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Computer-Mediated Communication and the “Liberated” Sociologist

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It is fitting that I write this essay for an online publication; not only is the online world the place I research – looking at how we create and sustain community and work interactions, at a distance, and via computer media – it is also where I work, meet people, and carry on friendships and family relationships with those both near and far. It would not be possible to do this if I, or we, cling to the notion that interpersonal relations and community can be maintained only in face-to-face settings. Indeed, it requires a “liberated” view to make sense of our new world. And so it is not surprising that a key foundation to my work comes from the sociologist Barry Wellman at the University of Toronto, and more specifically from his seminal work on the “liberated” community. In 1979, before computers had taken over our desks and our lives, he wrote how community can exist “liberated” from geographic space, supported by phones, cars, letters, and airplanes. His notion moves the discourse away from arguments about whether community has been “lost” (as felt by those who longed for the imagined ideals of pastoral times) or “saved” (e.g., by finding community activities in the inner city) to what constitutes community and how that is supported through interactions with others (see also Wellman, 1999).

Once we conceive of and examine the characteristics of community “liberated” from constraints of co-location we can see how it is possible to belong to an online community, maintain long distance relationships, and enjoy personal communities that include people across continents and oceans. We can maintain social relations with others by communicating with them, visiting, inviting them to dinner, driving to their houses, getting to know what they like, sharing common interests – and they can reciprocate by doing the same. Once we see interpersonal ties as dependent as much on communication as face-to-face interaction, we can see how computers support social networks, as outlined by Wellman et al (1996) in the *Annual Review of Sociology* (with myself at the end of the et al’s). However, we also know – after another decade of research – we don’t stop at online. As Wellman noted in his first studies, and now extends in current work (see for example Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002), we do still visit, meet at work, go out to dinner – we mix offline and online to create and maintain our relationships across distance and time.

I started working with Barry Wellman in the early 1990’s when computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the Internet were just making their way onto the public stage. CMC had, of course, been active in many businesses and universities for a decade or more. I had been using email since 1981 in the company where I worked and thus had a full decade of CMC-based life. It was hard for me then, and still is now, to reconcile my experience in this highly CMC-active, international company (high email traffic, plus file transfers, and a shared programming environment) with research that questions

the ability of a text-based medium to support social interaction. In that company, we worked together, socialized, organized, and completed projects – online, via CMC, and across geographic and temporal boundaries – with team members from Paris to Vancouver, around a central core in Toronto. How could others not know and feel the excitement of this immersive community? How could others not know that work could run seamlessly through both online and offline interaction?

It is perhaps from my own longing to return to this ‘pastoral’ CMC environment that I have spent so much time exploring these environments. A decade beyond my experiences in this company I understand how critical mass, local context, and organizational culture created the success of that CMC-based workplace, and how this does not automatically apply everywhere. At the same time, research on CMC use has also evolved: from a focus on human-computer interaction to an inclusion of human-human interaction through computers; from stand-alone computing to computer-supported cooperative work, computer-mediated communication, and social communication networks; from recognition of the role of CMC in creating social structures to explanations of the origins and constant evolution of such structures (I count heavily among my scholarly influences the work of the editors and authors in Fulk & Steinfield’s, *Organizations and Communication Technology*, 1990). The systems and their reach have also changed: from proprietary systems for intellectual and organizational elites at work, to standardized protocols that support world-wide connectivity available nearly anywhere, anytime.

Where do we go from here? Where do these influences and changes take sociology and sociologists in Canada? Probably in many ways, but let me make note of two that affect me personally. First, these changes take us out of the country (although we hope it doesn’t take the country out of us :-). The CMC and Internet revolution make boundaries more transparent, and often totally invisible. The availability of scholarly articles online – whether through publisher’s websites, library access points, or scholar’s webpages – makes it far easier to find (and be found by) others regardless of their location, national or academic affiliation, discipline, membership in organizations, or attendance at conferences. Scholarly activity is more visible and aggregated more by the logic of popular search engines than by the rules of traditional cataloguing or the purchase choices of institutions with limited budgets and geographical responsibility. Moreover, we do mix online with offline; online articles and web pages may lead to email which may lead to collaboration and meetings both virtual and face-to-face. Of course, this change is not neutral. Although there is not room to discuss this at length here, it is probably fairly obvious that attention to the online world has both pros and cons for local scholarship, and can act as both a push and pull on scholars in time and attention given to local versus global activity. Yet, it lets me maintain a strong, working relationship with Canadian scholars both inside and outside Canada. I can choose my colleagues and collaborators by criteria other than geographic co-location.

Second, these changes stretch and challenge the discipline to cross to other fields. CMC and the Internet affect every field, and every endeavor. Their effects are ubiquitous and unavoidable. Even those without access are the focus of study (e.g., in research on the ‘digital divide,’ and on Internet use in developing countries). Sociology has a lot to say about the force and impact of such a change on interpersonal and social interaction, yet the field is not dominated by sociologists. As CMC breaks down geographic barriers, it also may break down disciplinary boundaries. This major new phenomenon is already giving rise to new areas of study (e.g., programs in Internet Studies, social

informatics, information and technology studies). The challenge exists for sociologists to contribute to these new programs, accepting and integrating work from other disciplines, yet applying and making known to others how a sociological perspective can help our understanding of the (virtual) world around us.

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