

Online Communication: Changing the Way We Perceive Others and Ourselves?

Online communities have been around since the early days of the Internet, yet the highest users of these spaces have traditionally been computer geeks or scientists. Since only a small portion of society practiced this type of activity, it was viewed often as deviant and an activity that encourages social apathy and withdrawal. With the advent of the graphic browser by 1993, mass numbers of people began to utilize the Internet looking for information or educational content. Most of these mainstream internet surfers were looking for a view-only, non-interactive way to access the information, and most early websites were structured as more online brochures than fully interactional web portals. In this way, early surfing was similar to reading a print material or being entertained by a traditional broadcast medium. The majority of users were engaged in the passive reception of a message, not instances of direct interpersonal communication.

Today however, more people than ever are utilizing the Internet as a way to create and sustain social relationships. It is no longer an activity deemed as “deviant” and “anti-social”, and with the advent of chat rooms on such sites as yahoo.com and aol.com, more and more numbers of internet users are wandering into chat rooms and formulating interpretive communities with relative strangers. ***While this increase in cross-cultural communication can be viewed as positive in a world of increasing globalization, what is this increase anonymous communication doing to our sense of place within that community?*** Before the Internet, body language and tone of voice impacted communities and these aspects are missing from the online environment. Community is

also a place where one can test one's identity and develop a sense of place within a larger whole. Many of these same goals can be actualized via online communication.

Currently traditional web users are increasingly becoming a part of online communities (as is illustrated by the vast increase in companies that are bundling their website with near real time communications technologies like listserves, bulletin board and instant messaging systems). With a vast number of the American public interacting online, social identities are being constructed without the typical face to face (FtF) interaction and users are able to explore and formulate their personal identities in ways never before possible. The Internet offers a safe way to explore aspects of one's personality without directly impacting FtF interpersonal relationships or social status. In contrast, discussions around online communities often provoke concern about a lessening of human interaction supplanted by textual, anonymous interactions and an increase in socially inappropriate behavior. ***How exactly is this disembodied, online communication affecting our perceptions of self and place within a social identity?***

There are two underlying assumptions in place within this analysis. The first is that online communication is changing the way that we think about ourselves and formulate an identity within a social construct. The second is that communicating with others via textual communication also encourages a sense of community. These virtual communities are also changing how we view others. By outlining the current literature involving personal identity formation and CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) in

relation to current studies of online communities, this paper will prepare an analysis of how the Internet is changing our perceptions of personal and social psychology.

CMC is “synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode text messages that are relayed from senders’ computers to receivers.” (Flaherty, 1998) There are various ways to communicate with others via the Internet. Email, listserves, bulletin boards, instant messaging, chat rooms and now webcams are technologies that are assisting us in our effort to reach out and get to know each other. The channels most often discussed in this paper are those that involve instant (synchronous) communication via instant messaging and chatrooms. Most of the research in the area of online communications has focused on MUDS (Multi-User Dimensions/Dungeons), IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and email. MUDs are basically on-line interactive role-playing games. MUD cities are typically accessed through Telnet, a computer program/protocol that allows computers on the Internet to communicate with each other directly. (Coon, 1998) Internet Relay Chat was first formed in 1998 by a researcher in Finland as a text-based way of chatting. It was designed primarily as a text-based means of CMC that would enable people from around the world to communicate on topics of specific interests. The discussions are organized into channels.

Personal Identity

There are various ways that online communication is changing the way that we not only talk to each other but think of ourselves. Innate to human interaction is the need to communicate with others in order to fulfill interpersonal needs. If we are drawn to communicating with each other, how is online communication different, and how does

the medium impact our type of communication and relationally, how does that impact our view of ourselves?

How online communication different

There are various nuances of the medium of communicating via the Internet that make the interaction different than face to face. These include the limitations of the textual environment in allowing the user to express emotion, the different meanings of pauses in communication, and the impact of anonymity. Various theories such as: Cues Filtered out theory speaks to the limitations of the medium for significant interaction. In contrast, there is a growing body of literature, which argues that the lack of visual cues allows the user to establish a more intimate bond with other users albeit the relationships develop at a slower pace[KAW1].

Why we communicate

Schutz (1966) identified inclusion, affection, and control as the three primary interpersonal needs. Inclusion includes such emotions as the need to feel included by others; affection refers to the need to feel loved by others or express love; and control is the need to exert power over others or allow others to exert power. R. Rubin et.al (1998[KAW2]) identified pleasure, relaxation, and escape as three additional interpersonal communications motives. Pleasure fills a need to unwind, rest or feel less tense. Escape motive fulfills the need to avoid activities and worries by communicating with others. All of these concepts have been traditionally examined in media research. (Flaherty, 1998, 254) These motives are very applicable to CMC, and most users utilize the medium to fulfill their need for inclusion, pleasure, relaxation and escape. Affection can be expressed via CMC though not ultimately fulfilled via an online environment and

a sense of control is often present within some online contexts (such as MUDs where role-playing creates social hierarchies). As a medium, therefore, CMC fulfills our interpersonal communication needs; yet there are significant difference between how we communicate to each other online and how we communicate FtF.

Emoticons and Silence

Users of CMC have developed ingenious ways to overcome the lack of FtF emotional expression. Frequently users insert relational icons into the text of the message to convey feelings (emoticons – for ex: {☺}). Users of CMC have also developed an electronic paralanguage to convey relational messages such as intentional misspellings, spatial arrays, and ALL CAPTIAL LETTERS to convey yelling. Flaherty (1998) argues that “These modified interaction create higher social presence. People who use the interactive capabilities of political computer bulleting boards (i.e., send and receive messages) perceive the medium as more personal, social and warm.” There [KAW3]are various social behaviors that have developed within this medium, however, that are not translatable into face to face interaction. For example, the use of silence in face-to-face interactions is usually accompanied by various non-verbal cues like facial expressions, postures, gestures etc. that add additional meaning to the silence. Yet within CMC, pauses in communication may give rise to alarm. “The absence of a ‘verbal’ response may be construed as agreement, disagreement, or indifference; it may also be taken as a sign of technical trouble.” (Jacobson[KAW4]) Users overcome this difficulty by signaling when they are leaving the conversation briefly (for ex. *brb* used as shorthand for “be right back”) to signal that the user is leaving the conversation versus registering distaste or unhappiness with the conversation. By developing a shorthand of shorts for online communication online users have been able to overcome a lack of visual cues to

effectively communicate with one another, and often, due to lack of visual cues, more intimate relationships are able to flourish.

Anonymity

The lack of visual information is often paired with the user's use of a pseudonym. One of the most intriguing and widely discussed topics in relation to CMC is the issue of anonymity and what affect a false identity has on both our visions of ourselves and our interactions with others in this online world. It is partially this concept of "false" selves that has spurred various academics to conclude that online communication leads to anti-social and immoral behavior and a lack of intimate interactions. Anonymity creates an environment where users are more comfortable relating to one another, but it also often creates an unrealistic perception of the "other" within the online communication. *Social Information Processing Theory* (SIP) speaks to this unrealistic expectation of the identity of the other created within online communication. SID asserts that users who send messages via CMC have a tendency to portray themselves more socially favorably than reality in order to draw the attention of the receiver of the message in order to foster the possibility of future interaction. Message receivers, in turn, tend to idealize the image of the sender, overvaluing minimal, text-based cues. In addition the asynchronous nature of CMC gives the sender and the receiver enough time to edit their communication, making interaction in CMC more controllable and thereby reducing the stress of the immediate feedback loop inherent in face to face interactions. (Kim, 2000) The results of this overestimating of the physicality of the online receiver by the sender results in often startled reactions during real life meetings. Stories that speak to this frequent occurrence have spread themselves throughout popular American culture, and the online dating

phenomenon has created much such causality. Even when photographs are exchanged, the medium makes it easy not to be completely truthful. While some online interactions are clothed in anonymity and false personalities coupled with an innate tendency to idealize in place of reality based details, a unique phenomena of increased disclosure of personal information among internet users has been observed. Intimacy[KAW5]...

Cues Filtered Out Theory and Flaming

There have been various studies into Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and one of the preliminary theories addressed the lack of cues present on the Internet. The most used theory *cues filtered out theory* predicts that users will develop less of a social engagement with others via CMC due to a lack of social cues, and the medium will create an increased tendency to “flame” or become verbally violent due to the lack of visual cues. Flaming can also mean attacking someone personally for their posting by using insults, swears or hostile and intense language (Kelly, 1999). The theory argues that CMC users cannot maintain relationships due to the vehicle’s inability to convey important social cues. This theory is losing academic support, however, as online communication is becoming more prevalent. “Research conducted over long periods of time, even in the laboratory, has found that relationships formation in CMC is similar to that in face to face groups although it is slower to develop.” (Blanchard, 1998) In fact, they have found a higher degree of “socioemotional communication” in all CMC settings (including task driven ones) as the use of CMC becomes more widespread. (Chenault, May 1998) As cited in Chenault, Lee [KAW6]and Spears (1995) argue that the reduced cues approach is “ill prepared” to account for the development of personal relationships

that are developing via CMC and it relies too heavily on the physical aspects of interaction and ignores the other aspects that drive attraction. (Chenault, May 1998).

Disclosure [KAW7]

At the root of a sense of presence is the ability of a user to engage in disclosure of personal information in order to form online relationships with others. “The more one discloses personal information, the more others will reciprocate, and the more individuals know about each other the more likely there are to establish trust, seek support, and thus find satisfaction. ...Disclosure creates a kind of currency that is spent to keep interaction moving. “ (Culter. 1995 pp. 18) With the anonymous nature of the Internet, users are often more comfortable disclosing information hence creating a more of a sense of intimacy within their online relationships than their FtF relationships.

How is it impacting our view of ourselves[KAW8]?

Our sense of place within a community is changing, and for some, our membership within a virtual community is gaining significance. How is this splitting of emotional ties and a balancing a set of diverse identities affecting our personal psychology? For Culter (1995) the formation of personal identities is grounded within the roles that we play within certain social situations and relationships that create our sense of control within the virtual world. “The altered sense of awareness that creates senses of who I am and who others are can be called a sense of presence. Presence, combined with common interests, enable people, removed physically from each other, to relate via cyberspace.” (Culter. 1995. 16) Culter goes on to highlight comments from

Garza, an observer of DragonMUD, which illustrates the conflict around a user's sense of place as a marker for individual identity. "Definitions of self in player/characters and the community as a whole are tied to the existing environment. Altering the environment would require altering conceptions of self." (Cutler 1995, 22) While applicable to MUDs where the identity is intentionally constructed in order to become a part of the role-playing game, the concept of having to "switch" identities within other forms of CMC isn't as clear cut. While there are instances of users only interacting via CMC through a pseudonym, as CMC gets more widely used, there are more users utilizing instant messaging programs and chat rooms to converse on a daily basis. Many of these users are not creating false identities, and instead are presenting themselves more realistically. The medium does, however, allow for the user to utilize an alternative identity if one so chooses, yet does that mean that all CMC users are shifting identities on a regular basis? And if so, what grounds our dominant online identity?

Here we find an argument that personal identity formation is established by a sense of presence within a community. This need to find grounding within the virtual space is universal and one can see evidence of this through our use of body awareness terms such as: immersion, manipulation, interactivity, and navigation to describe internet created circumstances. (Rheingold, 1991[KAW9]) If users formulate their identity in relation to their sense of presence within a certain online environment, however, what happens when they become involved in a different social environment? And with the technological capacity to have exist in multiple communities at once, how does the user transition from one identity to another quickly, and does the user retain any sense of their innate characteristics?

Some academics would argue that CMC users lose their sense of self all together in place of a strong personal identity, abandoning their sense of individualism to conform to the group identity. In this model, group stereotyping and the rejection of the “other” is rampant. In tandem to presence theory and the conceptualization of identity being determined by social presence is SIDE (Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects) theory. SIDE proponents argue that CMC reinforces existing social boundaries to the degree that all users integrate the social setting within their notion of self. This model accepts the contention that anonymity in CMC deprives individuals of individual identity awareness, and a social or group identity replaces individual identity.

“Anonymous individuals in CMC were inclined to accept ‘in-group’ norms and identity and reject ‘out-group’ norms and identity.” (i.e. stereotyping and biases prevail). “SIDE asserts that our actions stem in part from invisible social norms and identity, despite the absence of physicality...” (Kim, 2000). This theory purports that individual awareness is largely lost within an online social context, and yet it would follow that this socially created identity would change with a shift of social online group. It is here that we begin to see the development of more than one identity. Instead of internalizing one identity, a user creates many and embodies one or the other depending upon the social situation. It should be noted that FtF interaction also encourages this type of personality splitting (a woman could be in her role of mother in the morning, then visit her parents and fulfill the role of child and then go to work to assume yet another identity). Our mental capacity is created to handle this type of identity switching, yet the speed in which CMC users “switch” between one personality or another has reached a never before seen speed –to the point where often the switching occurs also simultaneously.

Split Selves

In amongst all the research concerning online communication, there is a plethora of information about lack of social cues, the impact of anonymity on CMC, and the various instances of electronic paralanguage and netiquette developed in order to overcome the limitations of the textual interface. What there isn't a lot of academic discussion about is the increased multi-processing that CMC users are displaying in order to be involved in two or three (or more) worlds at once. The impact of that type of split identity development on our personal psychology has yet to be fully explored. Take for instance the comments of a MUD user (Doug) as referenced on page 13 of Sherry Turkel's [KAW10] *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* where he talks about the various different identities and scenarios he maintains via different windows at once.

I split my mind. I'm getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more. And I just turn on one part of my mind and then another when I go from window to window. I'm in some kind of argument in one window and trying to come on to a girl in a MUD in another, and another window I might be running a spreadsheet program or some other technical thing for school. ...And then I'll get a real-time message (that flashes on the screen as soon as it is sent from another system user), and I guess that's RL. It's just one more window.

This splitting of selves is becoming even more prevalent among CMC users since the advent of instant messaging. Instant messaging has an easy interface where users can display themselves realistically or through a pseudonym and chat or exchange messages in real time with users around the world. There is no limit to the amount of users that one can communicate at once with via instant messaging (limited only to the computer's processing power) and most programs let you chat with an unlimited number of users within one chat room. Many companies have set policies in place to limit employee's use of instant messaging during work due to the assumption that it causes a decline in

productivity. The mere fact the policies had to be instituted speaks to the widespread use of instant messaging as a form of communication. If more people are using instant messaging, how is this splitting of our identity impacting our sense of ourselves? What kind of impact does it have on our real life behavior? Frederick Jameson argues that in a postmodern world, the subject is fragmented. As a postmodernist sees it, the self is decentered and anxious about it's identity. (Turkle, 1995, 49) With the advent of CMC, is this anxiety resolved with the acquisition of a larger social identity or is appeased with the ease of shifting between on identity and another? Never before have humans been encouraged to develop a schizophrenic type way of communicating with others, and this sense of a splitting of reality should be considered during discussions of online communities.

If one looks at this situation through the lens of adolescent identity development theory established by Erick Erikson, users of CMC are extending the time period in which they experiment with identities. In the study of adolescent psychology, Erikson is used to describe why teenagers are prone to "try on" one trend or fad after another until they eventually settle into an identity which is often like their parents. It is this period of rebellion is which, through rebelling against their parents' and society's expectations for them they are able to grant themselves freedom to delve into identities that are outside of the norm of their family or society. (Turkle, 1995) If users of CMC are exploring this stage of development that (within Erikson's construct) needs to be resolved in order to establish an identity and become an adult, how is a society of users interacting like adolescents going to impact our social framework?

Users online communication behaviors could also be impacted by the stress between online communication and the reality of where the users are physically located. Will users of CMC experience an increase of conflict between their real life identities and their distributed presence on the Internet? How does the sense of always being somewhere else affect our personal psychology?

In the future, with the widespread use of the online communication as a way to not only sustain but also create ties with others, the 10-year outlook that views CMC as inferior to Face to face communication might change. (Chenault 1998) As it becomes not only more socially acceptable but also more widely practiced for work and educational purposes; the stigma surrounding communicating via the net will dissipate. What will gain momentum, however, is a more comprehensive study of how online communication is affecting our relationships and our sense of place within a larger structure.

Interpersonal Interaction

What is the nature of relationship established by people over the Internet? Whereas the popular assumption about relationships established online is a very negative one, the academic research into online relationship building has discovered that even with reduced social cues, people on the Internet have a tendency to establish highly intimate relationships. In an experiment by a Joseph Walther, assistant professor of communications studies in Northwestern University School of Speech, he mapped the differences in relationship development between online and offline social groups assigned to complete the same task. Within the groups who had never met face to face he discovered that they were more socially oriented than the groups who had met face to face on a regular basis. "Members of the computer-based groups often compared

hobbies, discussed musical preference and exchanged other personal information while group members meeting face to face rarely took the time after working on their assigned tasks to establish such bonds.”(Harrington, Feb. 1995)

Community Identity

Is the Internet a community in a sociological sense? With the study of CMC, Hillary (1995) has been widely referenced as establishing a foundation for which to compare aspects of traditional communities with characteristics of online communities. Her research created criteria through which CMC can be viewed as a fully functional community. She examined 94 different definitions of community that were presented in the literature in an effort to identify consensual definitions. The three areas of agreement that she found were people who are involved in social interaction, a geographic area, and a common tie of some kind. (Coon 1998) Whereas her research supported the hypothesis that users who are involved in an online community are involved in social interaction and share a common tie, her focus on geography was problematic. Other theorists like Reid are convinced that community on the Internet within Internet Relay Chat can be illustrated through the users’ shared collective belief systems as well their symbolic strategies for sustaining the integrity of the community through their system of netiquette. (Reid, 1991) Jan Fernback and Brad Thompson found in that the two primary ethical functions that govern CMC (and are found in postings of netiquette within online communities) are 1. Individualism is honored and fostered, and 2. The network is good and must be protected.

A hybrid of both conceptualizations results in a more comprehensive argument for the establishment of online communities as functional social entities that serve a

communal purpose. Surrat comes closer with her findings that every CMC system (she) analyzed in her research has evolved from a piece of communications software into a complex social system. These social systems were complete with belief systems, set of clues, cultural norms, systems of socialization, social control and stratification that are necessary for any group of individuals to be defined as a human community. (1996, 568)

Ideologically, online communities appear to “emphasize a shared belief in the principles of free speech, individualism, equality, and open access.”(Fernback & Thompson, 2000)

Considering that the Internet was first established from hubs in the United States, it is perhaps not surprising that the values of online communities reflect American concepts of democracy.

As studies of CMC expand their intellectual reach, we are discovering that in many ways CMC does help develop a community, and in many ways provides an environment that is more beneficial to group work. Dennis Johnston and James Sempsey outline various aspects of group dynamics within CMC that function more efficiently than Face to Face in their article, *The Psychological Dynamics and Social Climate of Text-Based Virtual Realities*. While their summary explains that their findings are merely preliminary, their study focused on providing examples that support the theory that MUD groups exhibit greater equality of participation than face to face social recreational groups. They discovered that MUD groups led to a great degree of self-expression, and exhibited a higher degree of diversity and internal change than do face to face groups and hence exhibits an encouragement of innovative thinking. They also encouraged independence among members, and a higher degree of self-disclosure of personal information. All of these characteristics were present within a highly

decentralized system of power. (Sempsey and Johnson, 2000) These findings suggest that CMC have a great potential for encouraging more efficient and personally fulfilling group work as well as a forum for individual personal counseling. These findings debunk previous notions of CMC as a highly narcissistic environment that encourages social withdrawal.

There have been various recent studies that show the impact CMC has on not only the development of online communities, but also the support of existing communities. In a study of the Blacksburg Electronic Village conducted by Andrea Kavanaugh and Scott Patterson, scholars at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, they found that the users felt closer to the community as a whole and the communications network enhanced the existing social and informational exchanges between community members.

(London, 1997)

Yet within the history of CMC, there has been a growing large segment of society that exhibits a huge distrust of online communities. From within their perspective, “Many people are drawn addictively to such communities do so because they have difficulty with real social interaction, and chat rooms make it easy. Like any type of crutch, people can develop a serious dependence on it. Critics have a valid point that chatrooms offer too shallow an experience to warrant replacing real social interaction in the long run.”

(Davidson) For many, like Bruce Bimber who’s article *The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community and the Accelerated Pluralism* looks at the possibility of the Internet and CMC influencing social and political process and is not convinced that the Internet will have an impact. “There seems to be no compelling reason to believe that the communication capacity of the Net will have such a dramatically

different effect than have other advances in point-to-point and broadcast communication. In all fairness, Bimber's article was written before the World Bank protest in Oregon. And current events illustrate that by networking activists around the world, political action through large scale protests are a reality that due to economic restraints would not have been possible through point to point or broadcast mediums. Never before have large groups of citizens been able to gather and share information across HUGE geographical areas at a low cost and without the presence of political authorities. The impact of the Internet on political processes has yet to be fully actualized.

There is a sense of Meta power at work within online communities. Meta-power as defined by JP. Singh is "how networks reconfigure, constitute, or reconstitute identities, interests and institutions." (Singh, 2001) The networks have powers to not only construct identifies, but then also become a part of the social discourse and in some instances, spark social action. Especially with the dispersed power relationship rooted within online culture, it will be interesting to see how the empowerment of its "net citizens" creates new social paradigms globally. The communities themselves survive within the shadow of the commitment of the individuals to the life of the community. Without the interaction of users within that virtual space, the community dies and its members disperse to find other communities to join.

The retention of community members within a virtual community has sparked a great deal of discussion and scholarship are what makes an online community successful as a social entity and as an opportunity for social growth for the members involved. Web developers are well aware that the vast amount of surfers on the Internet are not just looking for sterile information, but are looking for social interaction, companionship and

community. (Chenault, 1998). In fact if one is searching for information on subject of online community building, the search will result in a vast amount of information about how to involve the user in a community in order to involve them in ecommerce or marketing activities. Beyond establishing the technology to enable synchronous communication, current scholarship talks about the need to encourage eventual face to face interaction among its members in order to sustain group cohesion. The most successful online communities have already established national conventions for its users to meet their chat partners without traveling around the world to do so. ICQ.com has been very successful in this venture, and its last conference...did this

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[KAW3]
reference?

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[KAW4]Year?

Page: 7

[KAW5] Add another sentence as a lead into the concept of intimacy..

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Reference?

Page: 8

[KAW7]needs lead in...

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[KAW8]intro into presence theory/split selves

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[KAW9]More...

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[KAW10]correct spelling?