suggested that 'physical contact is not important in a friendship' many Cybercity inhabitants, particularly those who had lived in Cybercity longer (nine months or longer), observe that this escape from any physical anchors or contact is the route to more in-depth friendships, as these extracts illustrate:

After 46 months in Cybercity, Taygeta explains:

When you meet people online, people you cannot see face to face, you can be more open with them, therefore you learn more about them. In this way, you are able to connect with people who are like yourself in many ways. These are friendships that last.

These sentiments were reflected by Canopita (39 months):

I can make new friends there. The age, race, nationality or religion don't matter at all here and grownups as well as kids can talk, work and play together in harmony.

And by Polaris (33 months):

Just being online eliminates the physical entanglement that comes with having the extra physical side to deal with . . . we want to be with each other for who we are not what we look like.

I also got to know Acrux (34 months) very well during my field study. Here she talks about how her intimacy and closeness to her best friend is made easier by living in Cybercity:

We're friendly enough for me to be comfortable talking to him he's close enough to be trusted but not close enough to be clouded by offline issues. He is completely impartial.

In addition another resident, Maasym (21 months), also enjoyed a feeling of isolation from worldly cares:

You actually get to know someone inside, without being judged on appearance and everything else wrong with the world today.

Yet not everyone shared these views, a small minority (3.5 per cent) of residents with less experience of Cybercity (nine months or less) were worried as Sadr (six months) explained:

I think you might lose that sense of personal conversation, especially when compared to talking face to face.

This difference could be explained simply by suggesting that over time residents become more familiar with being online. However, there may be a more profound difference. In Cybercity, the mechanics of actually meeting people there is very different from that in everyday life, thus affecting how relationships are initiated, negotiated and progressed. Because of the absence of physical clues in Cybercity the process of getting to know someone often starts by simply saying hello to someone near you and getting a conversation going, then making decisions about disclosure based on the quality of conversation. However, friendship is something that is not always left to chance. Making friends is very important to Cybercity inhabitants, and this importance has facilitated the development of what I call friend-finding expeditions. Basically a friend-finding expedition entails exploring Cybercity looking for potential friends. Interestingly, these trips are often made in groups rather than singly. In addition these expeditions make no distinction between visiting the public or private spaces in Cybercity. In this respect the plaza and private homes are considered equally fair game, serving as rich hunting grounds.

I myself experienced these friend-finding expeditions fairly frequently (perhaps once or twice a week) in groups of anything from two to 11. Setting out on an expedition was often spontaneously decided, suggesting that finding friends may be becoming a recreational activity. The starting point for such expeditions was generally the Plaza where upwards of 80 people would be gathered at any one time. Basically it involves simply starting conversations with strangers without being first introduced. Importantly, less experienced residents are taught to make friends in this way by more experienced residents, partly explaining the worries voiced by Sadr (who had not yet been on a friend-finding expedition) earlier. As Zosma, a resident of 48 months' standing, told me on our first outing, 'it feels weird at first, but you get used to it, and I've met some really lovely people'.

After yet another friend-finding expedition, Chatah (17 months) also agreed:

Going to the Plaza is a great way to meet people, and online you actually get to know someone from the inside, without being judged on appearance.

Apart from the Plaza, another starting point was to check the lists of people online. In Cybercity there is a facility that lists all the places occupied at that moment and also tells you how many people are in each place. This information is available to everybody in Cybercity and comprises a list like the following:

Plaza (105)

Café (15)

Beach (3)

Duty's House (14)

Friend-finding expeditions simply target the places on this list where many people are gathered. Joining groups of people like this without an invitation is similar to gatecrashing yet is sociably acceptable in Cybercity. It was how I initially met Phad (37 months), another Cybercity inhabitant whom I later met offline. He was in his own Cybercity home with four other people when Zosma and I gatecrashed, and our subsequent conversations and meetings led to us all becoming close friends.

Because of these expeditions, making friends in Cybercity tends to be a very proactive experience rather than a reactive one. For example, in offline life as we move between the different social settings of work, home, the doctor's surgery or shopping etc. we meet people but do not tend to actively consider them as possible friends. Yet in Cybercity, the residents learn to regard everyone sharing the same social space as a potential friend. This may be partly because all spaces in Cybercity appear to be social spaces. In contrast, not all of the spaces we occupy offline are social spaces. Some, as Augé (1995) describes, are 'non-spaces' because they are interstitial places that attain their identity from their being between other significant and meaningful social spaces (for a more in-depth discussion of interstitial spaces see Vincent 1990).

Not a place outside of everyday life

In discussing pure relationships, Clark (1998) suggested that the teen chat room is becoming a space outside of everyday life where the development of the ideal pure relationship is one with imagined intimacy but with no

need for trust or commitment. In contrast I suggest that Cybercity is not a place outside of everyday life. Rather it is both embedded in, and an integral part of, its inhabitants daily lives, as illustrated by the number of friendships, 69 per cent, that are successfully moved into offline life. This movement offline requires some degree of trust and commitment to be established but, as we have already seen, in Cybercity trust is something that must be mediated without first having face-to-face contact. This factor is often seen as an advantage by many residents, and this lack of identity cues where all five senses are not brought into play has been discussed elsewhere (Parks & Floyd 1996; Donath 1998; Markham 2003), for example in everyday offline life we can see if someone is male or female, young or old. We also talk about liars looking 'shifty' or 'sounding insincere'.

As we have already seen, this is seen as an advantage by many Cybercity residents because it removes any preconceived ideas regarding judgements about age, race, gender etc., allowing a pure relationship to develop initially. In addition it makes people feel safe in their acts of disclosure, removing the embarrassment of confession that Rawlins (1983, 1992) sees as being so contentious. In close relationships in both Cybercity and elsewhere trust has to be mutual otherwise the friendship would break down. Active trust brings about disclosure, and it is this disclosure that in turn facilitates intimacy. As Rawlins (1983) explains, in order to move from impersonal to interpersonal relationships, acts of revelation or disclosure must occur, but in an atmosphere of mutually negotiated trust. In discussing online relationships Whitty suggests that this follows a similar pattern to face-to-face relationships where trust develops gradually as people become familiar with one another (2002). In this sense a parallel can be drawn between online and offline relationships in that trust develops over time rather than immediately.

As I discussed earlier, for some, the intimacy of their online friendships appears to be superior to their offline friendships because of their initial free-floating nature. For example, Jabbah (18 months) thinks Cybercity relationships are more significant than offline ones because they 'Tend to be more emotional and psychological since you cannot see the person's physical characteristics'. Similarly, Meissa (4 months), explained to me how she bonds with her Cybercity friends 'in a more personal way' than her offline friends.

These responses were typical of those whose friendships appeared to be free-floating in nature. Yet they revealed a major paradox: at the same time as significant value was attached to their free-floating nature, their frequent move into face-to-face social settings re-anchored them in a more traditional sense. As such they became externally rather than internally referential, consequently ceasing to be pure relationships. In this respect friendship in Cybercity appears much more complex than either Giddens or more traditional theories imply. However, it also seems clear that after the initial stages of

friendships have been negotiated online, they are then often treated much the same as any other friendship. As such it appears that the pure relationship could simply be the preliminary stage for the development of friendship, rather than all online friendships being pure relationships.

Typically, my informants support the view there are few or no differences between the friendships they have online or those they have offline. For example Zosma (48 months), who visited me in my own home, does not agree that online relationships are different. She is one of many residents who insisted that friendship online and offline are the same, but suggested that 'It just takes much longer in real life to get to know people'. She explained that in Cybercity:

You get to know each other from the inner person and out – in real life you know people from outside and later inside. So in that way the two are composite. And knowing the inner person first – you see that looks aren't that important.

Similarly, Thabit (20 months), another resident, explains:

My best friend here is Adara (42 months), we are very close. She knows me inside out and I know her that way too . . . I have also met many others that I care deeply for here, reaching across the USA and to other countries . . . we share our thoughts and feelings good or bad, listen to each other all the time. We pick each other up when we are down due to ct or real life. We cry together and learn together. My friendships here are as important to me as the ones here in Real Life, sometimes more.

Equally Porrima (39 months) does not understand, 'why my friends in either place should be treated any different'. For many of the citizens of Cybercity, their life there is already an integral part of their everyday lives. They are part of a new society, what Wellman & Haythornthwaite (2002) and Castells (1996) call the network society.

Moving friendship offline

Not only are people negotiating friendships online in similar ways to offline but also many inhabitants have also met their Cybercity friends offline. Thus, their friendships are moving between the different places or social settings known to them in their everyday lives. Of the 86 inhabitants that I interviewed 31 had already met their online friends face to face, two of them having later married. Sixteen people expressed the intention to meet others, with one of these, Wasat, having spoken to online friends over the

telephone, and eight others saying they would like to meet, but they lived too far away. Of the remaining 31 only three said they would never consider meeting anyone outside of Cybercity. In all, two-thirds had met or were about to meet their Cybercity friends face to face. However, all of those interviewed had spoken to me about their Cybercity experiences, and that could be interpreted as moving their Cybercity relationship with me into offline life. They had not only acknowledged that I was an authentic researcher, but had also made themselves 'real' and 'authentic' to me, making our relationship externally referential, hence not a pure relationship.

Because online and offline social experiences exhibit the same similarities and differences, it follows that they may also be interchangeable. For example online relationships can be sustained offline. However, there is also an understanding among Cybercity residents that there are common misconceptions about the type of people who use the Internet. Recently a kind of global moral panic (Cohen 1972) about deviants and the Internet has been amplified by the media, emphasizing the risk involved with meeting people in the flesh. When using the Internet we are warned not to trust anyone with our name, address, telephone number, credit card details etc. Despite this people are learning to trust people they meet on the Internet. As Acrux, a 33-year-old Scottish policewoman says, 'People who don't use the net a lot don't seem to understand that real friendships can be established online, it's not all mass murderers and psychos'. Acrux explains how, two years after meeting her 'best friend in the world', they continue to speak every day and meet face to face once a week. Similarly, Lesath, who had previously been a CB radio ham, was forthright about meeting her friends offline. She has been doing it for several years now:

Why *not* meet? General rule of thumb is, if local or in large groups, it's safer . . . also, meeting in public & letting your family or friends know where you are is a wise idea. There are precautions, but no more or less than back in the days of meeting CB buddies off the air for coffee breaks, etc.

Not only has Lesath been meeting her friends offline but also she is very happily married to one of them:

I married one of my online friends (who was strictly a friend, online . . . but over 3 years or so, we became much more romantically involved offline). Different people view it differently; some are horrified while others are intrigued & still others don't seem to think it unusual or 'different' at all. I am my own person . . . my kids were a little surprised & perhaps apprehensive at first, but they understand who I am . . . & they have come to admit that my choice is the best I've made in a long time. LOL.

My own meeting with Zosma in September 2002 was a more opportunistic meeting, and made glaringly obvious to me the contradictions inherent in Giddens's idea of the pure relationship. During my fieldwork in Cybercity I spent many hours chatting to her. She was in effect my gatekeeper as well as my friend, introducing me to many other residents and helping me find my way around Cybercity. It was Zosma who taught me many skills and under her patient tutelage I learned to live life online. That September she was coming from her home in Copenhagen to visit another Cybercity friend, Phad, who lived only 50 miles away from my home, so I invited her to stay with me and my family too. I had already known Zosma for two years and we had exchanged many intimacies. We decided to exchange our real names, email each other our photographs and to speak on the telephone in preparation for meeting face to face. When she knocked at the door I went to answer it alone. This was a private moment. Thankfully she had told me the truth; she was exactly like her photograph. It was not until I saw her that I realized how important that particular truth was. Yet until this point I would have said that over time I had learned to judge the truthfulness, authenticity and consistency of Zosma's personality, and that confirmation of this through face-to-face meeting was neither necessary nor desirable. In short, I agreed with my informants in that truth that is verifiable through sight was not necessary for true friendship. Nevertheless, in that instant of meeting face to face I realized that we had maintained an authentic perception of each other, and that failure to do so would have destroyed our friendship. Indeed, this fact illustrates that our friendship was in a state of dialectical tension (Rawlins 1983, 1992). We also continued to call each other by our Cybercity names, to the hilarity of friends and relatives, a strategy I thought at the time was no different to being called mum by my son and Denise by my husband. On reflection I believe this was yet another strategy for maintaining our perceptions of one another. As Zosma said, 'thank goodness you really *are* Dutypigeon'.

Intriguingly at this time I also met Phad who accompanied Zosma. At our meeting he was about 10 years older, and a stone heavier than the photograph we had exchanged. Talking later, Zosma and I agreed he was a bit vain to send us a younger photograph, but also that he was exactly the same person we knew. Therefore, in this case we maintained our own perceptions of him even though he had not been completely truthful.

Conclusion

People are coming together on the Internet to inhabit new kinds of social places. One of those places is a city called Cybercity. It exists in a world of places in which time and effort is invested in social interaction. My

research indicates that the people who live in Cybercity do so as an integral part of their everyday life. To them it is often just another place to meet friends. In addition, many of the friendships formed in Cybercity are routinely being moved offline. As a result individuals are extending their webs of personal relationships to include cyberspace. In this respect cyberspace is no longer distinct and separate from the real world. It is part of everyday life, as these relationships are becoming embedded in everyday life. The fact that many of these friendships are sustainable offline suggests that people are widening their webs of relationships to include those that are no longer dependent on what Willmott calls 'the social patterns that underpin social support' (1987, p. 1). Social relationships are in a state of transformation inasmuch as we are no longer confined to the work or home to meet people, or to develop or sustain friendships.

Additionally, what these people call friendship can indeed be evaluated using traditional theorists like Allan and Jerrome in much the same way as offline friendship, illustrating the similarities between them. They are generally informal, personal and private. Furthermore they are chosen rather than imposed. Online friendships within Cybercity are formed and maintained in similar ways to those in wider society. There are, however, some differences. Initially, online friendships are not always anchored by the everyday social and cultural construction of gender, age or race. They appear to be what Giddens calls free-floating. Nevertheless, people in Cybercity are learning to actively trust each other. In many instances the free-floating nature of online friendship enables this trust to be achieved more easily, and this trust is a major contributory factor in maintaining the commitment and intimacy of online friendship. Yet there are contradictions. Giddens suggests that pure relationships have no external referents, and this can be true in Cybercity, particularly in the early stages of friendship. However, if friendship includes trust and intimacy then these external referents become exactly the type of things that are revealed over time and that validate the continuing relationship. There is also an inconsistency between the need to trust without visual/external referents on the one hand, which appears to be balanced by a desire to externally validate the truth. This is illustrated by the relief of both Zosma and me on our first meeting. Yet at the same time it is contradicted by our continued acceptance of Phad. Hence a double paradox is revealed: trust can be maintained even when external validation has failed.

As a result the basic tenets of online friendship appear to be impossible to separate from the traditional everyday concept of friendship itself, and just as slippery to define. Certainly individuals in Cybercity appear to be investing a great deal of effort in maintaining their relationships in cyberspace. These relationships also seem to develop and mature in the same ways as offline friendships, and it is clear that mutual trust is an important element in this. Indeed the typical response from my informants gives the impression

that a great deal of time and effort is often invested in moving these relationships into other social settings, in particular offline into everyday life. What is clear is that each relationship is individually negotiated. What is equally clear is that the rules which govern that validation are also individually negotiated. It is also possible that changes in social settings also bring about changes in validation criteria.

Overall this preliminary analysis has both answered and asked some intriguing questions. What is clear is that Bell and Coleman were correct when they said that friendship studies are long overdue; what is equally clear is that sociologists and anthropologists need to temper their analysis within the shifting frames of context that friendship provides. One direction would be towards a dialectical analysis such as that mooted within other disciplines such as communications studies.

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