The Glocal Village: Internet and Community
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The Internet as Utopia and Dystopia
A three-year-old New York girl reports meeting her imaginary friend only when they sporadically bump into each other on the street. If they miss one another, they leave messages on their voicemails. Nowadays, even a three-year-old can no longer count on having an imaginary friend readily available at home; but she believes she can rely on voicemail.

That preschoolers are having such fantasies shows how much computer-mediated communications pervade everyday life. That the New Yorker magazine published this report, by Adam Gopnik, in 2002 suggests how this pervasiveness still surprises many people.

After all, it was only five years ago that everyone was jumping on the Internet bandwagon: dot.com entrepreneurs who dreamed of getting rich; their stock market followers; media enthusiasts who aspired to being trend spotters; politicians wanting to promote themselves; government officials seeking to reorient economies; and community developers who saw an opportunity to reverse a perceived decline in sociability.

Discussions about the impact of the Internet were often unsullied by data and informed only by conjecture and anecdotal evidence. These travellers’ tales from Internet incognita focused on the exotic and treated the unusual as routine. The bulk of media reporting described a parallel world of role-playing, gender-bending and erotic pursuits, much like 16th-century European accounts portrayed America as filled with beasts, Amazons and centaurs. Even more sober discussions extolled the Internet as egalitarian and globe-spanning, rarely considering how differences in power, culture, gender and status might affect interactions online.

For many pundits, the Internet was seen as a technological marvel that would bring a new Enlightenment to transform the world. Before the World Wide Web-driven information explosion, communication dominated the Internet: by asynchronous email and discussion lists and synchronous instant messaging and chat groups. All were supposedly connected to all, without boundaries of time and space. As technology journalist Phil Patton’s Open Road forecast in 1986, “Computer-mediated communication…will do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a ‘vehicle’ and yet not detach us from the rest of the world.”

Some people truly had such expectations and experiences. A participant in the Apple Internet Users discussion group in 1995 expresses the optimism of the times: “Every advance in communication changes the nature of reality as we experience it… The Internet is yet another revolutionary method of communication. For the first time in the history of the world, I can have an ongoing, fast-moving conversation with people regardless of their physical location, schedule or other such constraints” (personal communication).

Yet, not everyone saw the Internet as utopian. In some accounts, it was viewed as the destroyer of identity and community. The Dystopians’ major concern was the supposed inauthenticity of Internet contact. Critics wondered if relationships between people who never see, smell and hear each other could be the basis for true community. They feared that people would become alienated from one another if their lives were spent online, interfacing only with computers and TV screens. Several psychologists even saw a few distressed patients whose life online had replaced life on the streets.
and announced the endemic danger of Internet addiction. Indeed, psychologist Kimberly Young went so far as to propose, in *Tangled in the Web*, a “comprehensive plan for recovery to help individuals hooked on adult chat rooms, online pornography, web cam sex, or a Cyberaffair.”

From Technological Determinism to Social Possibilities: Utopians and Dystopians had four things in common. First, both sides assumed the Internet had the power to draw people into online communities and away from other interpersonal pursuits. Second, early accounts rested largely on supposition and anecdote rather than on systematic ethnographic observation, surveys of people’s actual behaviour or laboratory experiments. Third, commentators mistakenly assumed that those who communicate online communicate only online, viewing the Internet as a separate social system.

Fourth, both Utopians and Dystopians were technological determinists: incanting Marshall McLuhan’s Delphic prophecies as fact, they believed that the sheer introduction of a technology would inevitably change social relations and thoroughly remake societies. Their technological determinism was both presentist—thinking that the world started anew with the Internet—and parochial—assuming that only things that happened on the Internet were relevant to understanding it. For example, they did not recognize that long-distance communities had flourished well before the Internet, and that a multitude of social, cultural, economic and psychological phenomena were relevant for understanding who used the Internet, why and for what purpose.

Indeed, social scientists have known for a long time that technology does not determine anything; people take technology and use it (or discard it) in ways its developers never dreamed of. The medium is not the message, contrary to McLuhan’s assertion. Rather, the nature of the medium affords possibilities, opportunities and constraints. For example, automobiles and expressways have made it possible for people to live in sprawling suburbs; they have not ordained that people do so. Just compare the sprawl of American cities with the more compact Canadian suburbs. Similarly, the Internet made it possible for—but did not force—people to communicate quickly and cheaply across continents and oceans.

The Internet in Everyday Life

From Hope and Hype to Scholarship: Many Internet hopes were dashed in the dot.com stock market crash in 2000. As the boom and dream faded, the Internet began to be seen as routine and even boring. Yet, the Internet actually grew in importance as it became deeply embedded in everyday life: it was being used more often in more different ways even as it was being hyped less. A majority of households in many developed countries now have Internet access. Although Internet use has spread more slowly throughout the developing world, elites, students and the ambitious have found ways to connect. For instance, although only five per cent of China is connected to the Internet, the huge Chinese population means that it now houses the second largest number of Internet users: approximately 80 million (W. Chen and B. Wellman, “Charting Digital Divides: Within and Between Countries,” *Transforming Enterprise*, eds. W. Dutton et al., 2004). At present, about one-third of Internet users live in North America, one-third in Europe and Japan and one-third in the rest of the world.

With the explosive growth in Internet use, scholars, governments and research funding agencies began moving in the late 1990s toward analyses of computer-mediated communication. Social scientists have done surveys and ethnographies; they have studied the language people use online and mapped communication and networks of conversations and links between websites.

Researchers are employing sociological lore to design new social software to help people build, use and analyse their social networks. The sociological perspective is bringing analysis down to earth. Instead of looking at the Internet as an isolated system, it has grounded consideration of what happens online in what happens in people’s everyday lives. Analysts now relate involvement in the Internet to other ways in which people communicate, offline as well as online. Not only is the Internet seen as affecting the rest of life, but gender, age, social class, etcetera are seen as affecting how the Internet is used.

How Important is the Online-Only World? Although the online-only world of virtual community captured a lot of attention in the early days, it plays only a small role in the larger scheme of things. For example, a high percentage of Internet users in the United States who exchange emails and instant messages also see each other in person or talk on the telephone. By contrast, only a small percentage engage in online-only activities, such as virtual communities, role-playing games and multiplayer gaming and gambling.

While online-only worlds are statistically small, they can be important niches for communities or for individuals. For example, some religiously orthodox Muslim women, who are often socially isolated and spatially dispersed in North America, have joined discussion lists through which they can socialize, assuage loneliness and obtain advice about how to deal with North American society. Yet even this is not an online-only world. Members of the far-flung North American Muslim women’s network often travel to visit each other (S. Bastani, “Muslim Women On-Line,” *Arab World Geographer* 3, 2001). In similar ways, people who work together online often find ways to meet in person at conferences, on personal trips or at organizational get-togethers.

Does the Internet Isolate People from Community? The realization that Internet communication did not stand alone, but is usually part of an ensemble of in-person meetings and phone calls has changed thinking about what the Internet affords community. To be sure, there have been echoes of the Utopian/Dystopian debate, but now the debate is accompanied by evidence. The argument that the
Internet is weakening community got the first blow. The early, widely-cited "Homenet" study, by Robert Kraut and associates in 1998 ("Internet Paradox: A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being? American Psychologist 53), showed that some new users ("newbies" in Internet slang) did become more alienated and less sociable with household and community members but only when they first went online. More recently, a host of evidence has shown that people use the Internet to augment their existing community interactions, filling in the gaps between in-person get-togethers, maintaining weak ties and making weak ties stronger (B. Wellman and C. Haythornthwaite, eds., The Internet in Everyday Life, 2002). Analysing the impact of the Internet at work, in the community and among family members is the main area of research conducted at the University of Toronto's NetLab, a network of sociologists with links to the Centre for Urban and Community Studies, the Department of Sociology, the Knowledge Media Design Institute and the Faculty of Information Studies (see http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/netlab/).

How Does the Global Internet Affect Neighbouring and Local Community? Has the Internet afforded the transformation of community into a "global village" (to use another of McLuhan's phrases) and, in so doing, taken energy away from the local communities that have traditionally been the paragons of interpersonal virtues?

Despite the Internet's ability to leap across continents at a single bound, it does not appear so, although in practice most community ties were not local even before the advent of the Internet (B. Wellman and B. Leighton, "Networks, Neighborhoods and Communities," Urban Affairs Quarterly 14, 1979). The "Netville" study of exurban Toronto has shown how the Internet can sustain local community. When we compared those heavily involved in a high-speed Internet service and accompanying discussion list and those not online, we found that the "wired" residents neighbourhood more than the non-wired (K. Hampton and B. Wellman, "Neighboring in Netville: How the Internet Supports Community and Social Capital in a Wired Suburb," City and Community 2, 2003). The impact of the Internet was especially significant for more casual relationships. Wired residents knew the names of 26 neighbours, an unusually high number, while non-wired residents knew the names of a more usual nine, nearly a 3:1 ratio. Wired residents also had talked regularly with twice as many neighbours and had been invited into nearly twice as many of their neighbours' homes as compared with non-wired.

Email and discussion list chat provided wired residents the opportunity to identify other local residents with shared interests and to meet people who were not their immediate neighbours. The list was used to discuss common problems, solicit advice on services, advertise garage sales and locally available products and services, send invitations to social gatherings and alert one another to suspicious strangers. When irate Netville residents protested at City Hall against the developer, it was the wired Internet members who organized the protest and showed up to make their views known. As one resident commented (on the list): "I have walked around the neighbourhood a lot lately and I have noticed a few things. I have noticed neighbours 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."

Was Netville unusual? To some extent yes, because most neighbourhoods do not have a discussion list that may foster community. Moreover, as an experimental, highly-wired development, it was featured in the Toronto media and its wired residents developed an esprit de corps. Yet, the Netville experience suggests that when people can use the Internet to communicate at very low cost, the scope and amount of overall social contact intensified and their relationships ranged further through the neighbourhood. Our NetLab's analyses of other surveys, such as the National Geographic Society studies of 1998 and 2001, similarly show that the Internet is supporting local relationships.

How Does the Internet Affect Community? If the Internet neither isolates people nor weakens local community, does it have any impact at all? Recent survey evidence suggests that communication with friends and relatives over the Internet adds on to in-person and telephone communication. The more, the more. It is probable that people not only have more relationships than in pre-Internet times, but that they are also in more frequent contact with community...
members. And the longer they have been on the Internet, the more they use it to communicate. Experience counts as the Internet becomes embedded in the routine of people's lives.

In fact, Internet users are becoming "glocalized"—that is, heavily involved in both local and long-distance relationships. They neighbour, on and offline, and they connect with far-flung friends and relatives, mostly online. But the wired nature of the current Internet means that the more people are online, the more they must stay physically rooted to fixed personal computers and Internet connections at home, at work, at school or in public places. Paradoxically, even as people are connecting globally, they are well placed to be aware of what is happening in their immediate surroundings. The coming proliferation of wireless computer networks will change this situation, but only somewhat.

What Is the Internet Doing for Community?

While the Internet has not dragged people away from their friends, relatives and neighbours, neither has it created a situation where many people hang out online sharing interests with soulmates around the world. The Internet is not a self-contained world, but part of the real world. Indeed, it is becoming more difficult to distinguish the Internet as a special medium as the variety of computer-mediated communication proliferates—from email to chats, instant messaging, short text messages and video conferencing—with pictures and videos attached to email messages and telephone calls routed over the Internet. The Internet is becoming another means of communication that is being integrated into the regular patterns of social life.

Yet, as the Internet has become incorporated into everyday life, it has fostered changes in community. Before the 1990s, telephones, cars, planes and transit largely connected places, such as households. Now, people are connected. Where before each household had a telephone number, now each person has a unique Internet address and carries a mobile phone. The evolution of "networked individualism" had started before the Internet, but the developing personalization, portability and ubiquitous connectivity of the Internet are facilitating more individual connectivity. And, as portability develops from laptops to hand-held computerized communication devices, people's whereabouts increasingly become less important for networking with them. Each person becomes a switchboard between ties and networks. They remain connected, but as individuals available for contact anywhere and at anytime, instead of being rooted in home, café and workplace.

In effect, the Internet and other new communication technologies are helping people to personalize their own communities. This is neither a dystopian loss of community nor a utopian gain, but rather a complex, fundamental transformation in the nature of community from groups to social networks.

Connected Lives, Multiple Worlds

The residents of the GTA, East York represent a wide range of ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds and household arrangements—which makes Canada's only former borough an ideal source of data for the Connected Lives Project, a three-year study on Internet and community funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Barry Wellman heads a group of post-doctoral fellows, graduate and undergraduate students from sociology, social work and civil engineering, and high-school mentorship students investigating the social impact of the Internet. Three sociology doctoral students are Jeff Boase, Tracy Kennedy and Bernie Hogan. Boase, who is spending this year at Harvard's National Center for Digital Government, is examining the relationship between the Internet and "tie strength to determine how weaker interpersonal bonds influence accessibility to and possession of new kinds of knowledge and social support, as well as tolerance of difference. Kennedy, who has created a "network of women in the cyberworld" (viz., http://netwomen.ca/), is analysing the extent to which gender dynamics construct and manage people's Internet activities and the decision-making processes within the family. For his part, Hogan is seeking to understand how "practitioners of network wanderlust" manage their contacts with others in a world of proliferating new technologies, fewer routine spaces and the potential for more spontaneous connections. According to Hogan, "We're finding that—at a communication level—the digital divide is really a cultural divide, separating those who are used to technology as a culture and those who are not. Different networks of people operate in different modalities, such as email or cell phone. This has profound implications for one's personal community since it is now partially structured by one's technological skill and ability to negotiate many media." Furthermore, adds Wellman, "As our society moves from groups into networks, the constant navigation of partial networks becomes the basis of the way we interact with one another. The Internet is a great navigation tool because it minimizes the costs of time and space and enables us to participate in multiple worlds simultaneously—both at home and at work."