'KEEP YOUR DISTANCE': REMOTE COMMUNICATION, FACE-TO-FACE, AND THE NATURE OF COMMUNITY

Kevin Harris

Abstract

The processes that sustain community life – especially communication processes – are the matter of community development. As people communicate increasingly online and with mobile phones, it is likely to have an effect on their local social relations and therefore may change our understanding of the nature of local community. This article explores the implications for community development, drawing on material from interviews with a range of practitioners, activists and researchers. It reviews the debate about the quality of remote and face-to-face interaction and shows how attitudes that privilege the latter over the former can be questioned. It goes on to consider the relationship between emotional content and information exchange.

The article then addresses how the technologies are thought to affect cohesion, participation and the generation of social capital. The principle of individual empowerment emerges from a discussion about mobiles, but it is also apparent that the likelihood of serendipitous encounters diminishes. This material suggests the need for a framework by which to understand social encounters and relationships; and in turn this leads to a number of questions about interaction and public space. The technologies appear to stimulate connectivity amongst people where commonality is already established or readily recognised. It is suggested that a closer understanding of the ways in which people interact – remotely as well as in propinquity, through serendipitous as well as scheduled encounters – is fundamental to community development.

Introduction

It's been remarked that 'communication' and 'community' share the same etymological root. The one implies the other: questions about communication are also about the nature and scope of community (Robins, 1989). How we feel about the communities in which we belong affects our sense of quality of life; and that 'sense of community' is itself crucially affected by the quality of interpersonal communication. In order to feel secure about where we live, and be informed about options and opportunities, we need connections to others. Those connections are strengthened by trust, which itself is reasserted by informal interaction in a 'neutral' context – in the street, in shops, parks and other public and civic spaces. If communication is severely constrained, it is not just conviviality that may diminish. Where necessary information is not accessible, or social networks do not flourish, people can easily become excluded and their communities can atrophy (Harris, 1999).

Any significant changes in the nature of communication, therefore, could have implications for community practitioners. This article explores the implications of the widespread, and potentially predominant, use of remote communication for our understanding of the nature of local community. In part, it draws on material I gathered in a series of interviews conducted in 2001 with a range of practitioners, activists and researchers.[1] After a general introduction concerning communication technologies, the paper reviews the debate about offline and online community, and discusses the relationship between emotional content and information exchange. I then consider how these technologies are thought to affect cohesion, participation and the generation of social capital. The principle of individual empowerment emerges from a discussion about mobiles. This material suggests the need for a framework by which to understand social encounters and relationships; and this discussion in turn leads to a brief review of some questions about public space. I suggest that a closer understanding of the ways in which people interact, remotely as well as face-to-face, is fundamental to community development.

Community practice depends heavily on face-to-face interactions of various kinds – one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, formal and informal. Further, we tend to assume that a necessary if not sufficient condition for a well-functioning neighbourhood would be opportunities to encounter others in 'neutral' and civic places.[2] Nonetheless, the predominance of face-to-face interaction may be diminishing, due to increased use of remote communication technologies and a perceived decline in the spatial environment of local and civic interaction. The ways in which new technologies are used challenges some of our assumptions about interpersonal communication at local level, and may contribute to a new context to which community work needs to adjust.

Communication and technologies

With popular use of the internet barely ten years old, we can only just begin to distinguish the features of the evolving 'network society'. The term refers to the emerging social structure that characterises the post-industrial age (Castells, 2000), (Castells, 2001). Networks are of course an ancient human device and resource, but new technologies increase their number, power and potential, perhaps significantly. Castells presents the notion of 'the network' as the distinguishing feature of the foreseeable future, based on network infrastructures that exploit combinations of converging new technologies – wireless telecommunications, data

processing, personal computing and so on. In urban sociology, Wellman and others suggest a shift in interpersonal relations from neighbourhood groups to social networks and 'networked individualism', a transformation partly intensified by the internet:

> 'This shift facilitates personal communities that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging. It is the person, and neither the household nor the group, which is the primary unit of connectivity' (Wellman et al, 2002, p. 160).

As far as remote interaction is concerned, the technologies in question are fixed line telephones, fax, online systems (especially text-based systems such as email, instant messaging and chat-rooms), mobile voice telephony, text messaging and mobile image transmission. Other technologies such as telegrams and citizens band radio have enjoyed passing popularity. Advertisements for picture messaging begin to loom around us. The advertisements still require words to explain the product to us, but some things 'go without saying' and the message now is that remote communication has a new, richer mix – voice, text, and image, separately or in combination. Furthermore, we can now use the same device to communicate either in real time or asynchronously, for those occasions when our correspondents are unavailable, we don't wish to disturb them, or we simply don't want real time interaction.

There are thus three key dimensions affected by these technologies, which in combination may have an impact on interpersonal behaviours: multimedia (the combination of sound, text and image); remote connection or 'telepresence'; and asynchronicity. None is specifically new. What you are reading now is an example of asynchronous remote communication, and an expensive medium it is too. Apart from the infrastructure of print, paper, distribution and libraries, it requires heavy investment in education to learn the basic technology of the alphabet and the written word, and then to develop the skills of interpretation in our civilizations that would be impossible without that technology. As William Mitchell has pointed out, a fundamental effect of the new technologies has been to bring about a substantial, rapid increase in low-cost, remote asynchronous interaction (Mitchell, 1999, p. 138).

These aspects of the network society imply potential changes in the ways in which people share information, send and receive messages, learn,

gossip and interact. All communication implies that sender and receiver already have something in common. This usually includes language and some facts or features encoded in the message. But before the invention of the electromagnetic telegraph in 1837, a necessary element of this commonality was proximity. With the exceptions of semaphore, smoke signals, drums and beacons, all direct communication took place between people at close range; otherwise messages were brought to, or left for, their recipients (Meyrowitz, 1985).

It follows that people's options and opportunities were almost totally dependent on where they were – in particular, on the people amongst whom they lived and worked. Notions of 'community' have evolved therefore in a socio-spatial context which have, until recently, constrained almost all human relationships – the distribution of reputation, coincidental encounter, acquaintance, status and power relations, neighbourliness, friendship, companionship, loving and kin relationships, and so on. This is not to imply that previous societies were necessarily cocooned: it is a question of degree, and the extent to which communities felt the threat of outsiders.

Since 1837 various technologies have eroded this 'law' of proximity by penetrating social customs, barriers and institutions. Electronic messages, as Joshua Meyrowitz tellingly puts it, 'do not make social entrances' (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 117). Meyrowitz's research focused on broadcast technologies and pre-dated the internet. But the penetrative characteristic he highlights can be illustrated in the degree of privacy many children with mobile phones now enjoy – privacy which would have been exceptional in their parents' childhood.[3] Nonetheless, until late in the twentieth century, the dominance of face-to-face interaction was never really in question.

We now find ourselves in the post-modem age with a range of technologies that facilitate remote communication. As with face-to-face communication, they offer one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many, formal and informal options. In some cases, such as many-to-many deliberation over planning issues, it could be argued that the electronically-mediated option offers new strengths and potential. In other cases, such as talking through a personal problem, we might understandably choose the face-to-face option, to get the 'high bandwidth' of body language, tone of voice and so on. 'It's better to be there' as one airline declared in a vigorous advertising campaign following the World Trade Center disaster.

It's timely to remind ourselves how new the experience of remote communication is for our species. As one interviewee noted: 'we have evolved to use our whole bodies to communicate' *(Interview A1 19/6/01)*. In what is, in evolutionary terms, barely a moment of time, we find ourselves adjusting to a world in which we could spend almost all our communicating time in contact with remote others, and potentially none of our time connecting with those around us. Many people find this threatening and discomforting.

Online and offline community

We can theorise a spectrum of 'community', with entirely closed offline membership and interaction at one end (for example a closed-order convent or monastery), and exclusively online interaction at the other extreme (that is, comprising internet-connected recluses). When dystopians express concern about the development of so-called virtual communities, it is the lack of the face-to-face element implied at the latter end of the spectrum that causes disquiet. There still is a common assumption that face-to-face somehow offers a default value, against which any other form of relationship has to be measured.

This theoretical spectrum suggests two points that I want to consider here. First, there are numerous clear examples of genuine community within a wholly or predominantly virtual context.[4] There are also examples of people living in physical proximity where there is little evidence of a sense of community. The notion that community can only be found where people have face-to-face interaction is as flawed as the notion that community is an inevitable consequence of such interaction. As Iris Marion Young forcefully puts it:

> 'I suggest that there are no conceptual grounds for considering face-to-face relations more pure, authentic relations than relations mediated across time and distance. For both face-to-face and non-face-to-face relations are mediated relations, and in both there is as much the possibility of separation and violence as there is communication and consensus' (Young, 1990, p. 314).

The second point is that most of us occupy habitually more than one physical context – for example, neighbourhood and school, or workplace and sports club – within which we may experience a sense of community. Wherever the sense of community is insufficient for our needs in one

context, another context may provide it. An example is where someone estranged from their work colleagues finds solace in regular company in a pub or more formal association of some kind. The assumption, then, that people have a sole context for 'community' that either functions for them or doesn't, needs challenging. In the complex practice of everyday life, our emotions and energies are often played out across a range of demands made on, and by, the overlapping communities of practice, interest, need and locality that we occupy. Only in extreme cases are we likely to glimpse the technologies being used for interaction in a context of physical isolation.

What these technologies appear to facilitate is the generation of network capital, which was harder to do in the age of print. We can now more easily stimulate *connections* that can lead to social transactions – information-sharing, agreements, collaborations, instrumental support, emotional support. There are predictions that where these connections are not supported by face-to-face interaction, they will be weak and social capital will be diminished because of reduced levels of familiarity and trust – what John Locke describes as an 'autistic society' which is uncomfortable with human intimacy. Thus he dismisses the idea of 'virtual communities':

> 'At most they abstractly unite dissociated people. The psychological nature of the hookup – the humanity of it – falls far short of any kind of human experience to which our grandparents were accustomed' (Locke, 1998, p.200) .

Similarly, Ziauddin Sardar argues:

> 'cyberspace provides an easy simulation for the sweaty hard work required for building real communities… .The essence of real community is presumptive perpetuity – you have to worry about other people because they will always be there. In a cyberspace community you can shut people off at the click of a mouse and go elsewhere. One has therefore no responsibility of any kind' (Sardar and Ravetz, 1996, p. 29).

The flaws in these two statements are worth reviewing because they expose some of the issues I want to explore. Both appear to be constrained by either/or thinking – they present online interaction as an alternative, rather than as a complement, to face-to-face interaction, implying that a direct comparison is meaningful. Thus Sardar, using the term 'real community' but apparently referring to neighbourhood, seems

to overlook the fact that local community is often experienced entirely passively (and sometimes confrontationally), whereas online community requires deliberate action. Locke's suggestion that an online community might comprise somehow 'dissociated people' is conceptually puzzling and misleadingly implies that meaningful association between people is a function exclusively of face-to-face connection.

It is also possible that many people find value in online communities of interest partly because they do not find it in their neighbourhood. Further, while it may be the case that building online community (if we could measure its value) is easier unit-for-unit than building local community, that would not mean that online communities are invalid. Many people who find communion among online contacts would regard the claim that in such an environment one has 'no responsibility of any kind' as offensive.

Again, Locke implies that the psychological nature of face-to-face connection is characterised by a higher level of human experience, and that remote interaction is somehow inauthentic. This point was re-enforced in one of my interviews:

> 'I think email is such a narrowband way of communicating. That makes it extremely efficient for certain functions, to do with communicating information. And that includes mobiles, using it for 'where-do-we-meet'. The next level, the enriched communication, involves bodies, the whole body' *(Interview A1 19/6/01).*

By contrast, Adam Joinson has this to say about the reification of face-to-face:

> 'For any student who has sat in a lecture hall with hundreds of fellow students, or a single person who has experienced the quality of discourse in a noisy night club, the notion that face-to-face interaction is inherently more satisfying than a virtual equivalent would no doubt ring hollow' (Joinson, 2003, p. 96).

These views then relate to the question of the perceived quality of the online relationship, and we will return shortly to the question of emotional content. The interviews I conducted were all with people who had experience of online interaction and who had reflected on community development, and they offered views on the *quantity* of interaction, as this example illustrates:

'I don't think the network society differs greatly from the 'un-networked' society in that, in any local community you have a small minority of people who get things done. It's unusual if that group is more than 5%. You then have another group who are the 'turners-up', in addition to the energisers, and then the rest of the community who are the majority. They may bump into the others in the local store. What proportion of the people in that store recognise each other? I think it's very few. I cannot see, unless there is some effort put into changing it, that that gets any different. Of course, a lot of people are quite happy to be left to their own devices, they don't want to be ener-gised. So I don't see why the net should reduce the amount of face-to-face recognition' *(Interview H1 29/5/01)*.

Nonetheless, some interviewees foresaw 'little local difficulties' if there was a high level of remote communication. One exchange with a commu-nity centre manager went like this:

Manager: 'If everyone was spending much of their time communi-cating in a virtual environment, the community centre would die.'

Interviewer: 'Well, why not let the community centre die, if people are meeting their needs from virtual ties?'

Manager: 'No, you cannot meet all your needs from this stuff. People need people. People who come here with major problems, we support them. And when the next person comes through the door with the same problem, the previous person takes up the cudgel to support them. People don't come through the door and say "this is my problem", they come in with something else, they don't present with the issue. And the virtual environment is not a place where you present with your problems. You want to meet people: there isn't enough trust [with the technology]. Our whole culture is based around the messages we get when we meet people, that we don't realise we're getting' *(Interview S 12/4/01)*.

This may be inconclusive – we know that under certain circumstances people *do* present with their problems remotely, on radio phone-in programmes and self-help online forums, for example. But the inter-viewee did not dismiss online as an important medium for many of the centre's users, he was simply asserting an indispensable role for the centre in meeting needs that only co-presence is perceived to be able to satisfy.

Emotional content and informational content

One interviewee argued strongly that we cannot gauge emotional content remotely, and remote communication is thereby impoverished:

> 'Communication is not just about decision-making but also about learning, reflection, rumination. Processes of exchange and mutual influence' *(Interview A2 20/11/02)*.

Emotional content is an essential component in the sense of community, as is the emotional *context* for information exchange. Communication in which there is negligible information content, but a strong interpersonal connection, is clearly supported by the use of mobile phones. Thus for example Licoppe and Heurtin note how in some relationships 'trust is renegotiated with each call' – 'the mobile phone creates a web of short, content-poor interactions through which bonds can be built and strengthened in an ongoing process' (Licoppe and Heurtin, 2002, p. 108).

The development of trusting relationships facilitates information transfer: that's what networks do. This is echoed in work carried out in an ethnographic study of the use of instant messaging (IM)[5] in a work environment, in which it was found that IM 'facilitates some of the processes that make informal communication possible.' They identify 'a set of communicative processes *outside of* information exchange, in which people *reach out* to others in patently social ways to enable information exchange' (Nardi, Whittaker, and Bradner, 2000).

It is important not to misrepresent this link between emotional and informational content, but the distinction can be significant. For example, a 1981 study of residents' reactions to crime in ten neighbourhoods shows that the simple provision of information increased the fear of crime, whereas personal, emotional and instrumental support were more typically associated with a greater sense of security and reduced fear of crime (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981).

Nie, Hillygus and Erbring argue that the benefit of using email to stay in touch with people we might not otherwise contact 'comes at the expense of some of those "real" personal interactions' (Nie, Hillygus, and Erbring, 2002, p. 238). They accumulated time diary data from US respondents to explore the question of whether internet use competes with or complements face-to-face social time. The researchers suggest that such virtual

contact 'may be more superficial than that which occurs in more personal settings.' (There is a now-familiar issue here: just because remote communication can be superficial doesn't mean either that face-to-face can't be superficial, or that online can't be profound. And we should be wary of dismissing superficiality.) They add: 'Although empathy, tenderness, reassurance, flirtation, sadness or happiness can be written into email messages, email misses the eye contact, body language, facial expressions, vocalization, hugs, tears, embraces, and giggles that are the fundamentals of our socio-emotional evolution' (ibid).

In similar vein, Urry stresses that 'co-presence affords access to the eyes' and refers to 'a rich, complex and culturally variable vocabulary of touch' (2002, p. 259). For Urry, 'intermittent co-presence appears obligatory for sustaining much social life' and he asserts the importance of travel as an aspect of social capital.

This brief review suggests that there would be cause for concern, if two conditions were fulfilled: (i) it proves to be the case that remote communication stifles interaction and restricts it to data transfer; and (ii) the use of remote communication comes to dominate human interaction.

The work of Nie and his colleagues belongs in a modern tradition of sociological perspectives on online communication in everyday life, much of it reflected in a recent volume edited by Wellman and Haythornthwaite (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Broadly, this literature offers little support for any claim that meaningful human interaction is stifled by remote communication. Nor do we find such claims endorsed in the growing body of work on the use of mobile devices.[6] There is a third body of literature, which draws on psychological research, and again much of this work has been summarised in a recent volume, written by Adam Joinson (2003) and in a paper by Watt, Lea and Spears (2002). This work offers further insights.

For example, research into the use of online medical support groups shows that electronic social support among fellow sufferers of given medical conditions seems to depend on a close combination of empathy and the provision of information (Preece, 1999, cited by Joinson, 2003, pp. 146–147). Given the ability to use such a resource at any time of day or night – famously illustrated by Howard Rheingold in his early study of a support group (2000 (1993)) – while accessing a broader range of opinions and experience than would usually be available face-to-face, online would

appear to be a hugely beneficial addition to the range of communication options. The fact that much use of health services anyway is highly private, because of embarrassment and potential stigma, reminds us that the sense of community generated in online support groups is a bonus that helps to explain their popularity. And as one interviewee pointed out, it may be false 'to suggest that in the non-networked world, that it's natural and easy for people to have good local support networks… .We have all sorts of people who are dependent on "artificial" support networks, put in place because they need it. Why should the networked environment be any different?' *(Interview H1 29/5/01)*.

Meyrowitz cites Mehrabian's studies of non-verbal behaviour as suggesting that the relative weight people give to messages in face-to-face encounters is 7% to the verbal component, 38% to vocal inflection, and 55% to facial expression. In which case, as Meyrowitz notes, over 90% of the meaning of a message that is delivered face-to-face is derived from expressions rather than 'communications' (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 100).

Perhaps we need to look at this a little more closely. As expressed, the formula appears to equate the proportional 'weight' that people give to messages, with the proportional 'meaning' of the message. But in many cases there might be other ways of interpreting what is going on. It could be that the non-verbal cues do not all carry the same 'meaning,' consistent with the main message, but may include a good deal of noise or additional and distinct meanings. Many comedians make their living out of the inefficiency of face-to-face. A medium that screens out the visual channel provides clearer focus for certain kinds of communication, with (under certain conditions) a much-reduced risk of misinterpretation. In remote systems without the visual channel, as Joinson and others have shown, this may have to do with the sense of anonymity: being anonymous and unseen requires us to put more effort into expressing our thoughts and feelings.

> 'Not being able to see the person you're talking to encourages intimacy and openness… It is not an accident that the Catholic confessional is visually anonymous' (quoted in Kelly, 2001).[7]

As one interviewee commented, 'This suggests that there are other forms of feeling comfortable with people, which do not depend on being face-to-face with them' (*Interview S1, 18/7/01)*.

The question also arises as to whether we will learn to present ourselves online very much as we do offline, if the distinction between the two modes becomes less stark.

> 'If you're talking to someone you pick up non-verbal clues but you don't get those online. That may be a temporary thing, in time we may learn to interpret online' *(Interview D4 20/8/01).*

Perhaps also we have yet to learn to make dependable decisions on our choices of medium because our emotional intelligence has never before been challenged to make these choices.

'You're breaking up': cyberbalkanization and community participation

Projections of the use of online communications imply increasing polarisation through a 'cocooning' effect. In a context where an increasing proportion of human relationships are maintained remotely through 'anytime, anyplace, always-on' connections, a higher proportion of people's connections are likely to be to those with whom they have much in common, and to be largely *about* what they have in common.

This phenomenon has been described as 'cyberbalkanization,' in a paper by Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson (1997). They consider the extent to which, as people come to spend more time in the online world, 'local heterogeneity can give way to virtual homogeneity as communities coalesce across geographic boundaries.' This implies a reduction in face-to-face contact in a context that, crucially, does not require us to deal with diversity. Increasing the volume of interaction which takes place online implies a reduction in serendipity, and a diminution of trust and hence of some forms of social capital.

The assumption is that networks of contacts sustained mainly or entirely online are specialised groupings based on shared interests. As Barry Wellman says, such communities 'can foster cognitive homogeneity':

> 'people are generally drawn to online communities that link them with others sharing common interests or concerns. They may be diversified in their gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, but still encounter only a limited set of topics and ideas' (Wellman, 2000)

Robert Putnam, in his measured assessment of the relation of the internet to social capital, is alert to this issue but regards it as much too soon to know (Putnam 2000, chapter 9). More decisively, he is sceptical of any claim that *local* online networks stimulate social capital, suggesting that a certain level of social capital may be the prerequisite for, rather than the consequence of, any relationship between online and community involvement. In Blacksburg, Virginia, where the community network dates back to 1993, research seems to support Putnam's argument. Kavanaugh and Patterson (2002) found no overall increase in the proportion of the Blacksburg population becoming more involved in the local community. In their discussion they outline the 'latent capacity' argument:

> 'The demands of modern life compete for people's time and attention. Nonetheless, many community members are interested in local issues, and are predisposed or "poised" to be more active… For individuals predisposed to become more involved, the internet and associated community computer networks help to distribute information more widely, more conveniently, and allow for efficient participation in discussion. Thus, the internet capitalizes on existing social networks while at the same time it reaches people "predisposed to be more active"' (Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2002, p. 340).

We can add here the possibility of perceived saturation in community participation, that is, individuals feeling that enough others are involved, and perhaps that causes are not sufficiently desperate, to make a claim on their time. There is certainly a need to ensure that deeper understanding of community development is a feature of any further research in this area.

Mobiles: control and flexibility

These lessons seem incomplete without a thorough understanding of the use of mobile devices, which have had probably a more rapid diffusion than any other technology in history. The key seems to be the diverse potential of the mobile to help people deal with different needs – security, professional contact, information, gossip, emotional bonds, having something to hold, and so on. And of course these devices communicate more than words. For example, the possibility that increased use of mobiles might be associated with a decline in cigarette smoking among young people is explained thus:

> 'The mobile phone is an effective competitor to cigarettes in the market for products that offer teenagers adult style, individuality, sociability, rebellion, peer-group bonding and adult aspiration' (Charlton and Bates, 2000, p. 1155).

Similarly, research in Italy found that the mobile phone was more closely associated with fashion than with any perceived 'communicativeness' as a national trait (Fortunati, 2002). These points serve to illustrate the complex relationship between personal behaviours and the technologies of remote communication.

It is uncontentious to observe that, by increasing communication opportunities, mobiles contribute significantly to sustaining personal social networks, both weak ties and strong. Against this, in one interview I found defiant resistance to their use in public spaces, similar to the use of walkman devices:

> 'The mobile phone culture is intrusive. If people are walking along the street talking on mobiles, they're focused on who they are talking to, and a chance encounter, a nod or greeting, gets missed. You get no recognition, people don't see you. It's anti-social. I think we will learn to be socially responsible, to be more sensible' *(Interview J3 14/6/01).*

Thus, in some senses, the technology of remote communication may only serve to intensify the knotty issues of homogeneity and diversity that are fundamental to community practice. As we have been implying with increased use of online, 'serendipitous connections become less likely' (Putnam 2000, p. 178) and with mobiles they become highly improbable. As Sadie Plant observes:

> 'Rarely stranded incommunicado, the person with a mobile is less exposed to the vagaries of chance, unlikely to be thrown onto resources of their own, or to encounter adventure, surprise, or the happiest of accidents.' (Plant, 2001, p. 63).

Having said that, there may be contrary findings, for example if we come to learn that more women are venturing out more because they feel secure to do so.

Such observations suggest how these technologies offer to users a new level of *control* over their interactions, and make *existing and established* social relations more open and flexible. The evolution of answerphones,

personal rather than location-specific phones, caller identification, voice-mail and so on all contribute to the empowerment of the user. They enable us to some extent to avoid pressured responses, to select correspondents, to control who reaches us and when. This would seem to come at the expense of chance and perhaps diversity. Our use of mobiles reduces the likelihood of serendipitous encounters, unless we supplement our behaviour in other ways.

The power of the internet is less emphatic. It is quite common for people to discover connections online and to develop new, or refresh previous relationships. A good example of course is lapsed ties, the availability of old school friend websites being transformational in this respect.

> 'Would you telephone someone you hadn't seen for five years? Possibly not, but you'd send them an email. If you phone them they might be uncomfortable and pretend they'd like to meet you when they don't really want to. With email, people can control the relationship' *(Interview M1 25/5/01).*

Furthermore, online encounters will be facilitated with the development of 'situation awareness' software, which can reveal who is visiting a given web page, and supports communication between them.

As another interviewee explains, internet technology brings new levels of control of personal social networks:

> 'There are some things you can't *easily* do without this technology. It changes the nature of relationships because you can be part of communities of interest and practice with varying degrees of involvement and commitment. Your involvement and commitment can go up and down. You can distinguish between core people, interested people, and "keeping-in-touch" people. You can opt-in to saying which category you want to be in. You can change your level of interaction, so you can organise personally your relationships and your degree of involvement with different people and networks' *(Interview D2 17/5/01).*

'I spy strangers' – encounters and occasions

The issues we have been considering suggest the need for a typology of encounters and occasions. Such a framework would enable us to distinguish relationships by, say:

- *familiarity* (close ties – first-name – knowing ties – strangers…)

- *freedom of relationship* (coerced – kin – coincidental – voluntary – spontaneous – pragmatic …)

and so on. There is a wealth of material to draw on. For example, Henning and Lieberg distinguish 'acknowledge-contact', 'greeting contact', and 'helping contact' as forms of weak tie. They also recognise in passing the fact that there may be some contacts that an individual wishes to *avoid* (Henning and Lieberg, 1996).

We should also be able to distinguish more systematically different kinds of encounters or 'occasions'. Here we would want to know not just whether contact is face-to-face or remote, synchronous or asynchronous; but also the degree of contrivance, on a spectrum covering

> … coincidence – serendipity – predictable/explicable
> – scheduled/contrived …

A predictable or explicable encounter would be one that might seem slightly coincidental, but is clearly explicable in terms of one or all parties' behaviour: the everyday occasions of the post office queue, taking the kids to school, or walking the dog. Mobile technology facilitates explicable, near-scheduled face-to-face encounters, through what has become known as 'approximeeting'. For example, young people use mobiles to find out who else is in town after school, and then for the precision of meeting up. Mobile and online technologies also allow synchronous or near-synchronous remote conversations, for example with exchanges of text messages, or in online chat-rooms. Again, a developed model would distinguish, for example, between serendipitous interaction with weak ties, and with strangers. We might find that in the network society, the former was increasing but the latter was decreasing.

We should note also the need to understand the conditions of 'dropping in' on friends and neighbours, as a form of unscheduled contact among strong ties. One interview, with three young people, included this exchange:

(A) 'I very rarely just drop in to see someone.'

(B) 'It's become more and more rude to do that.'

(C) 'It's in some way intrusive, because you're doing something else. You have less vacant time.'

(A) 'Your life is more controlled.'

(B) 'The time I'm communicating online isn't time I would necessarily be communicating face-to-face with people I know, with people I've been communicating with earlier in the day' *(Interview Y 11/6/01).*

Why should such a framework be of any value for community development? Because the likelihood of personal interactions can be designed-in to community and civic life, just as it can be designed-out. Victoria Nash has suggested that local authorities carry out 'social mix' studies, to identify the degree of mixing in key areas and to help avoid enclave communities (Nash and Christie, 2003, p. 45). Such studies could be the more powerful if they included an understanding of the varied nature of interactions and encounters. They might take account of how we promote or constrain interactions, and how we accommodate the uses of technologies, in public places.

'Keep your distance' – space and place

All the interviewees made reference to aspects of public space in their understanding of the ways in which we use these technologies:

'There's another issue, to do with time spent outside, an issue for young people. There's a societal change because often there's nowhere safe or secure to go, and kids are using the technology to substitute for lack of socialising opportunities, to create their own communities and maintain them too' *(Interview D3 18/5/01).*

'People will still be out and about on the street, getting a pint of milk or taking the kids to school, dealing drugs or whatever. But I think there will be a reduction in the number of casual social interactions, serendipitous interactions. It's that layer of interaction, bumping into people in the street, a wave, minimal keeping up on news, which keeps

community networks going so that when they are needed they can be brought into action' (*Interview A1 19/6/01).*

'A lot of localities are very atomised. Partly that's because very often there aren't the facilities for people to go to; and where there are, they're not very nice, or dominated by a particular group. Whereas if you've got high quality facilities, that look as if some money's been spent on them, people will go to them, and social relationships will form' *(Interview M2 13/6/01).*

Zygmunt Bauman has offered a brief analysis of spaces that are public yet not civil. They include places that inspire awe but discourage staying; 'non-places,' typified by airport lounges (Auge, 1995); and places that encourage action but not interaction. Indeed, Bauman stresses that the main feature of such places is '*the redundancy of interaction*':

'Public but non-civil places allow one to wash one's hands of any truck with the strangers around and avoid the risk-fraught commerce, the mind-taxing communication, the nerve-breaking bargaining and the irritating compromises' (Bauman, 2000, p. 105).

This seems to be an important context for our understanding of the way in which mobile use might be amending the relation between public and private (Cooper, 2002). If our public spaces are not genuinely civil in the first place, we can hardly be surprised if people use remote technologies to help compensate.

In addition we have to be alert to confusions in our thinking about public space and community space. For example, many commercial places are very communal, while many community and public spaces are exclusive or off-putting. Shopping malls are widely regarded as homogeneous and 'inauthentic,' but this is challenged by Jennifer Light (Light, 1999, p. 115), who notes their communal function. Jane Jacobs famously challenged attitudes to parks (Jacobs, 2000) and Greenhalgh and Worpole report how people use parks 'to be private in a public place' (Greenhalgh and Worpole, 1995). Skelton and others have shown that many young people do indeed still have a street life, of necessity (Skelton, 2000), (Matthews et al, 2000), (Lieberg, 1995). In a survey of young people's use of the street (Matthews et al, 2000, p. 71) 54 per cent of the sample rarely or never had friends visit them at home, echoing the experience of the young people cited above.

'Keep Your Distance': Remote Communication, Face-to-face, and the Nature of Community

Public space then is still in demand, if it is not always civil or community space. The question arises, do the personal technologies of remote communication mean that the use of space becomes increasingly privatised? When we see someone huddle over their mobile in conversation, creating a private space around them and excluding present others from their context, it seems to remove space from the public to the private: is that diminishing the possibility of community?

Concluding remarks

'The communication effects stimulated by new media are probably no less rich, and certainly no less complex than social interaction in general' (Watt et al, 2002, p. 77).

The ways in which people interact are critical to the metabolism of communities. The processes that sustain community life – especially communication processes – serve to crystallise local identity and are the matter of community development. The notion of a well-functioning community (Chanan, 2002) depends fundamentally on how people relate to one another, and social policies that fail to take those processes into account will founder.

The changes that we can anticipate are likely to reflect the ways in which people are inclined to connect anyway. The word 'connect' is important: it covers emotional, bonding ties as well as bridging ties and purely informational communication. New communication technologies apparently stimulate more connectivity between people who already know one another, and new connections amongst those who have something readily-identifiable in common. If serendipitous connections are reduced, or local weak ties are less valued, does it matter? Two key points arise.

First, accommodating the power of mobile connectivity raises questions about working with groups. These are individual-oriented technologies and they enable people to manage their personal social networks with far less recourse to semi-formal groups. But those who lack communication skills, and the facility of making connections with others, face a higher risk of exclusion – in which case group work may be a highly appropriate medium.

Secondly, if the technologies stimulate connectivity amongst people where commonality is established or readily-recognised, does this imply

atrophy and stagnation, or does it not matter? This raises questions about how we promote cohesion and integration, against such forces. Is diversity in jeopardy, as serendipitous encounters become scarce or abnormal? Do we retreat in cliques within the virtual equivalent of gated houses and condominiums – the contact lists on our mobiles functioning as electronic barriers to new encounters and cross-cultural experience? These questions go to the heart of community development because they re-articulate the challenge to explain the relationship between the homogeneous group, displaying solidarity, and the principles of diversity and heterogeneity – between the politics of collective action and the politics of difference (Young, 1990).

While these issues provoke a revision of our understanding of 'community,' Claude Fischer concludes that 'The historical record on changes in community suggests that the effects of electronic technologies are modest' (Fischer, 1997, p. 113). And as cyberspace fiction pioneer William Gibson famously put it, 'the street finds its own uses for things' (Gibson 1981, p. 215).

Gibson's remark refers to the use of drugs, but is usually offered as a telling observation on the social impact of technology. It reminds us that the designed purposes of technologies won't always be matched by their use, because as Castells notes, 'People adapt the Internet to their lives, rather than transforming their behaviour under the "impact" of the technology' (Castells, 2001, p. 128).

And perhaps it is to the street that we should direct our attention. We have seen that the technologies of remote communication increasingly facilitate scheduled encounters, possibly at the expense of serendipitous encounters. High levels of lone car travel, and the decline of local shops, limit the opportunities for local community interaction. The design of streets and other public places needs to embody a community development response, which takes account of the social potential of remote communication. Various phenomena – such as the resurgence of coffee shops, the popularity of televised sport in pubs, even the way in which smokers congregate outside non-smoking office buildings – all suggest a resilient human need for diverse social environments that are charged with the possibility of new encounters.

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Notes

1. The research explored anticipations of the network society, from a community development perspective. A total of 21 people were interviewed, identified on the basis of understanding of new technologies and community development. They included local activists, community development workers, consultants active at local level, young people, futurists and researchers. The work was funded by RICS Foundation (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors) and their generous support is acknowledged, with particular thanks to David Fitzpatrick of RICS Foundation. One of the interviewees requested anonymity and so remarks are not attributed, but I want to acknowledge here the time and thought generously contributed by all those who participated. I wish also to thank Alison Gilchrist for numerous insights during several stimulating discussions, both face-to-face and online.
2. Ray Oldenburg drew attention to the importance of 'third places' and this has been re-enforced in much of the literature on social capital. See Oldenburg, 1999.
3. Computers are also implicated in the development of children's 'bedroom culture': see Holloway and Valentine, 2003.
4. See for example Rheingold, 2000 (1993), Bastani, 2001, Bier et al, 1997.
5. Instant messaging is online computer-based real-time interaction that does not involve users 'meeting' in chat-rooms. It typically involves two users (although often a fluid group) who know one another and it therefore excludes the possibility of serendipitous encounters.
6. See, for example, Katz and Aakhus, 2002, Brown, Green, and Harper, 2001.
7. See also Young, 2000 and Joinson, 2003.

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