

**Barry Wellman**

## **Connecting Community: On- and Offline**

<<Context:>> The Internet is no longer a separate world for the in-group; millions of people routinely come online. Rather than isolating users in a virtual world, the Internet extends community in the real world, and connects people through individualized and flexible social networks rather than fixed and grounded groups.

The documentary film *Almost Real* (2004) tells true-life stories of the Internet. For some characters, the Internet provides an escape from human interaction. A recluse living alone on an abandoned North Sea oilrig runs a data storage haven supposedly free of government interference; an antisocial eight-year old boy hides from his schoolmates through home schooling and the Internet. Meanwhile, the Internet brings other people together. A man and woman in a bondage and domination relationship communicate daily over webcams thousands of miles apart; late teens bond by incessantly playing an online cooperative game.

These stories are fascinating but misleading, because they atypically show people who have their social relationships wholly online. Most uses of the Internet are not “almost real,” but really normal. Rather than an exotic tool used mainly by the cyber-hip, the Internet has spread to become an ordinary part of life.

Consider my own use. I’ve received several e-mail messages in the past hour. Nancy and Bill confirm dinner for tonight. Even though it is the weekend, a student sends a question and expects a quick answer. So does a graduate student from Europe, with an urgent request for a letter of recommendation. Cousin Larry shares some political thoughts from Los Angeles. Stan sends a joke. I arrange to meet friends at a local pub this Tuesday. My teenage niece avoids email as “for adults,” so I send her an instant message. One of my most frequent correspondents writes twice: Ms. Miriam Abacha from Nigeria, wanting yet again to share her millions with me. And so on and on.

In addition to communication, the Internet has become an important source of information. To check facts for this article, I use *Google* to search the web. It’s too rainy to go out and buy a newspaper, so I skim my personalized *Yahoo News* instead. My friend Joe is driving to my house for the first time and gets his directions online from *Mapquest*. And so forth.

The Internet has burrowed into my life, but is not separate from the rest of it. I integrate offline and online activities. To connect with my friends and relatives, I email, chat, web search and instant message – but I also walk, drive, bike, bus, fly, phone, and send an occasional greeting card. I am not unique. Both the exoticness of the Internet in the 1990s and the fears that it would undermine “community” have faded. The reality is that using the Internet both expands community and changes it in subtle ways.

Few people dedicate most of their waking lives to the Internet. Time spent on the Internet usually supplants time spent watching television rather than time spent on other forms of social life.

### **Digital Divides**

Between 1997 and 2001, while the number of Americans using computers increased by 27 percent from 137 million to 174 million, the online population rapidly increased by 152 percent. Nielsen NetRatings reported in March, 2004 that three-quarters of Americans over the age of 2 had accessed the Internet. Many were on the Internet both at home and at work, and about half went online daily. Instant messaging (IM) has spread from teenagers to adults in growing popularity, with more than one-third of all American adults IM-ing.

A decade ago, the Internet was mainly North American, and largely the domain of young, educated, urban white men. It has now become widely diffused. About one-third of users live in North America, one third in Europe and Japan, and one-third elsewhere. India and China host many users, although the percentages online remain small. China now has the second largest population of Internet users, growing from half a million in 1997 to 80 million in January, 2004. Although the proliferation of computers is no longer headline news, 41 million PCs were shipped to retailers and customers in the first quarter of 2004.

As more people go online, the digital divide shrinks between users and non-users. Yet even as the percentage of users rises, differences persist: between affluent and poor, young and old, men and women, more and less educated, and urban and rural, those who are able to read English and those who cannot. Moreover, there are substantial international differences, even between developed countries. For instance, in economically developed countries, the digital divide between high-income households and low-income households ranges from a gap of more than 60 percentage points in the United Kingdom to less than 20 percentage points in Denmark. In the United States, while 79% of relatively affluent people (family income \$75,000 or more) were Internet users in September 2001, only 25% of poor people (family income of less than \$15,000) were. And while the gender gap is shrinking in many developed countries, it is increasing in Italy and Germany as men get connected at a higher rate than women. Moreover, the digital divide often happens at the junction of socioeconomic status, gender, age, and geographic location. For instance, more than two thirds (78 percent) of Americans with an annual household income of \$75,000 or higher were online in 2000. However, within this affluent group, there was a 31 percentage point gap in Internet access between those with a university education (82%) and those with less than a high school education (51%).

Digital divides are particularly wide in developing countries, where users tend to be wealthy, students, employees of large modern organizations, or people with easy access to cybercafes. The risk of a “digital penalty” grows as Internet use among organizations and individuals becomes routine. Those without access to the Internet will increasingly miss out on information and communication about jobs, events, and people.

The many who are using the Internet and the many more who will eventually use it face the question of how that experience might affect their lives. Fast messages, quick shopping, and instant reference works aside, widespread concerns focus on the deeper social and psychological implications of a brave new, computer mediated world.

## Hopes, Fears, and Possibilities

Just a few years ago, hope for the Internet mesmerized many. Entrepreneurs saw it as a way to get rich, policymakers thought it could remake society; business people hoped that online sales would make them Amazon-ically successful. Pundits preached the gospel of the new Internet millennium. For example, John Perry Barlow, co-leader of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, forecast in 1995:

We are in the midst of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire. I used to think that it was just the biggest thing since Gutenberg, but now I think you have to back farther.

The media generally saw the Internet as a weird, wonderful and sometimes scary thing. The cover of the December, 1999 issue of *Wired*, the *Vogue* of the computer world, depicted a lithesome cyber-angel leaping off a cliff into the glorious unknown. Major newspapers set up special Internet sections, and new computer magazines became fat with ads, advice and influence. The meltdown of the dot.com boom in March, 2000 snuffed out many dreams of a radiant Internet future. The pages of *Wired* magazine shrank by 25 percent from September, 1996 to September, 2001 and another 22 percent to September, 2003. Revenue and subscription rates followed suit, while the editors noted ruefully in February, 2004 that their magazine “used to be as thick as a phone book”.

The advent of the Internet also provoked fears of personal danger and the loss of community. News media warned of men posing as women online, cyberstalking, identity theft, and dangerous cyber-addiction. As recently as March, 2004, computer scientist John Messerly warned that “computer and video games ... ruin the social and scholastic lives of many students.”

Much of the hype and fear about the Internet has been both *presentist* – thinking that the world started anew with its advent – and *parochial* – thinking that only things that happened on the Internet were relevant to understanding it. Yet, sociologists have long known that technology by itself does not determine anything. Rather, people take technology and use it (or discard it) in ways that its developers never dreamed. For example, the early telephone industry marketed its technology simply as a tool for practical business and spurned the notion that it could be a device for sociability. Indeed, phones, planes and cars enabled far-flung communities to flourish well before the coming of the Internet.

Technologies themselves neither make nor break communities. Rather, they create possibilities, opportunities, challenges, and constraints for what people and organizations can – and cannot – do. For example, automobiles and expressways make it possible for people to live in sprawling suburbs, but they do not determine that people will do so: compare the sprawl of American cities with the more compact suburbs of neighboring Canada. The Internet’s low cost, widespread use, asynchronicity (people do not have to be connected simultaneously), global connectivity, and attachments (pictures, music, texts) make it possible to communicate quickly and cheaply across continents and oceans. For example, emigrants use email to chat with folks back home and use websites to learn home news. *Yahoo! India Matrimonial* links brides and grooms in India, Europe and North America. Emigrants use email to gather news from back home and post it on websites to readers hungry for information from countries with much censorship. Thus, the Internet both allows mobile people to maintain community ties to distant places and also supports face-to-face ties closer to home.

## Community Online and Offline

Online communication – email, instant messaging, chat rooms, etc. – does not replace more traditional offline forms of contact – face-to-face and telephone. Instead, it adds on to them, increasing the overall volume of contact. Where some had feared that involvement in the Internet would detract from “real life” ties with friends and relatives, high users of email are in at least as frequent phone contact and in-person contact as those who rarely or never use the Internet. People who frequently use the Internet to contact others also tend to be in frequent contact with people in other ways (even after taking into account differences of age, gender and education). Extroverts especially benefit from its use, as they add another means of communication to their contact repertoire. Thus, a 2001 National Geographic survey reports that North Americans who use email to discuss important matters do so an average of 41 times per month, in addition to 84 face-to-face discussions and 58 phone discussions. Those who do not use email to discuss important matters have about the same number of monthly face-to-face discussions, 83, but only 36 phone discussions. Adding these numbers up, those who use email report 183 discussions per month, 54% more than the 119 discussions for those who do not use email. The result is that the more email, the more overall communication.

This is not surprising because the Internet is not a world apart. When we talk to people about what they do on the Internet, we find out that the great majority of the people they email are those they know already. They are keeping in touch between visits, often by exchanging jokes, sharing gossip, or arranging to get together. If they email someone they have not already met in person, they are frequently arranging a face-to-face meeting. Telephone calls also get intermixed with emails, because phone chats better convey nuances, provide more intrinsic enjoyment during the conversation, and handle complex discussions. Sociologist Andrea Baker’s book, *Double-Click*, tells us that few cyberdates stay online: they either proceed to in-person meetings or fade away. However they communicate, people bring to their online interactions such offline baggage as their gender, age, family situation, life style, ethnicity, jobs, wealth and education.

Email is not inferior to other modes of communication; it is just different. Emails are less intrusive than visits or phone calls and often come with useful “attachments” – be they baby pictures or maps to someone’s home. The spread of high-speed (“broadband”) Internet access makes it easier for people to integrate the Internet into the rest of their lives without long waits. By April, 2004 39% of U.S. Internet users had broadband at their homes and 55% at either home or work. Broadband means that people can always leave their Internet connection on so that they can spontaneously send emails and search websites and more easily surf the web and download large files such as pictures and music.

The longer that people have been on the Internet, the more they use it. And most Americans – and much of the developed world -- have become experienced. According to the Pew Internet and American Life study, the average American in February, 2004 had been using the Internet for six years. Internet use is becoming even more widespread as home users get access to high-speed broadband networks, and as access proliferates from desk-bound computers to small portable devices, such as third-generation mobile phones and personal digital assistants (Palm, Pocket PC). Yet, these small-screen, small-keyboard, lower-speed instruments are used differently than computers: to contact a small number of close friends or relatives, or to

coordinate immanent in-person meetings. Far from homogenizing people's communications, the Internet technology has been used in different ways by different sorts of people

### The Internet Globally and Locally

A decade ago analysts believed that as the rest of the world caught up to the United States in Internet use, they would use it in similar ways. Experience shows that this is not always so. For example, in Scandinavia and in Japan, people frequently use advanced mobile phones to exchange emails and short text messages. Their Internet use is much less desktop-bound than that of Americans. Teens and young adults are especially heavy users of emails on their "third generation" mobile telephones. Time will tell whether young people continue their heavy mobile use as they get older. Manuel Castells and associates have shown that people in Catalonia, Spain use the Internet more for information and services than for communication. They extensively search the web to answer questions and book tickets. But they are much less likely to exchange emails. This may be because many Catalans live near each other and prefer to meet in cafés at night. Mobile phones sit beside them, ready to incorporate other close friends and relatives into conversations via emails and short text messages. Many third-world countries exhibit a different mode of use. Even if people can afford to connect to the Internet from their homes, they often do not have reliable electrical, telephone or broadband service. In such situations, they often use public access points, such as Internet cafés or schools. They are connecting to the Internet while their neighbors sit next to them in person.

Such complexities illuminate the role the Internet can play in specifically *local* communities. The issue is whether the Internet has fostered a "global village," to use Marshall McLuhan's phrase, such that local community has weakened. Some intensive and engrossing online communities freed from geography do exist, such as the "BlueSky" group of young male friends who appear to live online, described by Lori Kendall in her book *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*. Yet, they are the small minority. Despite the Internet's ability to leap continents at a single bound, it does not appear to be destroying local community.

For example, in the late 1990s Keith Hampton and I studied "Netville" near Toronto, a typical North American suburban housing tract of middle-priced single-family homes. The teachers, social workers, police officers and technicians who lived there were typical people buying homes to raise young families. The community was exceptional in one important way: As part of an experiment by the telephone company, many residents were given high-speed, free Internet access and became members of a neighborhood email discussion group.

When we compared those who were given this Internet access with those who did not receive it, we found that those on the Internet knew the names of three times as many neighbors than those without Internet access. The "wired" residents regularly talked with twice as many neighbors and had been invited into the homes of an average of 4 neighbors as compared to 2.5 for the un-wired. The Internet gave wired residents opportunities to identify others in the neighborhood who shared common characteristics and whom they might want to know better. Email and the discussion group made it easier for them to meet fellow residents who were not their immediate neighbors: the wired residents' local friends were 34% more widely dispersed throughout Netville than those of the unwired. The email discussion group was frequently used to discuss common concerns – problems with plumbing and driveways; to request help or advice on small matters – setting up home computer networks, finding a local doctor; and to advertise

garage sales and skills for hire – such as a tax accountant. As one resident commented on the discussion group:

I have walked around the neighborhood a lot lately and I have noticed a few things. I have noticed neighbors talking to each other like they have been friends for a long time. I have noticed a closeness that you don't see in many communities.

Not only did these wired residents talk to and meet one another more, they did most of Netville's civic and political organizing online, for example, by warning neighbors about suspicious cars in the development, and inviting neighbors to social activities and events such as barbeques and block parties:

For anybody interested there is a Sunday night bowling league looking for new people to join. It's lots of fun with prizes, playoff's and more. For both ladies and gents. If interested e-mail me back or give me a call.

These community involvements built bonds for political organizing. When irate Netville residents protested at City Hall against the developer's plans to build more houses, it was the wired Internet members who organized the protest and showed up to make their voices known. Others grumbled, just like new residents of housing developments have often grumbled, but the Internet supplied the social bonds and tools for organizing: telling residents what the issues were, who were the key players, and when the protest would be.

The Netville experience suggests that when people can use the Internet to communicate, the scope and amount of neighborly contact can increase. Evidence from other studies also shows that the Internet supports nearby relationships. For example, the National Geographic Society asked visitors to its website about their communication with friends and relatives living within 30 miles. Daily internet users contacted nearby friends and relatives 73 percent more often per year than they contacted those living further away. Not only did they have more frequent in-person and phone contact with nearby friends and relatives, they also had more email contact.

At the same time, the Internet helped wired residents to maintain good ties with – and get help from -- friends and relatives who lived in their former neighborhoods. You can take your ties with you if you are properly wired. In short, the evidence shows that Internet users are becoming "*glocalized*," heavily involved in both local and long-distance relationships. They neighbor – on- and offline – and they connect with far-flung friends and relatives – mostly online.

### **“Networked Individualism”**

As the Internet has been incorporated into everyday life, it has fostered subtle changes in community. In the old days, before the 1990s, *places* were largely connected -- by telephone, cars, planes and railroads. Now with the Internet (and mobile phones), *people* are connected. Where before each household had a telephone number, now each person has a unique Internet address. Many have several, in order to keep different parts of their lives separate online. This change from place-based community to person-based community had started before the Internet, but the developing personalization, portability, and ubiquitous connectivity of the Internet are facilitating the change. By April, 2004 17% of American users could access the Internet wirelessly from their laptop computers, and the percentage is growing rapidly. As wireless

portability develops from desktops to laptops and handheld devices, people's whereabouts become less important for contact with friends and relatives.

The Internet and other new communication technologies are facilitating a basic change the nature of community from physically fixed and bounded groups to social networks, which I have started to call "*networked individualism*." These technologies are helping people to personalize their own communities. Instead of being rooted in their homes, cafés, and workplaces, people are becoming connected as individuals, available for contact anywhere and at anytime. Instead of being bound up in a neighborhood community where all know all, each person is becoming an individualized switchboard, linking a unique set of ties and networks. In a society where people rarely know friends of friends, there is both more uncertainty about who will be supportive under what circumstances, more need to navigate among partial social networks, and more opportunity to access a variety of resources. The Internet provides both communication and information resources to keep in greater touch with community members – from neighbors to cousins left behind in international migrations.

### **Recommended Resources**

Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society*. 2d ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. Castells presents a magisterial account of the transformation of societies into social networks.

Jones, Steve, and Philip Howard. (eds.) *Society Online: The Internet in Context*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003. The editors provide an important compendium of research, with much representation from the authoritative Pew Internet in American Life studies.

Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. 2d. ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000. Rheingold delivers a popular and sound account of life online.

Wellman, Barry, and Caroline Haythornthwaite (eds.). *The Internet in Everyday Life*, 2000. Oxford: Blackwell. We present a score of original research articles documenting many of the ideas presented in this article.

<http://www.pewinternet.org>. The Pew Internet in American Life studies have carried out a large number of surveys on Internet use in American life.

<http://virtualsociety.sbs.ox.ac.uk/>. This is a British scholarly network doing a variety of mostly qualitative analyses of Internet and society.

<http://www.webuse.umd.edu/>. This site is an interactive statistical database making it relatively easy to analyze a variety of surveys about the Internet and American life.

<http://www.worldinternetproject.net>. This site contains the reports of survey researchers in many nations on the nature of the Internet and society.

### **Bio:**

Barry Wellman studies networks: social, communication, information, and computer. He has built on his earlier studies of nonlocal communities to investigate how the Internet affects the ways in which people work and find community with each other, offline as well as online.

Wellman is Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto, where he directs the NetLab at the Centre for Urban and Community Studies. The founder of the International Network for Social Network Analysis, he has been the chair of both the Community and Urban Sociology section and the Communication and Information Technologies sections of the American Sociological Association.