

**THE INTERNET IN EVERYDAY LIFE: COMPUTER NETWORKING
FROM THE STANDPOINT OF THE DOMESTIC USER**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evolution of the Internet into a mass medium. The focus in this examination is the domestic (home) environment. The thesis provides insight into the ways in which non-professional, “ordinary” users interpret, domesticate and creatively appropriate the Internet by integrating it into the relevance structures and activities of their everyday lives.

The theoretical argument developed in the thesis draws on social constructivism, critical theory of technology and cultural studies to constitute the user as an active and significant figure in the social shaping of the Internet. It identifies everyday life as the main terrain of user activity. It offers a perspective on the place of technology in everyday life and the home combining insights from phenomenological sociology and critical theory.

The empirical work reported in the thesis looks for creative appropriations of the Internet in the daily life of users' homes. The objective has been to grasp the logic of the relationships users establish with the Internet from their standpoint in the actualities of their everyday lives. How and why does the Internet become drawn into subjects' systems of relevance and activities? How is its use related to their social and biographical situations? What are the empowering potentialities and the alienations stemming from domestic Internet use?

On the basis of in-depth interviews and “tours” of the home and computer space of 21 respondents, several types of relationships to the new technology and patterns of inscribing it into the spaces, activities and interactions of the home are identified. The study demonstrates that domestic users engage in a complex signifying process rendering the technology place and function, meaning and value. They generate a repertory of use practices that obtain wider social currency and come to represent a formative strand in the social shaping of the Internet. Drawing

on theory of language, these reoccurring practices are referred to as “use genres” arising in typical situations.

The different user-technology relations and Internet use genres discerned in the everyday practice of the 21 respondents are examined with a view to the degrees of empowerment and alienation implicit in them. It is argued that such a discriminating evaluation represents an important instance of consciousness raising and broadens the field of action and choice open to ordinary people with regard to the Internet.

The thesis concludes that the empowering use genres initiated by everyday users represent a basis for advancing a critique of the reality of technological development from the perspective of the possible. This is a constructivist critique outlining and actively pursuing a democratic counter-project for the shaping of the Internet as a technology and communication medium.

Dedication

**For Dobromir, Peter and Victor,
my parents Deshka and Peter Bakardjiev
and in memory of my grandparents.
Their love has made me who I am.**

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At each step of my work towards the completion of this thesis I have benefited from the generous help of people with whom I have shared smaller or bigger sectors of everyday life. Ultimately, this project materialized thanks to my respondents – the 21 Internet users who let me into their homes and computers and trusted me with their stories. I am deeply grateful to them all for their generosity and candour. I wish to acknowledge the assistance in recruiting participants in my study that I received from Vancouver Community Net's Board of Directors.

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Writing a doctoral thesis is a trial hard enough by itself, but when a change of countries (and actually worlds) is added to it, things can easily get out of control. I survived these challenges because I had the shoulders of a bunch of very special people to lean on. David Smith was like a brother to me and contributed substantively to my work with ideas, feedback and moral support through difficult times. I can never thank him enough. My colleagues Richard Pinet, Ian Chunn, Debra Pentecost, Caroline Newton, Jackie Botterill, Yuezhi Zhao, Diana Ambrozas, Bob Everton, and later also Susan Bryant, Kwan Ramasoota and James Compton, gave me their wholehearted friendship, solidarity, trust and assistance with countless smaller and bigger things. I can, and probably should, write a book thicker than this thesis about what their presence has meant to me. I wish to acknowledge also the support I received from my Bulgarian friends Boyan Belev and Rumiana Ilieva with whom we walked the path of immigration and academic growing up side by side.

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And finally, I would have never ventured into this work, not to speak about finishing it, if I hadn't had the reliable support of my husband Dobromir Rizov who took care of the necessities of everyday life while I was theorizing about it. He and my beautiful, smart and forgiving boys Peter and Victor helped me to put this whole effort into perspective and ultimately, to emerge out of it still a normal human being.

Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication	v
Acknowledgments	vi
Table of Contents	viii
List of Tables	xiii
List of Figures.....	xiv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	
Conceptualizing User Agency: Socio-pragmatics and Critical Constructivism.....	13
Introduction.....	13
The Social Construction of New Communication Technologies	14
Interpretative flexibility.	15
Relevant social groups.	17
Structure and agency.	18
Critical Theory of Technology.....	22
Theoretical sources of the critical theory of technology.	22
Operational autonomy versus subversive rationalization.	25
Raymond Williams: technology, institution and cultural form.....	30
Technology as Text: The Legacy of British Cultural Studies.....	31
Technology as Language	35
Summary.....	45
Chapter 2	
Everyday Life and the Home: Technology in Everyday Life.....	47

Introduction: What is Everyday Life?.....	47
The Schutzian Everyday Lifeworld	49
Spatial arrangement of the lifeworld.....	52
Temporal arrangement of the lifeworld.	53
The social arrangement of the lifeworld: Zones of anonymity.	55
Situation.	58
Relevance structure: imposed and intrinsic relevances.....	60
Social-biographical situation and its pertaining structure of relevances.....	63
Relevance, knowledge and power in the social world.	67
From the “Head World” to the Material World: Marxist/Critical Perspectives on Everyday Life.....	71
Henri Lefebvre: the misery and power of everyday life.....	71
Agnes Heller: particularity versus individuality.	76
Towards a Synthesis: Lifeworld and System.....	83
Technology in Everyday Life: A Critical Phenomenology?	87
Technology in the phenomenological lifeworld.	88
Technology as system.	99
Conceptualizing the Home	104
Summary.....	110
Chapter 3	
Research Design.....	112
Introduction.....	112
The Research Rationale	113
Research Framework	117
Respondent Recruitment.....	122
Data-Collection Procedures	125
The Respondents: Social-Biographical Situations.....	131

Data Analysis.....	133
Summary.....	136
Chapter 4	
Becoming a Domestic Internet User	138
Introduction.....	138
The Home Computer	140
Hooking up	143
Networking Knowledge and Skills: The Warm Expert.....	148
User-Technology Relationship	154
Amplifications and Reductions	164
Chapter 5	
Situating the Virtual: Little Behaviour Genres of the Internet	169
Introduction.....	169
Isolation	171
Dislocation.....	177
Globally Spread Family and Social Networks.....	183
Lack of Intellectual Challenge and Uncertainty or Dissatisfaction with Current Job	186
Sense of Belonging to a Dispersed Community of Interest.....	188
Summary: Little Behaviour Genres of the Internet.....	190
Chapter 6	
Making Room for the Internet.....	193
Introduction.....	193
The Microregulation of the Internet.....	194
The Wired Basement	197
The Family Computer Room	204
Spatial Improvisations: Work versus Pleasure	206
The Gate in the Living Room	208

Internet Parenting.....	217
Summary: Inscribing the Internet	222
Chapter 7	
Virtual Togetherness.....	229
Introduction.....	229
The Virtual Community Debate	232
The Infosumer: The Rationalistic Ideal of Internet Use	240
Instrumental Relations: Rational Interaction	241
People and Ideas in Virtual Public Spheres.....	244
The Chatter: Sociability Unbound.....	245
Community as in Commitment.....	249
Between the Public and the Intimate: Gradients of Immediacy.....	254
Summary.....	260
Conclusion.....	263
Suggestions for Theory: Choices and Mediations in the User-Technology Relation.....	264
Suggestions for Political Practice: Grounded Visions of the Possible	268
Suggestions for Research: Critical Researchers as a Relevant Social Group.....	270
Final Reflections.....	273
Appendix A	
Respondent Recruitment	275
Section 1: Call for Participation in the Study	275
Section 2: Self Description	277
Section 3: Description of the Type of Users Sought	279
Section 4: Contact Information and Instructions	280
Section 5: Interview Arrangements	282
Section 6: Description of the Research Procedures Involved and Informed Consent Requirements	283

Appendix B	
Interview Guide	284
Section 1: Guide to the Individual Interview	284
Section 2: Guided Tour Directions	287
Section 3: Guide to the Family Interview	288
Appendix C	
Respondents Description	289
Appendix D	
NUD·IST Analysis List of Themes	292
References	298

List of Tables

Table 1. Respondents Description.....	289
--	------------

List of Figures

Figure 1. Inscribing of the Internet connection in the domestic space.	225
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Introduction

The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumer of newspaper stories and legends - what do they make of what they 'absorb', receive and pay for? What do they do with it?

(Michel de Certeau, 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 31)

At the time I first heard the words "Internet" and "cyberspace," in the early 1990s, they were already the key words of a mythology. There already existed an ample stock of media and academic texts discussing the new technical and social phenomena these words stood for. My initial reaction was one of pure fascination with the technology and frustration with the inadequacy of my own knowledge and skills. A few months later, taking a course in new media, I had the chance to read and hear quite a few imaginative accounts of what computer networking was going to do for people. And somehow, almost unwillingly, I found myself pestering the teacher with the recurring question: Who is going to pay? I did not mean that in any deep political-economic sense. My puzzlement was simply about who would be interested in experimenting with these technical marvels if their employers were not paying for their connection to the network as is usually the case for professionals and academics.

From where I stood in the early 1990s this sounded like a sensible question. It seemed to me that both the media and the academic discourse regarding the Internet demonstrated a curious inconsistency. These discourses swarmed with sweeping predictions of how computer-mediated communication would transform every facet of society. But at the same time, the image of the Internet user lurking behind those predictions was quite specific: In the case of the mass media this was the "computer geek," the young, dynamic, middle-class North American male, or more rarely, female, excited by everything concerning computers and knowledgeable about them. In the case of the academic discussions, the implied user typically was a university

student or professor, a computer professional or a semi-professional hobbyist. It can be argued that these images indeed represented the first generation of Internet users. The problem for me stemmed from the fact that the picture of the future of the medium and its social definitions circulated at the time were based exclusively on the practices of these early user groups. The emphasis on surfing, game-playing, socializing on chat channels and inventing alternative personae in MUDs¹ along with more “serious” applications enacted by professors, students and other types of knowledge workers characterized the emergent public understanding of the Internet. It was tacitly assumed that the rest of society would follow suit along these lines, captivated by the new possibilities and with no worries about the additional bill.

Something clung false to me in these readings of the medium. Not having grown up with computers and balancing a fragile budget, I was experiencing the burden of time, money and effort needed to acquire computer and Internet equipment and skills. I was also quite doubtful that many people - like myself - juggling work, family and whatever social life remains possible - would find time and be willing to sit in front of the computer to play Dungeons and Dragons, converse online with complete strangers, and purposelessly search the Internet or even, as it became the case later, surf the Web. I could clearly see the changes global computer mediated communication was bringing into the work of graduate students (like myself) and academics as well as to similar categories of information workers. But I was also aware of the fact that the general population did not hold jobs where processing information and knowledge represented the value-adding element that would justify the investment to be made in computer networking.

¹Multi-user domain or dimension; a text-based virtual environment where users can talk and interact with each other.

Over the course of the next few years North American statistics demonstrated a growing rate of Internet adoption.² With all the prevalence of educated and higher-income users factored in (see Industry Canada, 1999b; US Department of Commerce, 1999), this still meant that many non-professional people were going online, buying computers, and paying subscriptions to Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The very notion and practice of the ISP was evidence of the fact that the general population was buying into computer networking in both the figurative and the literal sense. But why? Were they lured by the media hype, brain-washed by advertising and scared by the alleged consequences of computer and Internet illiteracy for their own and their children's future? Were the flashy pages of the booming World Wide Web attracting them beyond reasonable cost-benefit consideration? What were they doing with it?

I could not accept that the thousands of people bringing an Internet connection into their homes were merely dupes, infatuated by the media, political and educational hype. British cultural studies notwithstanding, my East European experience with brain-washing (albeit less skillful than the one performed in the marketing of the Internet) had taught me the power of popular resistance and sheer common sense. So, if the masses of new Internet users were not dupes, they should have been putting the network in some operations of their own. I wanted to know what these applications were and whether the social institutionalization of the Internet, in its capacity as a technology and a communication medium, was taking them into account. So, I felt ready to embark on my dissertation inquiry.

Thus, I defined the type of Internet user that I wanted to investigate as the "simple customer" (Latour, 1987, p. 137), technology's Other, the man and woman not holding expertise and vested interest in the Internet. I further specified my definition of this user as someone who

²See for example AC Nielsen, *The Canadian Internet Survey*, 1996, 1997, 1997 (quoted in Industry Canada, 1999a) Statistics Canada's Household Internet Use Survey, 1997 and 1998 (quoted in Industry Canada, 1999b), the US Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration (1995, 1998, 1999) *Falling Through the Net* reports.

taps into his/her own resources to acquire a computer and pays for the Internet connection to a commercial (or non-profit) provider. I was aware that this category was pretty broad, but it served my purpose at the time: to exclude the early adopters – computer professionals, academics and hobbyists – and to see who the rest were and what they were there for.

The terrain at which I wanted to meet the so constructed user was his/her home. The penetration of computers and modems into individual homes, in contrast to computerization and networking at the work place, was, and still is, a relatively recent development. It has taken on a palpable scale in most western countries only in the last few years.³ At present, however, a domestic orientation is clearly declared by the Internet industry. Marketing addresses the family home as the ultimate recipient of Internet services and products. As an overspill of tele-work and tele-education (taking educational courses at different levels over the Internet), an Internet connection gets installed in more and more households⁴ thus increasing the exposure to the new medium of spouses, children and other family members. In this process, driven by the powerful push from telecommunication, computer hardware and software companies, the Internet gradually takes a stable place in the home and in the daily routines of its inhabitants along with the telephone, television, audio and video equipment, etc.

Has communication research been adequately oriented to this growing phenomenon?

While research on the introduction and adoption of computer networks in production, education and other kinds of organizational contexts has been keeping up with the dynamic developments

³For example, an excellently developed research program initiated by European communication scholars and supported by the European Commission -the European Media Technology and Everyday Life Network (EMTEL) - includes a wide range of studies on the integration of various media technologies into the everyday lives of users in several European countries. When I viewed the program's web site in 1997, still no project focusing on the Internet was reported or planned. (This web site is not online any more.) In this respect, Canada offers a ripe research ground.

⁴According to Statistics Canada, in 1994, 25% of Canadian households had home computers; one third of those had modems. Statistics Canada's Household Internet Use Survey, 1997 and 1998 reported that 39.8% of Canadian households had computers in 1997, and 45.1% in 1998. The penetration of the Internet in Canadian homes for these years was respectively 17.2% and 24.8% (Statistics Canada, 1999).

in these settings (Fulk & Steinfield, 1990; Lea, 1992; Sproul & Kiesler, 1991, to name only a few), precious little research has been done on the adoption of networks in the home. While journalism, advertising, marketing and popular education produce numerous messages enticing the home into adopting and using the Internet, scholarly research has been slow to take an interest in the experiences of people with this medium in domestic contexts until recently.

Indeed, to examine the Internet in the home seems almost antithetical to the bias of the new medium and everything that has been so fascinating about it to communication and cultural analysts. Cyberspace, following Gibson's (1984) evocative image, has been perceived as a synonym of disembodiment, displacement, free floating, transcending spatial limitations and playful engagement with disembodied others in virtual worlds. The home, on the other hand, is the epitome of anchorage, of place, of locale, of materiality and routine. Thus communication researchers have been keenly interested in looking closely at online social phenomena recognizing in the Internet a qualitatively new environment for social action and interaction (representative of this approach are Reid, 1991; Corell, 1995, Jones, 1995 and 1997 and Smith & Kollock, 1999). Studies such as these constitute a strand of Internet research that treats the medium as a culture in its own right. And as Hine (1998) has pointed out, with all the valuable insights that these studies have provided, they stopped short of making it clear how online interactions impact and fit into the offline lives of participants.

The living individuals behind the online personae, especially in their capacity as home-based users, have only recently become objects of more careful examination. An impressive example of a thorough study of domestic Internet use is the ongoing HomeNet field trial carried out by a research team at Carnegie Mellon University (HomeNet, 1999). Starting in 1995, the team recruited a sample of more than 100 households in the Pittsburgh area, supplied them with computers and Internet access and monitored their evolving Internet use over a period from one

to two years. The researchers have collected data through a variety of methods including questionnaires administered before, during, and after one year of use, standardized tests, electronic logs and individual and group interviews. This study has been one of the first, as far as I am aware, to try to establish “what the public is actually doing with the Internet” (Kraut, Mukhopadhyay, Szczypula, Kiesler, & Scherlis, 1998, paragraph 4). The HomeNet researchers have meant this question in a statistical sense. The thrust of their project has been to capture quantitatively what Internet applications the subjects participating in the trial utilize and to what extent. They have also looked for correlations between Internet use variables (for example hours connected to the Internet) and variables characterizing the social and psychological status of individual users and families (for example loneliness, interfamily communication, etc.).

The findings coming out of the HomeNet field trial have led researchers to argue that the public is actually utilizing the Internet for interpersonal communication more than for anything else despite the excitement surrounding the World Wide Web. Ultimately, they have argued, the Internet is a “social and emotional technology,” and that it “sustains social networks” (HomeNet, 1999, paragraph 5). Yet at the same time, the HomeNet data have also been interpreted as demonstrating that extensive Internet use may have negative social consequences. Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay and Scherlis (1998) have concluded that greater use of the Internet is associated with declines in the size of users’ social networks, declines in communication within the family and, for certain categories of users, declines in social support. Heavy users of the Internet, according to the same authors, experience increases in loneliness and symptoms of depression. The results of the HomeNet field trial continue to pile up and the research team’s definitive conclusions are still in the making.

Another strand of quantitative Internet research can be recognized in the rapidly proliferating marketing studies of the domestic Internet “audience.” Market researchers have

rushed to provide information for the growing e-commerce enterprise (see for example ComQuest, 1999a, b). These studies aim to capture the characteristics and the use habits of home Internet users and, on that basis, to give advertisers and e-commerce managers concrete directions about how to maximize the effectiveness of their appeal.

A notably missing piece from the map of Internet research has been the qualitative study of domestic contexts.⁵ We have not even started asking the questions about what all these Internet services *mean* to domestic users: “What do they *make of* [italics added] what they ‘absorb,’ receive and pay for? What do they do with it?” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 31). And equally interesting: what is it that domestic users search for but do not find in the electronic cornucopia?

There are several reasons why I think filling this gap is important. In the home, the physical entry point to the network, we can observe the user as a socially situated individual and interpret his or her Internet-related behavior with a view to the larger picture of his or her life. How is Internet use articulated to the practices that constitute family and community life? Does it help establish meaningful relationships between the individual and the entities of the larger social world? The social and cultural role of the Internet that many have pondered upon can be grasped and evaluated correctly only by a careful examination of this immediate level of engagement of people with the medium.

Another reason why the domestic context calls for qualitative investigation is the fact that it represents the backstage on which the appropriation of the new communication system by self-motivated users takes place. How is the relationship between acceptance and resistance to existing technological and cultural forms played out in the everyday lives of these users? Do

⁵An exception is the study carried out by Bier, Gallo, Nucklos, Sherblom and Pennick (1996) on personal empowerment through home Internet use by low-income families. The project provided resources necessary for “ideal” home Internet use to six low-income families and studied their behaviour for a year through ethnographic methods.

users themselves initiate new technical and cultural forms anchored in the medium? Silverstone and Haddon (1996) have argued that if we are interested in understanding the complete cycle of the social shaping of any technology, we should include user appropriation as an important moment of it.

The invention of alternative functions and meanings, unforeseen by designers and service providers, is particularly vibrant at the present relatively early stage of the social shaping of the Internet. Later in the process, business and political interests could be expected to impose irreversibly their preferred interpretations of the medium on the user population. Alternative possibilities initially evoked by users may die out if they do not fit into the dominant mold. Identifying and documenting these possibilities at the present moment can prove to be of historical and political importance.

But not simply a sense of responsibility to Internet history has motivated the project that will be presented in this thesis. The study of the meanings and what I will call later "use genres" invented by ordinary users can provide the basis for alternative imagining of the medium, a critique of the real with the possible (Lefebvre, 1991). What should the medium be like? What features should it have if the applications and meanings discovered by users are to be taken seriously and at an equal level with the visions and interests of engineers, managers and marketers? Such a reflection can contribute to a democratic process of bottom-up, grassroots-up, building of the new communication medium as a sociotechnical system.

Several theoretical perspectives on media and technology proved helpful offering a stock of productive concepts for my inquiry. These include but are not limited to social construction of technology, critical theory of technology, cultural studies of media and phenomenological sociology. The model of domestication of commodities developed by Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1992) and further elaborated by Silverstone and Haddon (1996) provided a useful

middle-level theory that guided my empirical study of Internet use in the home. While I have tried hard to remain true to the original content of these concepts and theories, I have also appropriated them substantively with a view to my own interests and goals in this project.

In Chapter 1 of the thesis I elaborate a conception of the user as an agent in the field of technological development and new media shaping. In order to achieve this, I weave together the constructivist (Pinch & Bijker, 1987) notion of interpretative flexibility of artifacts, Feenberg's (1991) theory of subversive rationalization and democratic transformation of technology, the concept of alternative reading of texts proposed by cultural studies, and a perspective on technology as language that I develop drawing on Voloshinov's (1929/1986) Marxist linguistics.

Chapter 2 takes on the task to suggest an understanding of everyday life, and the place of the home in it, that combines the insights of phenomenological sociology (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) and critical theory (Lefebvre, 1971, 1991). Phenomenological sociology offers valuable insights in how the everyday lifeworld of the acting subject is experienced and how human action is constituted with regard to the structures of the lifeworld. In this way, phenomenological sociology provides access to the standpoint of the thinking subject moving in and manipulating his or her physical and social environment in pursuit of his or her own projects.

Critical theory, for its part, has the explicit goal to distinguish structures of the social world existing outside the immediate experience of the thinking and acting individual, but never the less crucial in determining the limits and possibilities for his/her thinking and action. Drawing on ideas from both these distinct schools of thought, I attempt to show the dual life of technology as an object in the lifeworld on one hand, and as an embodiment of social relations

of a systematic order, on the other. Technology in the home can be seen against this backdrop as both an invader and captive, a colonizer and colonized.

In Chapter 3, I lay out the methodology employed in designing and carrying out my empirical study of Internet use by non-professional domestic users. The study has an ethnographic character in that it attempts to understand users' technological practices from their own point of view leaning on their own narratives and examining the arrangements and artifacts constituting users' personal Internet-related spaces. The extension this methodology brings to earlier ethnographies of media consumption (see Moores, 1993) consists in the examination of the electronic interiors carved by respondents' Internet use in the memory of their computers.

Chapter 4 considers the process of becoming a domestic Internet user. It exposes the home Internet connection as a complex network comprised of human, technical, cognitive, cultural and ideological components. Examining closely the centrality in this network of what I call "the warm expert," I demonstrate how subjective images of the Internet emanating from users' own experience cross the border of the subjective world and enter the current of social sense-making of the medium. I propose a typology of different user-technology relations formed in the process of becoming and being a domestic user. Each of these relations, I argue, places the user in a differently constituted force field of empowerment and oppression and calls for a different strategy with regard to retaining autonomy and control vis-à-vis the Internet.

The point of stabilization of the home Internet connection in its capacity of a heterogeneous socio-technical network is marked by the discovery by the user of one or more personally meaningful applications of the medium. Chapter 5 examines the nature of these applications that I, borrowing from Voloshinov (1929/1986), term "little behaviour genres of the Internet." I demonstrate the relationship between these genres and specific aspects of the user's social-biographical situation. Underlying these diverse genres of Internet use, I contend,

is the user's own situated rationalization of the technology that might be at odds with the dominant rationality of the medium. A democratic building of the Internet needs to be oriented to these user-initiated genres and consciously render the means for their realization, whether or not they fit into profitable business models.

Chapter 6 focuses on the integration of the Internet connection into the spaces and routine interactions of the family. It looks at the ways in which family members use domestic space and time to inscribe the medium into the systems of values underlying their collective life. The Internet enters differently the job characteristics of different family members and opens new dimensions to their interactions. Meanings and functionalities of the Internet are translated into sets of rules and responsibilities that constitute the microregulation of the technology in the domestic realm. Thus with regard to the foreign technological object, placing becomes appraising and timing is taming.

In the final chapter, I discuss the capacity of the Internet connection to articulate the domestic space to more distant regions of the social world. I am particularly interested in the different modalities in which users construct their involvement with others over the computer network. I question the productivity of two dichotomies established in the scholarly debate concerning these issues, that between virtual and real community on one hand, and public and private space on the other. I discover a continuum of social forms traversing the narrowly private consumptive perception of the medium and the committed participation in robust online groups with their own collective cultures and identities. I argue that the important question with a view to the social shaping of the Internet is not so much whether virtual communities are genuine, but rather whether the medium can extend users' social reach in terms of both knowledge of others and action with them. Can the electronic network make social institutions and organizational bodies more visible and accessible? Can it support networks of sociability

and solidarity of the kinds needed by users struggling to take control over different life circumstances – the unemployed, the sick, the abused, the retired, the silenced, the lonely, the dislocated, those devoted to a cause, etc.? A consumption-oriented model of the medium ignores such questions. A quest for “genuine” community overlooks them.

Generally, the goal of this study is to bring to the fore the heavy signifying work involved in being a domestic user of the Internet. I want to capture the numerous small ways in which people dealing with technology in everyday life make choices between autonomy and subordination or some subtle combination of the two. I want to counter the grand narratives of computer networking with a host of little stories like those people tell each other every day. Grand narratives teach us what is going on. Little stories give us ideas about what to do in particular circumstances. I find little stories empowering.

Chapter 1

Conceptualizing User Agency: Socio-pragmatics and Critical Constructivism

Introduction

In this chapter I will present the understanding of the relationship between technology and society that will underlie my examination of the uses of the Internet in domestic contexts. Drawing on some prominent trends in contemporary social studies of technology, I will attempt to construct a conceptual framework able to accommodate the user as an active and significant figure in the shaping of a communication technology, such as the Internet, and the new social institutions growing around it.

Speaking about the user, I refer to the “ordinary man”⁶ (de Certeau, 1984) and woman who plays no role as a professional (engineer, programmer, designer, etc.) and/or decision-maker in the industrial, commercial or service sectors developing computer-networking technology. This ordinary user has been traditionally seen as the person to whom technological innovation arrives last, but who never the less often represents the “target” of innovation’s products. Many will recognize in him/her the “adopter” of innovation studies. He/she is identical with Latour’s (1987) “simple customer” (p. 137) who receives technological artifacts packaged as a “black box” and is often actively discouraged from examining its content. Critical studies of technology typically define him/her as the powerless victim of technological domination. Due to the chosen perimeter of my study, I will also refer mostly to users who

⁶In the dedication of his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1984) wrote: “To the ordinary man. To a common hero, an ubiquitous character walking in countless thousands on the streets. In invoking here at the outset of my narratives the absent figure who provides both their beginning and their necessity, I inquire into the desire whose impossible object he represents.

access the Internet from their homes rather than from their place of work when different from the home. In contrast with most of these condescending representations of the user, I will try to construct him/her as an active contributor to the shaping of technology. To do that, I will have to identify sources of influence located with the user, that is, to discern the “power of the powerless,” if I may appropriate a phrase coined by Vazlav Havel⁷ (1985) in a different context and in relation to a different object.

The Social Construction of New Communication Technologies

The theory and research of social constructivists (see Bijker & Law, 1992; Hughes, 1987; Latour, 1987, 1993; Pinch & Bijker, 1987) along with the work of social historians of technology (Marvin, 1988; Williams, 1974) has demonstrated convincingly that new technological systems emerge in a process of negotiation and struggle over meanings and material shapes involving a myriad of “relevant social groups” (Pinch and Bijker, 1987, p. 30). The central premise of constructivists is that all technological artifacts exhibit “interpretative flexibility” (Pinch and Bijker, 1987, p. 27) which provides the basis for contestation among the social actors involved in the innovation process.

In a close parallel with the theory of social construction of science, the constructivist approach to technology argues that technical artifacts can be seen as contingent products of the activities of social actors rather than as inevitable consequences of scientific achievements and/or autonomous technological development. The developmental process of technological artifacts is conceived as an “alternation of variation and selection” (Pinch and Bijker, 1987, p. 28) that can be most adequately represented by a multidirectional model. This model shows that the successful variations in technological development have not been the only possible ones and

⁷*The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe.*

suggests that contingency and choice rather than forces of technical necessity, such as physical laws, chart the course of technological history.

Interpretative flexibility.

The concept of interpretative flexibility is an expression of the central constructivist belief that there is not just one possible way or one best way to design an artifact. Artifacts are flexible in terms of interpretation, which makes the process of their design multidirectional. Different social groups have radically different interpretations of the same technological artifact. This circumstance gives rise to technological controversies: different interpretations, problem and solution formulations contend for universal acceptance. Social factors and not intrinsic technical properties of the artifact decide whose interpretation and corresponding design will later stabilize and come to be seen as the best or even the only possible one.

Thus, it is not purely technical criteria that shape the content and properties of a new technical device. It is the interaction between social actors. Hence, it cannot be concluded that a definite design is *naturally* better than its contestants. There are no purely technical, i.e. rooted in natural laws, criteria for making a choice. All choices in the technical sphere are normatively and politically driven in one way or another. By advancing this conclusion constructivists contribute to the demystification of the social and political character of allegedly technologically rational choices (see Feenberg, 1993a).

Under different names, the recognition of technologies' interpretative flexibility has surfaced in social analyses of technology performed under a whole range of theoretical orientations. For example Moores, (1993) from the perspective of British cultural studies speaks about the "multi-accentuality" (p.103) of satellite TV across different households and neighborhood cultures. From the same perspective, Haddon (1992) comes across different

“consumer experiences and readings” (p. 83) of the microcomputer as an artifact Turkle (1984) concludes, on the basis of a psychological study of different user groups, that the computer is an “exemplary constructed object that different people and groups can apprehend with very different descriptions and invest with very different attributes” (p. 320). Not the least, Zuboff (1988) demonstrates the interpretative flexibility of new information and communication systems in her study of their applications at the workplace. “It is here in the realm of choice that technology reveals its indeterminacy. Though it redefines the possible, it cannot determine which choices are taken up and to what purpose” Zuboff states (p. 388).

Feenberg (1993a) has pointed out that the technological indeterminism suggested by constructivists has clear political significance: “in a society where determinism stands guard on the frontiers of democracy, indeterminism cannot but be political” (p. 306). Thus, according to Feenberg, technology proves to be a scene of social struggle. “Clearly, it is no great leap for the SST [Social Shaping of Technology] approach from seeing technology as a social product to seeing it as political,” Mackay and Gillespie (1992, p. 689) concur. Bijker (1993), in response to criticisms accusing constructivism of moral indifference and lack of connection with political practice (for example Winner, 1993), has argued that the pervasively socially constructed character of technology indicates a multitude of opportunities for shaping and reshaping technology (and society). Most importantly, “the deconstructive capacity of recent work can be effectively used to show interpretative flexibility, to suggest alternative technological choices, to debunk the sociotechnical ensembles constructed by the powerful” (Bijker, 1993, p. 130). More concretely, Bijker points out that constructivism could be particularly helpful in the study of nontraditional design contingencies. It can inform public understanding of science and technology and stimulate citizens' participation in the process of democratic control of technology.

Relevant social groups.

The notion of relevant social groups is central to the constructivist project and represents one of the main instruments for translating the logic of technical decisions into the logic of social interaction. It focuses attention on the social actors involved in the process of selection among numerous technical possibilities.

Relevant social groups by definition are:

institutions and organizations (such as the military or some specific industrial company), as well as organized or unorganized groups of individuals. The key requirement is that all members of a certain social group share the same set of meanings, attached to a specific artifact. (Pinch and Bijker, 1987, p. 30)

Thus, consumers and users form an obvious relevant social group, or groups, because the technology or artifact they are using has a meaning for them, albeit not necessarily shared.

The constructivist notion of relevant social groups has been criticized for being dangerously pluralist and for giving the impression that all social groups can be equally active and equally influential in making technical decisions (Winner, 1993). "What about groups that have no voice but that never the less will be affected by the results of technological change? What about groups that have been suppressed or deliberately excluded? How does one account for potentially important choices that never surface as matters for debate and choice?" Winner asks (p. 369).

A careful examination of the definition proposed by Pinch and Bijker (1987) in the light of these critical remarks shows that the concept of a relevant social group does not preclude interpretation and application in the direction pointed by Winner. At the same time, it is true that it does not possess enough sensitivity to bring to the fore the differences in resources and power that different participating (and not participating) social groups have access to.

Does this mean, however, that the social constructivist model will necessarily conceal as much as it reveals as Winner (1993) insists? The notion of a relevant social group is innovative in that it opens a conceptual space where the contribution of diverse social actors can be accounted for. It suggests the possibility that technological artifacts, technologies and with them the ensuing social relations might have been otherwise had the meanings and plans of different social groups prevailed. Although this notion may not provide a direct means for discerning the enduring social structures and the deep-seated political biases that can underlie the spectrum of technological choices (which is an important moment of Winner's critique of technology among others), it offers an insight in how some enduring technical structures have come to being and points to possible sources of change.

Structure and agency.

Another serious problem critics find with constructivist theory concerns its inadequate (to some) account of structure and agency. Constructivists, in Winner's (1993) view, disregard "the possibility that there may be dynamics evident in technological change beyond those revealed by studying the immediate needs, interests, problems and solutions of specific groups and social actors" (p. 370). The point is that the constructivist project pays no heed to the basic social conditions that underlie the activities of technology making, to deeper cultural and economic factors, or in other words, to the constraining dimensions of social structure. In a vein similar to Winner's criticism, feminist scholars (see Cockburn 1992, 1993; Berg & Lie, 1995, Gill & Grint, 1995) have accused constructivism of rendering women invisible and gender irrelevant in the technology-shaping process. By focusing exclusively on emergent networks of social actors involved in the development of a particular technology, constructivist analysis posits women as non-actors because indeed they are empirically absent as a relevant social

group from this process. The enduring features of the social system into which that technology is taking shape including male dominance and patriarchy thus remain out of the circle of problems to be addressed.

If one looks back into the programmatic essay of social constructivism, one will find that the examination of the wider socio-political context in which technical decisions are made is reserved for a later stage of the constructivist research program. After the relevant social groups have been identified along with their perceived problems and solutions at the earlier research stages, the content of a technological artifact has to be related to the wider socio-political milieu, the constructivist plan stipulates. "Obviously, the sociocultural and political situation of a social group, shapes its norms and values which in turn influence the meaning given to an artifact" write Pinch and Bijker (1987, p. 46).

Later constructivist research however has concentrated on the concrete activities of representatives of social groups involved in the creation of new artifacts and has paid only marginal attention to the broader socio-political context. It has seldom explicated how the structural conditions of a relevant social group have affected its interpretations and choices. The need to explicate the structural constraints on the contingency of technical development has been recognized by Bijker in his later work as a key requirement for constructivist analysis. Bijker (1993) proposes the concept of "technological frame" - "the cultural system in which an artifact is set, including exemplary artifacts, as well as cultural values, goals, as well as scientific theories, etc." (p. 123). The frame of reference is constructed and sustained by interactions in the relevant social group. "It provides the goals, and thoughts and tools for action. It is both enabling and constraining" (p.123). Even after the introduction of this more comprehensive category however, it remains unexplained how a technological frame, for its

part, is grounded in less dynamic socio-economic and political conditions of existence of relevant social groups.

A general interactionist perspective transpires even more clearly in this definition and I would argue that this micro-orientation comprises the actual problem of the relevant social group concept. Implicitly, this concept presupposes direct interactions among the members of relevant social groups and among these groups as collective actors. Such a model works well when the historical process of development of a particular artifact is to be captured in its factual detail. It inarguably broadens the historian's horizon in terms of taking into account the relationships of diverse categories of actors and their conflicts and negotiations compared to the research tradition focusing exclusively on the lonely inventor and the research lab. At the same time, this perspective silently commits the fault of substituting the interactional for the social. There are social relationships that never get actualized in the interactional process in which a technology is shaped. Never the less, such relationships form the bedrock delimiting who is considered an actor in a particular situation and who is not, what is possible for actors to think, say and do in the process of negotiation and selection of technical solutions.

The interactionist perspective is also responsible for the inadequate attention paid by constructivist researchers to the role of users in technology shaping. Users are hard to perceive as a social group that shares a common frame of reference because of their dispersed state of existence, diverse cognitive resources, interests and ideologies. Users inhabit numerous invisible everyday-life situations. They have no established forums or channels for interaction with each other and the designers of the technologies they employ. In contrast, researchers, engineers, managers, government representatives, etc. form distinct professional networks. They share cognitive and cultural frames of reference acquired in the course of their education and subsequent participation in a community of practice. Their proposals, negotiations and overall

involvement in technology shaping leave a palpable trail on paper and in technical prototypes. That is why their activities can be easily captured by the interactionist optics, while the activities of consumers or users escape it.

The character of the technologies chosen for investigation also plays a role in determining the scope of the constructivist researcher. Some technologies are employed exclusively in organizational contexts (the automatic lathe, the blast-furnace). Typically, their use is strictly regulated by formal and vocational rules of production. In contrast, other technologies (the microwave, the walkman) penetrate everyday-life and enter a diverse and less structured array of settings. A second distinction can be made between technologies with a high degree of openness for interpretation (the automobile, the computer) versus technologies allowing for fewer alternatives with regard to function and application (the telescope, the vacuum cleaner). It will be logical to propose that technologies that are employed in formal organizational settings and those relatively low in openness are less conducive to user involvement and hence its capturing by research. On the other hand, technologies that penetrate everyday life and invite a diversity of interpretations more often become an object of user creativity. When a technology chosen for investigation possesses this combination of characteristics, it will represent a favorable object for conceptualizing user agency. As the Internet fulfils this condition, it calls for a broadening of the research scope beyond the traditional innovation agencies that may exhaust the range of the relevant social groups in the case of a professional and less open technology.

To sum up, two main deficiencies of the constructivist approach prevent it from becoming the sole framework for conceptualizing user agency in the case of the Internet. The first shortcoming consists in its lack of sensitivity to the power and resource differentials among relevant social groups and its respective inability to problematize the macro dimensions of

technological change. The second problem lies in the fact that the interactionist focus misses the forms of involvement in technology shaping of less organized and culturally uniform groups such as users. In order to overcome these limitations the helpful concepts proposed by social constructivists need to be incorporated into a different analytical framework –one equipped for both appreciating and transcending the level of immediate interaction among the actors involved in the social construction of technology.

Critical Theory of Technology

A theoretical approach to the problem of human agency in the technological sphere that builds on the insights of social constructivism and promises to overcome its recognized limitations is the critical theory of technology proposed by Feenberg (1991). This work is particularly well positioned to advance the constructivist project with respect to a more accurate account of agency and structure.

Theoretical sources of the critical theory of technology.

The Critical Theory of Technology (CTT) rests on the basic premise, shared with social constructivism, that natural laws and purely technical principles by themselves do not determine the shapes of technology. It is social forces that play the decisive role in technological development down to the level of concrete design choices. Feenberg (1991) makes this claim the starting point of an examination of the character of technological rationality. Interests and priorities of social agents, he contends, live under the allegedly neutral shell of technological rationality. This makes technology one of the instruments that insure the systematic domination of certain social groups over others.

Modern forms of domination, Feenberg (1991) argues, are based on a variety of social activities including technologically mediated ones. Hence, the democratization of society

requires radical technical as well as political change. The main task of a critical theory of technology is to explain how modern technology can be redesigned to adapt to the needs of a freer society.

Some limited readings of Marx, Feenberg observes, attribute to him instrumentalist views such as: technology is neutral, technology developed under capitalism can be put in service of the values and purposes of the proletariat. Others consider Marx an economic determinist: it is enough to change the form of ownership over the means of production and a better more democratic society will result. Feenberg finds in Marx's *Capital* a more sophisticated understanding of technology that he calls "the design critique of technology" (p. 34). According to it, "technological progress achieves advances of general utility, but the concrete form in which these advances are realized is determined by the social power under which they are made and insure that they also serve the interests of that power" (p. 34-35). Technology therefore is not neutral. As far as particular interests have shaped it, it carries a class bias and helps to entrench capitalist power. At the same time, technology can take different shapes when put under the control of different social interests. On this account socialism must change the very machinery of production and not just its ownership because class biased technological design would reproduce social domination.

Building on Marx's design critique and Lukács's (1971) concept of reification, Marcuse (1964) has shown that the apparently neutral technological rationality, which reduces human agents to parts of the industrial machine, is in fact political rationality. It is an instrument for imposing and legitimating domination over human beings. In this way, Feenberg (1999) points out, Marcuse's critique of rationality provides "a general framework for a discussion of the condensation of technical and social functions" (p. 70). Marcuse was the first to treat rationality,

including technological rationality, as a social phenomenon and thus opened its concrete forms to sociological examination.

In Foucault's (1977, 1980) work Feenberg finds a necessary concretization of such a sociological study. Foucault examines various practices of social control subsumed under the concept of "microtechniques" (quoted in Feenberg, 1991, p. 70). Some of these microtechniques are materialized in machines, architecture, or other devices, "thus technology is just one among many similar mechanisms of social control, all based on pretensions to neutral knowledge, all having asymmetrical effects on social power" (p. 71).

Both Marcuse and Foucault did not attempt to suggest irrationalism as an alternative of rationality, Feenberg (1991) maintains. They sought alternative forms of rationality that can oppose the dominant one. Marcuse saw the possibility for a qualitative change of society in the reconstruction of its technological base with a view to different ends: "The new ends, as technical ends, would then operate in the project and the construction of the machinery and not only in its utilization" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 232). This suggested the need of a new science, a new form of rationality that would translate values in technical terms as elements of the technological process. Foucault (1980), for his part, asserted that the dominant form of rationality is not the only possible one. It is just one possible form among others. Foucault claimed that the imposition of a rational order gives rise to "subjugated knowledges" (p.81, quoted in Feenberg, 1991, p. 77), which can become the basis for positive social change. In Marcuse's and Foucault's notions of alternative rationalities one can see the roots of Feenberg's own concept of "subversive rationalization" (Feenberg, 1991, p. 92).

Constructivism in the sociology of science and technology informs Feenberg's (1991) theory by providing numerous concrete examples that demonstrate the flexibility of new technical designs and the extent to which their final shape is determined by the cultural logic of

particular human actors. The design problems and solutions offered by different relevant social groups actually represent a number of alternative rationalizations contending for an actual materialization in the new technical device. The contestation among these rationalizations and not a neutral technical criterion determines the final outcome.

From the work of all these theorists Feenberg (1991, 1995) derives his idea of where the locus of resistance to dominant rationality should be looked for. Foucault and the constructivists help him recognize the numerous micro scenes where modern individuals come in touch with technological systems as workers, users, clients, etc. In such points diverse technical micropolitical practices emerge: "Technical micropolitics involves forms of concrete political protest that aim to transform particular technologies through pressure from the grass roots activities of users, clients, victims" (Feenberg, 1995, p. 37). This is one of the most insistent messages of the critical theory of technology, namely that technology is a scene of social struggle, a parliament of things. The technological controversies discussed by constructivists in Feenberg's (1991, 1995) interpretation gain in political and even civilizational significance. They are seen as the exemplary cases of a technical micropolitics that holds the potential for a general transformation of society's technical base.

This brief sketch of the main building stones of the critical theory of technology is now supposed to serve as a platform for identifying these components of the theory that can inform the search for user agency.

Operational autonomy versus subversive rationalization.

Opening meaningful space for human agency in the technological sphere for Feenberg (1996) requires reformulation of what he calls the "technocracy thesis" (p. 34). Feenberg finds the origins of this thesis in Weber's (1958) theory of rationalization according to which

modernity is characterized by the increasing role of calculation and control in social life, a trend leading to what Weber called “the iron cage” of bureaucracy (quoted in Feenberg, 1996, p. 34). The technocracy thesis is the idea that by embracing a rational social order “human beings have become mere cogs in the social machinery, objects of technical control in much the same way as raw materials and the natural environment” (p. 34). From this perspective, it appears that the only possible resistance to bureaucratic technical control can take place on an irrational basis and at the expense of progress and material prosperity (such as for example return to nature, escape in art, refusal to accept the boons of civilization).

Feenberg (1996) seeks to give the technocracy thesis a non-deterministic formulation rooted in what I see as a “critical constructivist” interpretation of technological development. In this interpretation technology can take alternative routes of development leading to different social consequences. This ambivalence of technology can be summarized in two principles: the principle of conservation of hierarchy and the principle of subversive rationalization.

The principle of conservation of hierarchy is realized through the operational autonomy of the powerful, that is, through their capacity to make technical choices that reinforce and legitimate their dominant position and guarantee them technical initiative in the future. The important difference between this principle and the original version of the “technocracy thesis” consists in the recognition that alternative technical solutions exist. It is not the natural victory of the fittest of them that determines the course of technological change but a systematic value- and interest-laden choice made by the technocratic elite.

It follows that the basis for resistance to technocratic domination need not be sought in any non-technological realm and its technologically innocent characters. Rather, resistance consists in the practices of questioning the technical choices made by the powerful and proposing technical alternatives. The capacity for subversive rationalization lies in the hands of

individuals who inhabit a technical system. Such individuals are “immediately engaged in technically mediated activities and able to actualize ambivalent potentialities previously suppressed by the prevailing technological rationality” (Feenberg, 1996, p 45). This “subversive rationalization” holds the promise of democratization in the technological sphere.

The relative autonomy possessed by the dominated inhabiting the technological system Feenberg (1991) calls “margin of maneuver” (p.86). This autonomy works within the system to redefine and modify its forms, rhythms and purposes. It is the source of subversive rationalizations. Subversive rationalizations originating from the margins, Feenberg (1996) says, “may be reincorporated into strategies sometimes in ways that restructure domination at a higher level, sometimes in ways that weaken its control” (p. 48). I will call the first type of response to the system to practices and definitions developed at the margins “appropriation of the appropriators.” This response represents an adaptive and exploitative strategy employed by the powerful in order to appropriate the fruits of the creativity of the margins and dissolve the tensions that threaten to undermine the system’s hierarchical order. An example of this approach can be found in the successful co-optation by corporate enterprise of ideas generated by the alternative technology movement in the 1970s (see Slack, 1984). We are witnessing many similar attempts on the terrain of the Internet - for example the appropriation of the practice of virtual communities initiated by users for the purposes of product marketing and customer loyalty building (see Werry, 1999).

Re-incorporations of marginal rationality that weaken domination remain the actual hope for democratizing technology. When, how and why may such re-incorporations occur? Feenberg (1999) points to three possible mechanisms: technological controversy, innovative dialogue and creative appropriation. Technological controversies “draw attention to violations of the rights and health of those affected by a technological enterprise” (p. 127). The resulting public

pressure calls forth new technical solutions taking into account the demands of the victims. Innovative dialogue brings together the lay and the expert and initiates a process of continuous revision of technology in which technological design incorporates different values and comes to reflect a broader range of interests. An exemplary practice is participatory design.⁸ With creative appropriation, new dimensions of a technology are opened up and widely recognized thanks to the spontaneous inventiveness of its users. Such is the case of turning computer networks into media for human communication as opposed to their original rationally envisaged function restricted to exchange of files and resources (Leinier et al., 1997).

Finally, Feenberg's (1991, 1999) theory relates subversive rationalizations to the variety of human contexts in which technology is implicated. Dominant rationality under the conditions of capitalism is organized around a value system grounded in the context of capitalist production. In this value-system, the maximization of profit takes the leading position. Reification conceals the fact that this is only one among many systems of values and makes it appear the essence of rationality itself. Consequently, capitalist technical rationality constructs technological objects with privileging features that support and reinforce this normative orientation. Other possibilities, other features corresponding to central values characterizing different contexts of existence are either completely eliminated or suppressed in capitalist technological design. However, when a technology is put into practice, it re-enters actual living systems of relationships and must be integrated with the concrete natural, technical and social environment that supports its functioning. This environment may be organized by different, often competing, value systems. This opens the possibility for other social interests and values to intervene in the process of realization and to re-constitute the actual and potential features of

⁸In participatory design, workers and engineers collaborate in teams to design technologies for particular work settings. It represents a user-centered approach to information system development that originated in the Nordic countries with the idea of empowering workers in technologized environments both individually and collectively (see Schuler and Namioka, 1993).

the technology from the perspective of an alternative, “subversive rationality” (see Feenberg, 1999, p. 173-183; 187-189).

The concept of affordances used in technological design studies represents an appropriate illustration of this idea. Affordances refer to what a technical environment offers relative to the person or group perceiving or recognizing that quality of the environment (Gibson, 1979, p. 127, quoted in Mynatt et al., 1998, p. 130). This concept suggests that people and groups situated in different social and activity contexts may be able to recognize different affordances in a technical system or device. I will find another formulation of this idea of transformation through actualization anchored into the defining logics of local social contexts in the theoretical contribution of Marxist philosophy of language in one of the following sections.

To sum up, the simple customers or ordinary users whose agency I am trying to conceptualize are significant players in Feenberg’s scheme outlined above by virtue of their contact with and participation in technological systems. These systems can never exhaustively define the conditions of existence of the subjects involved. People generate interpretations and applications of technological systems that often diverge from the ones originally inscribed in them. These are not irrational modifications as the dominant ideology may see them. Rather, they reflect a practice of rationalization rooted in alternative sets of values and interests. On this basis, users, clients and victims of technological systems engage in technological controversies, innovative dialogues and creative appropriations that aim at reforming technology with more humane and democratic aims in mind. Note that these are not practices of negation, of avoiding engagement with technology, but ones that attempt to draw on unaccentuated or dormant technological potentialities in order to address the needs ignored by mainstream technological development.

Raymond Williams: technology, institution and cultural form.

Opening a bracket here, I would like to point out that the critical constructivist approach to technology and the possibility of its democratic transformation has an early predecessor in the area of communication studies in the face of the British cultural theorist Raymond Williams. In his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams (1974) discusses in detail the social shaping of the paradigmatic communication technology of his time - television. Coming from a critical theory perspective, Williams is aware of the inherited inequalities in terms of power and resources available to the social actors involved in the process. At the same time, he leaves open the possibility for alternative uses of the new technology initiated by subordinate social groups. "Technology opens new dimensions for those perceived as objects, public, market; ... they are exposed to certain uncontrollable opportunities" Williams (1974, p. 74) maintains. The viability of these alternative uses and cultural forms, Williams insists, will be decided in continually renewable social action and struggle.

An important distinction Williams (1974) makes in his discussion of television's social history is the one between a (communication) technology, its institutions and its cultural forms. This distinction escapes accounts originating from sociology of technology and much philosophy of technology for various epistemological reasons. I find this distinction very useful for the analysis of communication technologies in particular because it provides insights into the layered complexity of a communication technology's integration into the social system. It also points to more sources of variability in technological development and its effects, which means it suggests more arenas of struggle and possible change.

The social institutions anchored on a technology are the structures of rules, resources and recursive practices (see Giddens, 1984) that have to grow around a technology if it is to acquire a significant social presence. By cultural forms emerging on the basis of the new

technology of television Williams (1974) meant the new genres of television content production, but also the new structure of the viewing experience - its constitution as a flow rather than as discrete instances of exposure. I find both these aspects of the notion of cultural form necessary as they are closely related and represent the site on which the production-consumption relation is played out. In this sense television cartoons produced to entertain children represent a cultural form, but so does the domestic practice of using television for babysitting. Computer games constitute a cultural form anchored in computer technology, and so does school boys' computer-game talk (see Haddon, 1991). With this formulation in hand, one can easily recognize the possibilities for user activity at the level of cultural form. At the level of institution, user activity manifests itself in regulative controversies and user interventions in political processes related to technological systems' operation in society.

The events taking place at these additional arenas for user activity – institution and cultural form - reflect back on the technical problems and solutions that experts perceive and tackle. The development of the World Wide Web into an advertising and service-providing medium, for example, has oriented the efforts of engineers towards problems like signal compression, security coding, graphical interfaces, etc.

Technology as Text: The Legacy of British Cultural Studies

The school of thought originating from the work of the Media Group at the Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, drawing on the rich theoretical contribution of Raymond Williams, started its inquiry with issues related to the cultural forms of television and other mass media. The studies of mass media audiences performed by the members of the Birmingham group recognized the power of readers as active decoders of media texts, who will not necessarily accept the preferred ideological meaning encoded in the text by

its author. Importantly, the scholars working in this tradition saw the readers as sociologically grounded subjects whose semiotic involvement in a dialogue with the media is shaped by their socioeconomic and cultural position. The cultural studies researchers were committed to establishing a careful account of the balance between the reader's freedom and media power. They pointed out the limits of the range of alternative readings available to audience members and the social and ideological forces that impose constraints on the latter: "Polysemy must not... be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are not equal among themselves. Any society tends... to impose its segmentations, its classifications of the cultural and political world upon its members. There remains a dominant cultural order..." Hall (1973, p. 13) insisted.

In subsequent empirical studies undertaken by Morley (1986) and other members of the Birmingham Media Group, the importance of the contexts in which media content is consumed came to the fore (see Moores, 1993). Researchers' attention was drawn to the role of the "everyday microsettings" (Moores, 1993, p. 34) in which television reception takes place. Their efforts were directed towards understanding the connection between actions performed and meanings generated within these microsettings and the wider structural formations of society. Projects like these gave birth to a trend of reception ethnography within the cultural studies paradigm. The stated aim of this research was to see things "from the virtual standpoint of actual audiences" (Ang, 1991, quoted in Moores, 1993, p. 35) and for this purpose, it had to explore the situational contexts in which media were used and interpreted.

The stock of ideas developed by the Birmingham group was later applied to technologies (mostly of communication) and the involvement of users in these technologies' interpretation. As noted by Mackay and Gillespie (1992), it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to extend the cultural studies approach to the consumption (use) of technologies. The social constructivists' notion of interpretative flexibility already points in this direction. Rather than

media messages, in this case technological artifacts can be perceived as polysemic texts encoded by designers, developers and advertisers and calling for active decoding on the part of users. Here too, striking a balance between freedom and constraint is crucial to the analysis. First and foremost it has to be discovered how much freedom for reinvention and appropriation different technologies offer to users. The relative openness of a technological system for interpretation is an important measure of this. Turkle (1984), for example, has argued in her study of diverse user communities, that this interpretative flexibility (note that Turkle does not use this term) is remarkably great in the case of the personal computer. The openness of the machine allows for numerous readings determined to a greater degree by the personality of the user rather than by any technical characteristic feature of the artifact itself.

Working from within the cultural studies paradigm authors have analyzed communication technologies such as radio (Moores, 1993), television (Silverstone, 1994), satellite television (Moores, 1996) and home computers (Haddon, 1992) identifying divergent interpretations generated by users. Moores (1993, 1996), in particular, has been explicitly committed to ethnographic methodology. Some of the concepts proposed and applied as analytical tools in the work of these researchers can be of relevance to an ethnographic study of the Internet. This refers to the elaborate model of domestication of new media and communication technologies developed by Silverstone and his colleagues (Silverstone, Hirsh & Morley, 1992; Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996). This model is equipped to capture “both the general and the specific dimensions of the ways media and communication technologies are accepted and by extension resisted or rejected” (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996, p. 44).

Along with its numerous helpful components that I will discuss in more detail in following chapters, Silverstone et al.'s (1992) model shows a number of limitations as far as the

analysis of Internet use is concerned. These scholars choose the concept of consumption as the all-embracing label of what happens when a new communication technology enters the home. This choice can be challenged at two levels. First, seeing the home predominantly as a centre of consumption fails to recognize the changing functions of this unit in a post-industrial society. Increasingly, the home is being charged with productive functions, such as work and education, and most recently - tele-work and tele-education, activities representing moments of the social process of production in the classical sense. Thus, new communication technology is often adopted with specific productive applications in mind. It enters the home as a working tool, rather than as a recreational item.

Secondly, the cultural experience generated by the use of interactive communication technologies in the home differs substantively from those brought about by broadcasting media and escapes the characterization of consumption. I would argue that contrary to broadcasting media, interactive communication technologies have demonstrated their potential to serve as tools in a symbolic productive process involving an active exchange between the household and the outside world: the weaving and sustaining of social networks and meaningful relationships of sociability, in which individuals participate as active creators of cultural and political values. In the case of the Internet, users often become providers of content not just for a closed group of friends, but also for the public at large as exemplified by the proliferation of personal web sites with various purposes.

Consumption, I would argue after de Certeau (see de Certeau, 1984, p. 30-31), obfuscates the idea of the active and productive role of the user, of the inventiveness with which he or she enters the commercially offered product into operations of his or her own. That is why, I will follow de Certeau's example and will choose to work with the concept of use rather than consumption.

The cycle of consumption understood in its classical sense would inevitably reproduce the operational autonomy (Feenberg, 1991) of the economically powerful, i.e. their privileged position in choosing the shape of technology most profitable to themselves and imposing it on the rest of society with minor compromises (eventually brought about by marketing studies of consumer preferences). Consumer creativity would be only taken into consideration as far as it maximizes profit.

To be able to envision potential sources for a democratic transformation of technology, the cycle of consumption should be, at least theoretically, transcended. Users, situated in their homes, should be perceived in their threefold capacity of consumers, producers and citizens. For that matter, such a view would be in accord with the way people normally see themselves. The home is not only a centre of consumption but also one of the main sites of everyday life understood as the reproduction of the total social subject and involving an intricate web of relationships and the creative activities that sustain them.

To reiterate, I believe that in order to be able to reveal how users do or could possibly play a role in the formative process of a new communication technology, its institutions and set of cultural forms, the overarching concept of consumption should be replaced by the more open notion of use. Use subsumes consumption of both technology and content, but it also implies that not all forms of use and not for all analytical purposes should be seen as consumption.

Technology as Language

At this point, probably because of the haunting passivity overtones that could be sensed in the concepts of consumption, reading and interpretation serving as central building blocks of the cultural studies' framework, I am tempted to take the metaphor of "reading" one step further. I will undertake an exploration of the idea "what would it be like if technology, and in

particular a complex communication system like the Internet, is conceptualized as language?" This is to say that users will not be seen only as readers, generating their own interpretations of the technical text. They will be thought about as speakers, performing speech acts in which they appropriate the technical medium in order to achieve their own objectives in and onto the world. Benston (1988) proposes this view of technology observing that technology can serve as a language of social action: "The technology available at any specific time provides a range of options for acting on the world.... these options function rather like words in a language" (p. 18). Benston applies this metaphor to argue that contemporary technology represents a language created by men, which limits the action options available to women.

I would like to pursue this metaphor further and explore its implications for the analysis of user agency in the technological sphere. What are the grounds for utilizing an analogy between technology and language? First, as media researchers have observed, it is the specific property of media objects that distinguishes them from all other technologies and domestic artifacts, to "join the private world of the home with larger public worlds beyond the front door" (Moore, 1993, p. 9). But isn't joining the private world of the individual consciousness with the symbolic public worlds existing beyond it one of the primary functions of language? In this sense language is the meta-technology of communication and as such can serve as a general model for understanding any concrete communication system.

On the other hand, similarly to language, complex technological systems are culturally established formal structures of means and rules, or as de Certeau (1984) puts it, "ensembles of possibilities and interdictions" (p. 98) that the user actualizes in his/her individual (concrete) operations. In this way, complex technological systems exhibit the same double-level agency that language does - the forms and functions of the system invented and established by an elite or an anonymous cultural producer become an object of manipulation by practitioners who have

not produced them. The practitioner or user actualizes only some of the possibilities inscribed in the system, moves them about and invents others - as in new, unexpected figures of speech. Thus, de Certeau observes, "Charlie Chaplin multiplies the possibilities of his cane: he does other things with the same thing and he goes beyond the limits that the determinants of the object set on its utilization" (p. 98). This entails a third point in the analogy: acts of use, like speech acts, are at the same time a utilization of the system and operations performed on it. Furthermore, acts of use are characterized by an "everyday historicity" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 20) in that they are inseparable from their circumstances and hence from the contexts of existence of the subjects who perform them.

De Certeau (1984) provides an example of applying the model of language to the analysis of a domain of non-linguistic operations such as the city. "The act of walking is to the urban system what speech act is to language or to the statements uttered," he maintains (p.97). With this proposition, I believe, de Certeau lays the foundation of a general pragmatics, a study of the actualization of formal systems by users under particular circumstances. Following the line of analysis charted by de Certeau, I would argue that the act of use is to the technological system what the speech act is to language.

But once one has embarked on the path of borrowing from linguistics, another theoretical contribution stands out with its relevance to the analysis of technological systems - the framework developed by the Russian linguist Voloshinov (1929/1986) in his work *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*.

In this book, Voloshinov (1929/1986) criticizes the Saussurian approach to language, which he terms abstract objectivism, for creating a false dichotomy between language as a system (*langue*) and its implementation (*parole*), or in other words, between statics and dynamics in language. Perceiving language as an abstract system of stable norms organized

along an internal logic of their own, this approach cannot account for the multiplicity of meanings carried by the word and the constantly changing and socially conditioned nature of these meanings.

At the same time, Voloshinov (1929/1986) objects also to the antithesis of Saussurian linguistics - the Humboldtian tradition that sees language as the continuous flow of the individual creative speech acts produced by speakers. This tradition, according to Voloshinov, demonstrates individual subjectivism in its treatment of language. It postulates the individual psyche, the inner world of the speaker as the source of linguistic activity. Language serves only as material for objectification of this inner world of experience (see p. 84). Thus, a dualism between the inner (the content of internal experience) and the outer (its expression in language) elements and the primacy of the former is taken for granted. This view of linguistic activity, Voloshinov argues, is fundamentally untenable because "there is no such thing as experience outside of embodiment in signs" (p. 85). The experiential, expressible element (the inner world of the speaker) and its outward objectification "are created out of one and the same material" (p. 85). Furthermore, Voloshinov states, the motive force, the organizing element of linguistic expression doesn't lie in the psyche of the individual, but in the social world. This is true at two levels. On one hand, each utterance is determined by its immediate social situation, by the speaker's actual position vis-à-vis the social environment; and on the other, the speaker gives verbal shape to his/her inner experience from the point of view of the community to which he/she belongs.

Voloshinov (1929/1986) proposes a dialectical synthesis transcending both schools of linguistic thought that he critically analyzes. For him, "the actual reality of language-speech is not the abstract system of linguistic forms, not the isolated monological utterance, and not the psychophysiological act of its implementation, but the social event of verbal interaction

implemented in an utterance or utterances” (p. 94). Each event of verbal interaction is itself a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication, which, for its part, is only a moment in the continuous, all-inclusive generative process of a given social collective (see p. 95).

Thus Voloshinov (1929/1986) brings to the fore the complex hierarchy of levels of social activity in which the individual event of verbal interaction is situated. Following from this multi-layered interdependence, a central problem for his study of language arises: the problem of the connection between concrete verbal interaction and the extraverbal situation - both the immediate situation and through it - the broader situation: “Language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers” Voloshinov maintains (p. 95).

From this central thesis Voloshinov (1929/1986) derives his dialectical order of studying language including: (1) the forms and types of verbal interaction in connection with their concrete conditions; (2) forms of particular utterances, of particular speech performances, as elements of a closely linked interaction - i.e., the genres of speech performance in human behaviour and ideological creativity as determined by verbal interaction; (3) a re-examination, on this new basis, of language forms in their usual linguistic presentation (see p.95-96). This order, he argues, reflects the “actual generative process of language” (p. 96):

Social intercourse is generated (stemming from the basis); in it verbal communication and interaction are generated; and in the latter, forms of speech performances are generated; finally, this generative process is reflected in the change of language forms. (Voloshinov, 1986: 96)

Elaborating on the so identified “genres of speech performance in human behaviour,” Voloshinov (1929/1986, p. 96) maintains that the type of structure of these “little behavioral genres” (p. 97) is determined by their coming up against the extraverbal milieu and against the

words of other people. In this sense, the structure of genres can be accidental and unique. However, when social custom and circumstances have fixed and stabilized certain forms in behavioral interchange to some appreciable degree, one can speak of specific types of structure in genres of behavioral speech:

Each situation, fixed and sustained by social custom, commands a particular kind of organization of audience and hence, a particular repertoire of little behavioral genres. The behavioral genre fits everywhere into the channel of social intercourse assigned to it and functions as an ideological reflection of its type, structure, goal and social composition. The behavioral genre is a fact of the social milieu: of holiday, leisure time, and of social contact in the parlor, the workshop, etc. It meshes with that milieu and is delimited and defined by it in all its internal aspects. (Voloshinov, 1929/198, p. 97)

These little behavioral genres bring forth typical forms of utterances and their corresponding linguistic forms thus contributing to the historical generative process of language and its constant evolution.

This selective reading of Voloshinov's (1929/1986) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* does not do justice to the significance this work has for linguistic theory. Actually, most of its central, specifically linguistic, arguments and conclusions are entirely missing from the account offered here. My purpose in examining Voloshinov's theory of language has been to identify those elements and logical lines in it that could be productive in the analysis of technology. The particular goal is to envisage, if not develop, a dialectical understanding of technology and its diachronic evolution that takes into account the generative significance of the process of technology use. Voloshinov's model, I believe, can take us farther than the linguistic models employed by de Certeau (1984) that draw on speech act theory and pragmatics.

Voloshinov's (1929/1986) model is specifically focused on explaining the process of language change as a sociological process involving countless socially situated speakers, practitioners, or users. In Voloshinov's interpretation language evolution exhibits a dual character. On one hand it is determined by the material necessity associated with the basis of

social life including structures of inequality and domination. But at the same time, it is also driven by ideological meanings and values held by social groups of language practitioners. Brought to the level of consciousness and normative reflection, these laws of this process can become free necessity (see Voloshinov, 1929/1986, p.98). Therefore, while in de Certeau's (1984) terms the activity of users is expressed in subversions of the system that, for its part, remains by and large the same, in Voloshinov's (1929/1986) model practitioners' activity results in pressures on the system leading to its gradual change.

How is this analytical model to be applied to the study of (a) technology? What relevance can it have for a system (or systems) whose substantive nature, social function, historical evolution and meaning are so different from the system of language? I will start answering these questions by a simple thought experiment. I will substitute the word (and respectively the idea of) language in Voloshinov's analysis with the word (and idea of) technology.

One will immediately notice that rough analogies can be drawn between the two contrasting approaches to the study of language criticized by Voloshinov (1929/1986) and some of the influential contemporary approaches to the study of technology, even if the opposition between the latter is constituted differently. An evident correspondence exists between technological determinism and Saussurian linguistics (the way Voloshinov presents it). Both represent forms of structuralism conceptualizing technology, and respectively language, as autonomous systems organized in accordance with their own internal laws. The use of these systems is viewed as a separate and subordinated sphere, typically demonstrating compliance with the rules of the formal system. On the other hand, the Humboldtian tradition (again according to its exposition by Voloshinov) of subjective individualism bares some, if not utter, similarity with the instrumental approach to technology. The instrumental perspective finds the

motive and structuring force for developing and using technologies inside the human subject(s). It sees the resulting technical artifacts and practices as an objective actualization of internal human needs (see Feenberg, 1991, pp. 4-5 and 14-15). The fact that human needs and the means for their satisfaction are created out of one and the same material, to recall Voloshinov's insight (p. 85), eludes instrumentalist accounts.⁹

Constructivist interpretations of technological development can be seen as sharing the principal lines of Voloshinov's (1929/1986) semiotic analysis of language, and particularly the idea of the multiaccentuality of the sign (technological in the case of the constructivists and linguistic with Voloshinov). Technologies, for the constructivists, are not just functionally organized structures of physical components very much in the same way as for Voloshinov language is much more than a sequence of physical signals. Both the Word and the Tool are ideological by virtue of the fact that they have intrinsic social value. Let us recall the constructivists' insistence on the artifact having a meaning for a particular social group. The word is a sign that reflects and refracts social existence, according to Voloshinov, and the same can be said about a technical tool.

This refraction of existence in the sign (word or tool) is determined by "an intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community... by the class struggle" (Voloshinov, 1929/1986, p. 23). The reference to social interests and finally class struggle allows us to discover in his framework traces of the same insights with which critical theory of technology in its critical constructivist variation developed by Feenberg (1991, 1995) adds greater sensitivity to the structural realities of a given society to the constructivist picture.

⁹Vygotskian psychology is one school of thought that offers an elaborate model of the relationship between cultural environment, represented by tools on one hand and language on the other, and individual consciousness. The role of the prime mover is categorically assigned to the cultural environment. Interestingly, the contemporary exponents of the Vygotskian tradition equate language and tools (technologies) in their theoretical constructs referring to both these entities by the subsuming term "mediational means" (see Wertsch, del Rfo & Alvarez, 1995).

Ideological hegemony of the more powerful social groups decisively comes into play in the process of assigning meaning to a word or tool. Alternative meanings produced by subordinate groups are never the less an important variable in this process that can be justly perceived as belonging to the cultural dimension of class struggle.

Another aspect in which Voloshinov's (1929/1986) theory points a way beyond constructivist analysis is the aspect of technology use. As I argued earlier, constructivist studies remain predominantly focused on the production side of technology looking mainly into settings where technologies are being created. Everyday use and its implications however are not featured as prominently as one would expect in the constructivist research agenda. In contrast, Voloshinov's model, admittedly because of the character of its object - natural language - emphasizes the constructive role of daily use of the language system and makes the careful examination of the diverse forms of utterances produced under particular social circumstances the centerpiece of his research program.

Applying Voloshinov's (1929/1986) model to technology, the actual reality of technology would be found in the concrete acts of its use, and more precisely, in the social event of technologically mediated interaction between the user, or practitioner, and his/her environment. Such an event is not isolated, but on the contrary, inseparably embedded in the "continuous, all-inclusive process of a given social collective" (p. 96). That is why in the sphere of technology too, as in the sphere of language, one of the central problems to be investigated would be the problem of the connection between concrete events of technologically mediated interaction between user and environment and the extratechnological situation - both the immediate situation and through it - the broader situation.

This leads us to the phenomenon of little behaviour genres, each of which is "a fact of the social milieu: of holiday, leisure time, and of social contact in the parlor, the workshop, etc.,

... meshes with that milieu and is delimited and defined by it in all its internal aspects" (Voloshinov, 1929/1986, p.97). It is my contention that analogous behaviour genres can be observed in the technological sphere where they take on a particular importance. Use genres, in this sense, are coterminous with the cultural forms associated with the *use* of a (new) technology that Williams (1974) identified. In their everyday life, socially situated subjects put technologies into use with a view to the concrete circumstances of their interrelationship with the environment, physical and social. In the course of time, social custom and circumstances contribute to the stabilization of certain forms of technology use to some appreciable degree. In these instances one can speak of specific types of structure in genres of technology use.

Applied to the area of communication technology this would be to say that new generic forms arise not only on the production side of the communicative system anchored onto a new technology (such as for example soap operas or newscasts in the case of television), but on the use side as well (for example typical uses of the telephone such as sustaining long-distance family bonds; checking up on kids by their working mothers, etc.). The meanings that different social groups assign to a technology emanate to an important degree exactly from these genres of technology use, rather than being constructed in some purely cognitive process of abstract reflection. On the other hand, the stabilization of some of these genres and dying out of others is intertwined with the respective process of invention, selection and stabilization of concrete technological forms. It is a formative strand in the constant generative process of technology. Social groups of diverse kind and status are involved in creative invention of genres of technology use that are delimited and defined by these groups' immediate social milieu. Brought to the level of consciousness and normative reflection this involvement can become free necessity.

Summary

Three central points for a research program follow from this conception of technology development extended to include the process of use: The first stage is creating a typology of the use genres pertaining to a particular technology in relation to the specific social situations in which they arise. The second stage includes examination of the course of selective stabilization of some of these genres, their normalization and reinforcement by supporting technical forms as a course determined by power structures and involving ideological hegemony. The third stage aims at identifying possibilities for retaining a richer spectrum of use genres. Typically, this is a question of incorporating in technological forms the creative activity of different user groups on the basis of the recognition of the situated rationality of the use genres they initiate. Users themselves need to be involved at all stages of this research program in their capacity of knowing and acting subjects.

The first of the above tasks belongs to a level of inquiry that I will call socio-pragmatics. It consists in describing how diverse user groups put into use a particular technology and looking for the logic and rationality of the resultant use genres in relation to the parameters of these groups' specific social situations. The remaining two tasks constitute a critical-constructivist level of inquiry which explains how the observed use genres, and most importantly the ones that stabilize in social custom, interact with the development of the technical system under consideration, how they get translated into configurations of technical components. At the same time, it needs to be uncovered how these use genres and corresponding technical configurations fit into the big picture of a given society at a given time. The critical-constructivist level of inquiry has as its final goal the generation of guidelines for more inclusive technological development. Returned to ordinary users, the products of this

research would help make users' participation in the generative process of technology a free necessity.

By combining these two approaches – socio-pragmatics and critical constructivism - the numerous microsettings of technology use, which are themselves embedded in the macrostructures of society, can be accounted for both with a view to their dependence on technology - that is the way in which they are transformed by the introduction of new technological mediations - and to their capacity to leave their imprint on technology's shape. The latter aspect appears to be quite significant to conceptualizing agency in the technological domain, especially with a view to a more refined understanding of the degree of freedom and determination in the relationship between human agents and their technologies.

In the following chapters of this thesis I will make an effort to start implementing this research program by looking at the typical terrain populated by ordinary users – everyday life – and specifically, one of its central sites – the home. First, I will elaborate a detailed conception of everyday life (as the reproduction of the total social subject involving an intricate web of relationships and creative activities) and the place and role of the home within it. Then, I will enter this terrain in order to come to know first-hand some of the common heroes who bring the new Internet technology into their homes and engage in the complex signifying process¹⁰ of ascribing it place and function, meaning and value. I will try to understand the choices of these users against the backdrop of the specific social situations they find themselves in. In this way, I hope to be able to grasp the rationality of the emergent Internet-use genres and to uncover their implications to the generative process of technology.

¹⁰I borrow this term from Kristeva's (1973) essay "The System and the Speaking Subject" in which she advances further the linguistic theory of the Bakhtinian school to which Voloshinov belongs.

Chapter 2

Everyday Life and the Home: Technology in Everyday Life

Introduction: What is Everyday Life?

In this chapter, my goal will be to define the terrain and the specific perspective of my exploration of the Internet. The concept of everyday life is evoked in my analysis in order to distinguish the position of the user of technology, and specifically the Internet, from the organizational contexts in which development, design and production of technology takes place. These contexts are to a large degree centered on the technology itself, while everyday life is centered on the human being that lives it. Everyday life cannot be reduced to the private sphere and the processes of consumption. The analytical power of the concept of everyday life lies in its capacity to embrace diverse types of activity in multiple settings (Lie & Sorensen, 1996).

The design, development and production settings are themselves populated by people living their own everyday lives in which the technology they contribute to creating occupies an important but never constitutive place. But it is not the designers' and constructors' experience of new technology in their everyday lives that will occupy me here. My aim is to analyze the place that the Internet takes in the everyday lives of "simple customers"¹¹ (Latour, 1987, p. 137) and the ways it both affects these lives and is affected in the process.

Among the multiple sites of everyday life where simple customers can be found, the home holds a particular importance, especially in the case of the Internet. The way the medium is constructed now, it presupposes the home as the physical entry point to a global network of

¹¹Latour's (1987, p. 137) describes the "simple customer" as being the user who receives a technological artifact packaged as a "black box" and is often actively discouraged from examining its content.

computers, content and people. In this entry point, we can observe the user as a socially situated individual and interpret his or her Internet-related behavior in relation to the larger picture of his or her life. Both home and everyday life are complex empirical and conceptual constructs. I will examine their multiple dimensions in order to be able to elaborate an adequate understanding of their interaction with technology.

As noted by Waites (1989), the commonplace phrase “everyday life” has had a complex history in social science and has taken on different meanings under the roof of different social theories. It would be an excruciating task to follow all the lines of reasoning and attempt to resolve the debates focusing on everyday life. I will limit my excursion into the study of everyday life to two main schools of thought dealing with the concept of everyday life – phenomenological sociology represented by the work of Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) and critical theory represented by Lefebvre (1971, 1991) and Heller (1984). Secondly, I will discuss two attempts at synthesis of the valuable tenets of both the phenomenological and critical tradition undertaken respectively by Habermas (1984) and Smith (1987). In these two theoretical frameworks, the phenomenological tradition serves as a means for conceptualizing an acting and thinking subject, situated locally in an immediately experienced world, while the critical tradition supplies the means for transcending the actually observable individual world and understanding the higher-order social relations that organize it.

What I hope to gain from this theoretical survey is a concept of everyday life that will allow me to embrace the full scope of the terrain at which users become involved in the generative process of technology¹² and to discern the characteristic mechanisms of this

¹²Recall my adaptation of Voloshinov’s (1929/1986, p. 96) model of the “generative process of language” in Chapter 1.

involvement. This will subsequently help me draw a precise map of where to look and what to pay attention to when I investigate concrete cases of Internet use.

I would hypothesize that users appropriate and reinvent technology by way of their everyday living (and here the analogy with language intrudes again) and not by a scientific-technological practice, that is by conscious engagement with issues related to scientific principles and technological design. In Schutzian terms this means that most users appropriate technology without stepping out of their everyday lifeworld into a different “finite province of meaning” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 23) such as the “scientific-theoretical attitude” (p. 24). Rather, technology (the Internet) becomes creatively employed as a tool in mastering different social-biographical situations with a view to the actor/user's pragmatic interest. At the same time, a communication technology incorporated into the structures of the everyday lifeworld alters the experience of the social world as well as the horizon for action. But saying all this, I am already evoking Schutzian vocabulary, which needs to be understood as part and parcel of his system of phenomenological sociology.

*The Schutzian Everyday Lifeworld*¹³

The work of the Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz provides a rich and meticulously developed conceptual vocabulary to think about what he called “the everyday life-world” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 3).¹⁴ Schutz constructs a model of the various structures of the everyday lifeworld that can serve as an analytical tool for describing and understanding the significance of the numerous transformations that these structures undergo as a result of the

¹³I use the spelling “lifeworld” as one word throughout this thesis. Note that the spelling of the term used in Schutz & Luckmann (1973) is “life-world.” I have preserved this spelling in direct quotations from this book.

¹⁴This book represents an anthology of Schutz's thought prepared and published after his death by Thomas Luckmann.

arrival of new communication technologies and media. Concurrent with these transformations are changes in subjects' horizons for action and experience of their own place and power in the social world. Schutz's conceptual apparatus will help me also to grasp the logic of the advancement of the Internet and in particular its adoption and appropriation in the home from the standpoint of the domestic user him- or herself.

Schutz defines the everyday lifeworld as "the region of reality in which man [*sic*]¹⁵ can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by means of his animate organism" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p 3). The everyday lifeworld is the terrain on which man experiences other people (fellow-men) and communicatively constitutes a common surrounding world with them. The everyday lifeworld is "man's fundamental and paramount reality" (p. 3).

Furthermore, in the attitude of common sense, or in Schutz's term - the "natural attitude" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 4), the everyday lifeworld is taken for granted. Everything man experiences within its limits is "unproblematic until further notice" (p. 4). The everyday lifeworld comprises not only nature as it is experienced by the subject, but also social and cultural entities. It includes material objects and events, but also meaning strata "which transform natural things into cultural objects, human bodies into fellow-men, and the movements of fellow-men into acts, gestures and communications" (p. 5). In other words, the everyday lifeworld is the immediate material and social reality in which the subject is immersed, but not as it is seen by an outside observer, rather as it presents itself to the subject him/herself through the prism of an inherited (and itself unquestioned) cultural system of meanings.

Of particular importance to the project that I am developing in this study is the fact that the everyday lifeworld in Schutz's definition, in its totality as natural and social world, is the

¹⁵The problem of gender bias in language will recur throughout this chapter as many of the sources I have used predate the awareness that is now the norm in scholarly writing and publishing. I will stick with the original language of the works from which I draw.

arena, as well as what sets the limits, of human reciprocal action. "The life-world is above all the province of practice, of action. The problems of action and choice must, therefore, have a central place in the analysis of the lifeworld" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 18). Importantly, the lifeworld is thus a reality which we modify through our acts and which, on the other hand, modifies our actions (see Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 6).

Our actions in and upon the everyday lifeworld are shaped by our understanding of it ("to the degree necessary") given to us in our "stock of knowledge." This stock of knowledge is comprised by all our previous experiences, including our immediate experiences as well as those transmitted to us by our "fellow-men" (above all parents, teachers and so on). Our stock of knowledge provides us with the reference schema necessary for our explication of the world. Brought into relation to this schema, the objects and events that confront us in the lifeworld are placed into a set of typifications; we experience them as mountains and stones, trees and animals, etc. (see Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 6-7).

Several of Schutz's (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) concepts regarding the everyday lifeworld will be discussed in what follows with a view to their relevance to this study. Schutz's models of the spatial, temporal and social arrangements of the everyday lifeworld provide a useful basis for examining the transformations of the everyday lifeworld of a person brought forth by technological mediation. Furthermore, Schutz's notions of situation and relevance structures provide a way for gaining a systematic understanding of local action contexts as they present themselves to the acting subject. The relevance that the Internet acquires for users in their particular action contexts lends itself to a thorough examination and explanation thanks to this conceptual apparatus.

Spatial arrangement of the lifeworld.

Schutz distinguishes between two main spatial dimensions of the everyday lifeworld: the world within actual reach and the world within potential reach. The “world within actual reach” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 37) is the sector of the world which is accessible to the subject's immediate experience, it embraces actually perceived objects and objects that can be perceived through re-focusing of attention. This is the place where the person finds him/herself, his/her actual “here” and starting point of orientation in space, the “Zero” point of his/her coordination system.

Sectors of the world that were once in the subject's actual reach compose the province of his/her “restorable reach” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 37), experienced as such due to the belief (idealization) that what was once done, can always be done again. Thus, this province transcends the sector within actual reach and represents a dimension of the world within potential reach, confirmed as such by the experiences of the past. Another dimension of the world of potential reach is characterized by orientation toward the future. This is the province of the lifeworld that has never been in the subject's reach but can be brought within it. Therefore it constitutes the “world within attainable reach” (p. 38). This province, or zone, of the lifeworld is particularly interesting to the present study because it is bound on one hand by the “grades of ability” (p. 39) given to the subject that are physical, technical, socio-structural, and on the other - by his/her own biographical situation and the hierarchies of plans for action derived from it.

Thus, the world of attainable reach will be quite extended for the business executive who lives and acts in the time of air travel and from the standpoint of someone who has important plans to realize in a distant part of the world. Applied simultaneously to the subject and his/her fellow-men, this system of spatial arrangements becomes an important aspect of social relations. As Schutz points out, it “enters into the differentiation of intimacy and

anonymity, of strangeness and familiarity, of social proximity and distance..." (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 41). This relationship is valid if taken the other way around too: the social differentiation according to intimacy and anonymity, is an important aspect of the subjective experience of the spatial organization of the lifeworld. A city that I have visited and am familiar with feels closer no matter where it is located; a good friend whom I know well feels closer, meaning also within potentially restorable reach, no matter how far away from me her life circumstances have taken her.

With regard to action, these dimensions of the spatial arrangement of the lifeworld take the shape of differentiated "zones of operation" (p. 41). Simply put, within the world of actual reach and as a subsection of it there exists a zone which the subject can influence through direct action - the zone of operation. Further, Schutz draws a distinction between the "primary zone of operation" - the province of non-mediated action and the "secondary zone of operation" and the corresponding "secondary reach" (see p. 44) - the province of mediated action which finds its limits in the prevailing technological conditions of a society, and which is being dramatically enlarged with the advance of technology and its penetration into the everyday lifeworld. Schutz clearly recognizes the broad variation of secondary zones of operation within the limits of a single society. Social structures and the position a subject occupies within them determine differential access to the technologically possible.

Temporal arrangement of the lifeworld.

The three most important aspects of the temporality of the lifeworld are "permanence/finitude," the "fixed course of temporality/'first things first,'" and "historicality/situation" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 50). These aspects derive from the permanence of the world on one hand and the subjects' finitude within it:

I know that there are limits to my duration. The relevance system of the natural attitude is derived from this: the manifold, mutually interwoven systems of hope and fear, wants and satisfactions, chances and risks that induce men to master their lifeworld, to overcome obstacles, to project plans and to carry them out. (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 47)

Thus the knowledge of one's finitude is the foundation of the subject's projects within the framework of his/her life-plan.

The second aspect - fixed course of temporality - derives from the intersection of subjective time (stream of consciousness), biological time (the rhythm of the body), world time (the seasons) and social time (the calendar). The incongruence of events in these different dimensions imposes on the subject a time structure within which he/she has to arrange the temporal course of her affairs according to degrees of urgency, that is, postpone one thing and concentrate on another in each particular moment.

The succession of events in the outer world is imposed on me in my corporeal rhythm and in the social calendar.... All of the "unimportant" interludes, partial acts, etc. which for example I can pass over in my daydreams, are necessarily elements of my life in everyday situations in which nature and society, including their temporal structure, give me "resistance." ... The imposed, fixed course of the temporal structure affords a plan for the day alongside the life-plan determined by my finitude ... it depends importantly upon the principle of "first things first," the fixed courses of events in everyday existence. (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 48-49)

Finally, historicallity/situation refers to the realization that one is born into a particular historical situation which is only a moment of the historicallity of the social world, but which one cannot exchange for another.

These three aspects define the "unalterable limits" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 49) circumscribing the taken-for-granted basis of one's dealings. They work together with the spatial aspects of the lifeworld to define the "province of the practicable" (p. 50), that is, the representation in one's stock of knowledge of the zone in which one can act. Importantly, this province is limited both by the ontologically unmodifiable structures of the lifeworld and by the

“technologically practical” (p. 50) as it appears in one’s particular historical and biographical situation.

The social arrangement of the lifeworld: Zones of anonymity.

I experience other men in various perspectives and my relation to them is arranged according to various levels of proximity, depth and anonymity in lived experience. The breadth of variations in my experience of the social world extends from the encounter with another man to vague attitudes, institutions, cultural structures and humanity in general. (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 61)

Schutz (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) describes the social structures of the lifeworld, those involving other human beings, starting from the most immediate experience of an Other with whom I share a sector of lifeworld’s space and time at a particular moment. When I turn my attention to the Other and grasp his/her existence before me in spatial and temporal immediacy, a “Thou-orientation” (p. 62) is established. When the thou-orientation is reciprocal, that is - I turn to you as you do to me - a “we-relation” is established. The people falling into the zone of my actual reach are termed “fellow-men” (p. 62). This category refers to the people with whom one is in a face-to-face encounter.

We-relations are established at different levels of nearness, depth, engagement, coordination, mutuality, or in sum - immediacy. The we-relation with any concrete other in any concrete situation is determined also by our existing stock of knowledge and the “typifications of men” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p.63) that it contains. At the same time, this stock of knowledge is created and further expanded by each concrete we-relation we engage in. In each we-relation the intersubjectivity of the lifeworld is developed and continually confirmed as the lifeworld is not a private or an additive construct, it is the “world of our common experience” (p. 68). Within the world of our common reach, I can test the adequacy of my interpretative schemata by referring to the objects in our common surrounding.

Pursuing further the different “gradations of immediacy” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 69) found already in the we-relation, or face-to-face encounter, Schutz moves into more remote zones of the social world, those populated by “contemporaries.” This term refers to “those other men with whom I do not actually have a we-relation, but whose life falls in the same present span of world time as mine” (p. 69). Our experience of contemporaries is qualitatively different from that of fellow-men. This difference consists in the dramatic decrease of the “abundance of symptoms through which the conscious life of the other is accessible to me” (p. 69). Therefore, contemporaries are experienced as “types” (p. 75) to which certain attributes, certain function and behaviour is ascribed. These types display various degrees of anonymity, which again, becomes the variable according to which the world of contemporaries is stratified: personal types, functionary types, typifications of social collectivities. The anonymity of a typification is inversely proportional to its fullness of content, which, for its part depends on the origin of the typification - was it inferred from immediate experience of an earlier fellow-man; or was it a learned generalization of social reality.

The degree of anonymity of an individual social type, in the end, depends on how easily the relation constituted through it can be changed into a we-relation. “The sooner I can immediately experience the typical characteristics of someone as properties of a fellow-man, as components of his conscious life, the less anonymous is the typification in question” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 81).

Thus the immediate encounter with a fellow-man and the mediate experience of a highly anonymous social type represent two poles between which there are many intermediary forms. At this point an analogy between the spatial and the social structures of the everyday lifeworld becomes obvious. The structures of attainability and restorability characterizing the spatial arrangement of the lifeworld can be recognized in the subjective experience of the social world

as well. Based on this complex graduation of immediacy constituted by the various degrees of restorability and attainability of a once-existent or achievable we-relation, the structure of the social relationships between contemporaries emerges.

At least two questions come to mind with a view to this elaborate gradual movement from immediacy to anonymity of the experienced social world. First, it would be an interesting mental exercise to reflect on how different technologies and the respective media of communication affect the social arrangement of the lifeworld in terms of variations in its degree of anonymity. Does television make the institutional reality of politics less anonymous to me by presenting the faces and characters of the candidates in a parliamentary election? Does a telephone conversation with a representative of the taxation office bring this institution into a closer degree of immediacy?

It is clear from the outset that media are implicated in a re-charting of the zones of anonymity of the experienced social world. Mass media, for example, enlarge the number of types of contemporaries of whose existence I know in general, that is, whose existence I can infer on the basis of my knowledge of the social world as reference points of typical social functions. Thus, a question to be addressed in the analysis of the experiences of Internet users would be how this medium restructures the social world perceived by users. What transformation does it induce in the structures of immediacy and anonymity?

“The sooner I can immediately experience the typical characteristics of someone as properties of a fellow-man, as components of his conscious life, the less anonymous is the typification in question” Schutz states (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 81). Anticipating the analysis of the empirical data of this study, I will posit here that the configuration of the different levels of anonymity of typifications will be affected by a new technology (medium) of communication increasing the ease with which relation constituted through an individual or

collective social type can be changed into a relation of a lower degree of anonymity and ultimately in a (quasi) we-relation. Entering a process of mediated communication with representatives of social institutions and collectives cannot but reduce the degree of anonymity of these previously abstract social entities. This fact has lead analysts to ascribe the Internet a potential to overcome social distances and barriers very much along the lines of the logic which led McLuhan (1964) to envision a “global village” (p. 93) created by the media of broadcasting. Looking at the actual experiences of users in later chapters I will attempt to establish, and possibly qualify, the validity of such claims.

In summary, the Schutzian (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) structure of zones of anonymity organizing the social world is fundamentally determined by the probability and ease of mutual transformation between the we-relation (immediate face-to-face experience of a fellow-man) and the they-relation (the grasping of a contemporary by the means of typifications). This structure is interesting to my analysis with a view to the reorganization it undergoes as a result of changes in the mechanisms (implicating communication media) of transformation between these two different relations. My hypothesis is that by changing these mechanisms, a new communication medium contributes to important restructuring of the social world experienced by the subject (user of the medium), his/her perception of his/her own place in it, and consequently, his/her capacity for action vis-à-vis this world.

Situation.

In every moment of conscious life, I find myself in a situation. In its concrete contents this situation is indeed endlessly variable: on one hand because it is biologically articulated, so to speak as a “product” of all prior situations; on the other hand, because it is relatively “open,” that is it can be defined and mastered on the basis of an actual stock of knowledge. It is unalterably “delineated” by the embedding of inner duration in a transcending world time and as a consequence of the inseparability of the body into a structure of the life-world which is imposed on the experiencing subject. (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 100)

The course of life is a series of situations. The situation is partly “imposed,” partly “feasible” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 114) for the individual to define - these are two related dimensions of every situation. Elements of the situation that are imposed on the subject or otherwise unalterable include the ontological structure of the world, the structure of the subjective experience of the lifeworld; biographical imprints, i.e. the specific prior history of the situation; the biographically articulated stock of habitual knowledge of skills, of practical knowledge, and knowledge of recipes.

To be able to act in a situation, I must determine it (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). The imposed elements of the situation automatically enter into its determination, but the situation is also open and I have to determine the “open elements” (p. 114). Fundamentally, Schutz claims, the open elements of a situation can be explicated without limit. Every situation has an “infinite inner and outer horizon” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 114). This means it can be explicated according to its relation to an unlimited number of other situations and experiences, its history and future (outer horizon) and at the same time it is internally divisible without limit. Practically however, every situation is only limitedly in need of explication. The plan-determined interest, which is derived from the hierarchy of plans in the course of life, limits the necessity for the determination of the situation.

The situation needs to be determined only insofar as it is necessary for “mastering” it (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 115). The plan-determined interest selects the “open elements” of the situation which are to be determined in more detail against the background of the predetermined elements and limits the process of explication to that which is practically necessary. The determination of the open elements of the situation occurs also with the help of the stock of knowledge brought into the situation. Depending on the levels of this stock of knowledge involved in the determination of a particular situation, situations can be classified

into “routine situations” (p.115) - only habitual knowledge is drawn upon, the situation is unproblematic. In contrast, “problematic situations” (p.116) contain open elements that have to be consciously correlated with my stock of knowledge. New elements of knowledge have to be acquired or existing ones have to be brought to a higher degree of clarity.

The plan-determined interest determines the choice of the elements of the situation to be determined and also the point at which the exposition can be broken off (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). The plan-determined interest is included in the situation and is to a certain extent “swept-along” (p. 115) by the situation and modified. On the other hand it is incorporated in a hierarchy of plans. This means that it is subjectively experienced as a task or goal with a certain level of urgency. This urgency derives from the system of priorities in the course of life, which is ramified in subordinate systems for the course of the day, for work and leisure, for everyday reality and also for other provinces of meaning.

Relevance structure: imposed and intrinsic relevances.

The plan-determined interest organizing each situation is also responsible for determining relevance structures - that (object, feature, concept) which is experienced as relevant in a particular situation (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). The plan-determined interest at hand orients the subject’s attention towards different aspects of the situation with a view to the “mastering” (p. 116) of that particular situation. Thus, different areas of the subject’s knowledge as well as objects and properties of his/her material and social environment come to the fore as relevant. Schutz distinguishes four regions of decreasing relevance, or “zones of relevance” (Schutz, 1970, p. 111). First, this is the part of the world within our reach which can be immediately observed by us and also, at least partly, changed and rearranged by our actions. This is the “zone of primary relevance” (see Schutz, 1970, p. 112) that requires an optimum of

clear and distinct understanding of its structure. In this zone we apply know-how, the technique and the skill and also the precise understanding of why, when and where to use them.

Second, there are the fields mediately connected with the zone of primary relevance, but unlike it, not open to our domination. These fields – “zones of minor relevance” (Schutz, 1970, p. 112) - can provide “ready-made tools” (p. 112) for the accomplishment of our goal, or establish conditions affecting the implementation of our plans.

Third, there is the zone(s) which for the time being have no connection with our interest at hand. These are the relatively irrelevant zones which we can simply take for granted and not be concerned with unless significant changes occur in them that can create risks or new opportunities with regard to our interests and plans. The fourth zone is the field(s) of “absolute irrelevance” (see Schutz, 1970, p. 112). No possible change occurring in these fields can - so we believe - influence our objective at hand. These zones or regions of various relevance, Schutz emphasizes, are not separated from each other with clear-cut borders. On the contrary, they penetrate each other and overlap creating intermediate transitional areas.

Characterized from a different perspective, relevances can be subdivided into systems of “imposed” and systems of “intrinsic,” or “volitional” relevances (Schutz, 1970, p. 113), which again, in daily life, are intermingled with one another and never found in a pure state. The intrinsic, or volitional, relevances are the outcome of our spontaneously chosen interests and goals, those that are within our control. Along with them another system of relevances exists - one that has been imposed on us by events and situations over which we have no control. This is the system of “imposed relevances” (Schutz, 1970, p. 114).

One such system of imposed relevances is produced by the relevance structure prevailing in the social group or culture of which the individual is a member. Given its cultural hierarchy of values, every social community establishes its own hierarchically ordered “domains of

relevance” (Schutz, 1970, p. 115). These domains of relevance are culturally transmitted from one generation to another and are often institutionalized. While it is true that the nature and order of these socially constituted domains of relevance is in a continuous flux, the individual, in every particular moment, acts in a social world providing a particular structure of domains of relevance and has to orient him/herself upon them.

The notion of relevance will be evoked in my further analysis of Internet use with a view to questions concerning situations and plan-determined interests which draw the Internet into the zones of primary relevance of subjects. It will be interesting to determine the type of relevance - intrinsic (volitional) or imposed - that this medium obtains for residential users. Ascribing intrinsic relevance to the medium can be seen as a central moment of its creative appropriation. Furthermore, I see in Schutz's notion of intrinsic and imposed relevance an analytical tool to be employed in the investigation of the microdimensions of power in everyday life.

Another interesting question to be addressed refers to the Internet's potential to affect the balance between intrinsic and imposed relevance in everyday situations. Could it be the case that the new medium offers users possibilities for transcending the narrow horizons of socially imposed relevance and discovering aspects of daily situations that are relevant and exploitable with a view to intrinsically determined plans and interests? Or, on the contrary, the new medium could be functioning as yet another vehicle for imposing socially established relevances on the subject. To the degree to which it supports the pursuit of intrinsically determined interests and goals, it will demonstrate a liberatory potential; it will contribute to the democratization of everyday life. And on the contrary, if imposed relevances are further reinforced by the medium - then its capacity to enforce the existing social order (including the hierarchical order of domains of relevance) will be revealed. Sorting through the collected empirical data I will use the

concepts of imposed and intrinsic relevance to characterize the different relationships users establish with technology.

Social-biographical situation and its pertaining structure of relevances.

Schutz, in my reading, meant the concept of situation as the immediate here and now of the acting subject who defines the unit of time and space he/she inhabits at each particular moment on the basis of the interest and goal selected as a priority: "it is the province of what is open to me now to control" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 111). In this micro sense, my situation at this moment is determined by the prioritized goal of producing a piece of text which is supposed to pave the way towards completing my thesis and thus represents a minuscule component of my hierarchy of plans for the day, the year, and my life as a whole. This situation is biographically articulated because my past actions performed in prior situations - enrolling in an academic degree program, choosing a dissertation topic, studying the literature on this topic, choosing a supervisor, etc. have brought me to this point. Elements of the situation that are imposed on me include the nature of a piece of text (it has to be conceived and articulated in writing by its author as opposed to growing out of a seed that the author buries in the soil or some other mode of coming to existence), the language in which I am writing, the requirements of my degree program, the character of the literature I am drawing on, etc.

Open elements of this situation, elements that are feasible for me to determine are those particular ideas and links between them that I will choose to consider and/or express in my text; the exact words I will use, the breaks I will decide to take, the possibility of turning this text into a conference paper, etc. My computer is drawn into this situation, it gains what Schutz (1970) calls "minor" (p. 111), but I would rather refer to as "secondary," relevance. The computer is not a focal element of my situation at hand - my plans and subsequently my attention are not

focused on the computer or computer technology itself. But at the same time, I find in it a useful ready-made tool for accomplishing my primary goal. In this case I don't need to know how my computer works. I only need the skills of typing, formatting and saving text which I have acquired at some previous point and which make the computer (in its word processing function) a "transparent" technology to me. My computer/computer technology as experienced in this situation belongs also to the system of relevances imposed on me. In the social group of actual and aspiring academics where I belong, producing your text on a computer is a matter of convention. By the same token, the computer is constituted by this group - with regard to its typical values and derivative goals - primarily, although not exclusively, as a word-processing machine.

This situation is quite different from the situation I found myself in half an hour ago when I experimented with an Internet based conferencing system trying to create a forum, a virtual club, where I could meet with my group of high-school friends. My priority at that moment was the goal of maintaining my membership in a community almost lost because of distance. That situation also had its cluster of imposed elements such as the geographical distance between my friends and I, my socially and biographically articulated need to be in touch with them, etc. My computer and my Internet connection then represented a situational aspect of volitional, intrinsic relevance. I was orienting myself to it willingly and consciously in my search of means for mastering the situation. By doing this I was creating a minuscule precedent of constituting the computer as an emotional, community-sustaining, social machine.

With a view to my following analysis of Internet use, I would like to propose a second concept of situation rising above the microscopic, to a higher level of generalization. I feel I need a concept that refers to larger units of space/time and a corresponding higher level in the hierarchy of subjective plans and interests. Schutz himself distinguishes between "the basic

temporal structures of inner duration in which the meaning of... experiences becomes constituted” on one hand, and on the other “a superimposed signification level of temporal articulation” with a broader scope (see Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 56). I would like to reserve Schutz's notion of social-biographical situation for these broader temporal spans of everyday life whose meaning is constituted against the background of categories formed intersubjectively and established within the “relative-natural world view,” the culturally constructed structure of meanings and values. These categories are socially imposed on the individual and interiorized by him/her. Examples of such categories are the formal structures of childhood - youth, maturity, old age; unemployed - unskilled worker - skilled worker - professional; poor - economically comfortable - rich; disabled - in poor health - healthy; all the variations of married life and family, etc. These are, Schutz maintains, “historical formations of meaning-bestowing categories” experienced in the natural attitude as taken for granted articulations of the course of life” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 56-57).

This notion of social-biographical situation will represent the backdrop against which I will try to make sense of the individual Internet-related experiences of the respondents in my study. Different aspects of their situations (which in principle can be explicated without limit) will be drawn into the foreground when determining the relevance of the Internet to their lives. Thus I will not be confined to predetermined social attributes that may be considered responsible for Internet adoption such as level of education, occupation, income, gender, etc. I will be able to gain insight into a wider variety of situational factors that make the new medium relevant and attractive to users.

Corresponding to social-biographical situations of this higher level are interpretations and projects whose scope of meaning is the course of life. In my present social-biographical situation, I am a graduate student, my major project is to finish my thesis and get a job. But

from another perspective, I am a middle-aged woman, mother and wife, daughter to my parents, member of my community and social networks, and I have on-going projects related to meeting the responsibilities and enjoying the pleasures pertaining to these aspects of my situation.

Transposing the logic of Schutz's exposition concerning the immediate situation, that I will call "the situation at hand," I will posit that at any time of her life a person finds herself in a social-biographical situation. This situation can be described in conventional social categories such as the ones listed above - referring to economic, occupational, family, health, etc. status and role, stock of cultural and experiential knowledge. But at the same time this situation is relatively open and can be explicated without limit, or indeed within the limit of the plan-determined interest for that unit of time.

The temporal articulation of the course of the day, and the temporal articulation of the course of life, exist together in a reciprocal relation (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). On one hand, the biographical articulation is superimposed over the rhythm of the day - as in the case when I reflect on past periods of my life or when I project plans of a greater scope for the future. On the other hand, reflections and projects spanning longer durations are inserted into the inner duration in the scope of the day: I have to spend this day writing as I have to ensure the completion of my thesis, a project spanning a longer period.

To sum up, taking up an existing ambiguity in Schutz's notion of situation, I have introduced a distinction between situation at hand, the micro-level of pragmatic orientation, at this particular moment in the person's immediate zone of operation, and social-biographical situation. The latter represents a signification level of temporal articulation with a broader scope, a higher-level juncture in the hierarchy of plans differentiated vis-à-vis the socially available types of biographies on one hand, and the individually constructed plan for one's life, on the other.

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By introducing the second interpretation of situation, I make a few assumptions that are at odds with action theories contrasting plans to situated action as for example Suchman's (1984). I grant the individual a potential for conscious reflection and planning of a life course that, to me, is synonymous with personal efforts (no matter how effective or viable) to be in control of one's own life. However, this potential too exhibits a fundamental situatedness. Plans that individuals make for the course of their life at every particular moment are rooted in their specific, both socially and individually articulated, social-biographical situation.

Like situations at hand, social-biographical situations obtain their specific systems of relevance that can be analytically divided into zones of primary and secondary relevance, relatively irrelevant and absolutely irrelevant. The two types of relevance - intrinsic and imposed - are of particular importance here as they represent temporarily more stable structures compared to the systems of relevance with a view to the situation at hand.

Relevance, knowledge and power in the social world.

In a 1946 essay entitled "The Well-Informed Citizen An Essay on the Social Distribution of Knowledge" (see Schutz, 1964, p. 120), Schutz presents an example of an inquiry into issues of social distribution of knowledge and power in relation to the notions of imposed and intrinsic relevance. He starts from the premise that the presence of an Other within our zone of actual reach, that is the sharing of the same zone of actual reach with an Other always results in a certain number of imposed and (shared) intrinsic relevances. No matter how close our common goals may be, there are always intrinsic relevances for one partner that are not intrinsic relevances for the other, rather become imposed relevances for him/her. But the more the other becomes anonymous and the less his place in the social cosmos is ascertainable to the partner,

the more the zone of common intrinsic relevances decreases and that of imposed ones increases, Schutz maintains.

Modern society is characterized by extending reciprocal anonymity of social partners. Our social situation is to a lesser degree determined by relations with fellow-men (individual partners within our immediate and mediate reach) and more by highly anonymous types of contemporaries. Our degree of control on the social relationships we establish is reduced to a minimum. Most of the determining social relationships in which we are implicated extend beyond our immediate zone of operation. An important consequence of that is our being, at least potentially, subject to "remote control" (see Schutz, 1964, p. 129). Anonymous agencies that we know little or nothing about impose relevances on us. Modern technologies of communication and mass (remote) destruction contribute significantly to this state of affairs. This is how Schutz describes the situation of the subject in modern society:

Our own social surrounding is within the reach of everyone, everywhere; an anonymous other whose goals are unknown to us because of his anonymity, may bring us together with our system of interests and relevances within his control. We are less and less masters in our own right to define what is, and what is not, relevant to us. Politically, economically and socially imposed relevances beyond our control have to be taken into account by us as they are. Therefore, we have to know them. But to what extent? (Schutz, 1970, p. 239)

Looking for an answer to this question, Schutz constructs three ideal types representing different levels of knowledge: "the expert," "the man on the street," and "the well-informed citizen" (Schutz, 1970, p. 239).

The expert's knowledge is restricted to a limited field but within that field it is clear, distinct, systematic and based on warranted assumptions. The man on the street has a working knowledge of many fields that are not necessarily coherent with one another. "His is a knowledge of recipes indicating how to bring forth in typical situations typical results by typical means" (Schutz, 1970, p. 239-40). This knowledge is vague, superficial but still sufficient for

the practical purposes at hand. In matters not connected to practical purposes, the man on the street accepts his sentiments and passions as guides and establishes with their help a set of convictions and unclarified views which he simply relies on as long as they do not interfere with his pursuit of happiness (see Schutz, 1970, p. 240).

The well-informed citizen takes an intermediary position between these two ideal types. He does not aim at possessing expert knowledge. At the same time, "he does not acquiesce in the fundamental vagueness of a mere recipe knowledge, or in the irrationality of his unclarified passions and sentiments" (Schutz, 1970, p. 240). He strives to arrive at "reasonably founded" opinions in fields which, as he knows, are at least to some extent of concern to him although not bearing upon his purpose at hand.¹⁶

The man on the street is preoccupied exclusively with his zone of primary relevance. He accepts imposed relevances as given elements of the situation and does not question their origin and structure. The expert is absorbed by a single particular system of imposed relevances - that of his area - which he has embraced as his own intrinsic relevances. He is ready to assign to another expert every problem that lies beyond this system. The well-informed citizen does not have a predetermined domain of relevance. At any moment, he finds himself placed in a position belonging to an infinite number of possible frames of reference. He restricts the zone of the irrelevant to the minimum as he realizes that it can be imposed tomorrow as a primary relevance, it may turn out to be "the home of the anonymous powers which may overtake him" (Schutz, 1970, p. 242). In every situation, he has to choose his interest and to investigate the zones of relevance adhering to it as far-reaching as possible in order to form a reasonable

¹⁶All three types keep house together in each one of us with respect to different areas of knowledge.

opinion and choose a course of action. For that purpose, he has to look for information and knowledge.

Although Schutz (1964) does not consider this theme in his essay, it can be argued that the media of information and communication are deeply involved in the formation of the different types of knowledge existing in society. Traditional mass media have proven their importance in distributing and enforcing recipes indicating “how to bring forth in typical situations typical results by typical means” (Schutz, 1970, p. 240). A prominent example of this function is advertising. They have also been occasionally successful in bringing to the attention of the man on the street unsuspected zones of relevance lying beyond the scope of his immediate reach - as in reporting national and international events that may affect the immediately experienced world of the subject.

What will be the role of the Internet vis-à-vis the three types of knowledge Schutz (1964) discerns in society? Will it be the source of a new recipe paradigm replacing the presently dominant forms of mass communication? One can imagine “the man on the street” (Schutz, 1970, p. 239) retrieving ready-made how-to procedures that he does not need to understand with a few clicks of the mouse. Or will the Internet be a new stimulus and instrument in the hands of the well-informed citizen for forming reasonable opinion in diverse situations and resisting “the anonymous powers which may overtake him” (Schutz, 1970, p. 242)? Will it expand the scope of relevances perceived by users in their everyday lives? Will it nurture the well-informed citizen or the man on the street in a user?¹⁷ The implications of the Internet for the social distribution of knowledge will be one direction of analysis of the empirical data of this study.

¹⁷The answer to this question depends critically on what kinds of cultural forms and content will emerge on the Internet and how the medium will be perceived by different user groups.

From the "Head World" to the Material World: Marxist/Critical Perspectives on Everyday Life

Henri Lefebvre: the misery and power of everyday life.

Lefebvre (1991) started his inquiry into the quotidian (everyday life) with the conviction that he was developing a Marxist sociology. He contrasted his approach to the preoccupation of Marxist philosophers and thinking people in general with the political drama of that time acted out in "higher spheres" (p. 6), such as the State, parliament, policies, etc. Lefebvre's interest was in the "humble everyday base" (p. 6) of politics; in matters related to food, housing, rationing, wages, the organization and reorganization of labour. Lefebvre was at pains to grasp and articulate in a definition the "difficult to define and yet essential and concrete 'something' that 'just a quarter-of-an-hour alone' with a man from a distant or extinct culture would reveal to us" (p. 7). In contrast to descriptive historians and ethnographers however, Lefebvre's goal was to develop a *critique* of this elusive something. He could not be satisfied with the detailed accounts of the application of modern techniques in everyday life, for example. He wanted to discover "the real social process beneath an accumulation of technological detail" (p. 9).

Lefebvre's (1991) critique set off from the premise that (1) technical sophistication of everyday life through the introduction of gadgets works simultaneously towards the deprivation of everyday life of previously valued properties - something had to be given up (especially by peasants and working-class families) in exchange for the gadgets of technical "progress;" (2) modern technical progress realizes a critique of everyday "from within" (rather than through dreams, poetry, art). This is the critique of "the real by the possible" (p. 9). This is a criticism of technology and society from the perspective that there exists a wide range of alternative

possibilities. Much of “what is humanly possible” (p. 233) to achieve through technical progress in actuality is precluded by the choices made by the powerful.¹⁸

But before everything else, what is everyday life for Lefebvre (1991), where is it to be found? The obscurity of this notion, Lefebvre claims, stems from the fact that bourgeois society (capitalism, modernity) differentiates and separates from each other previously blended elements of human life - work and leisure, individual and community, public and private consciousness and spheres of activity. But that is exactly the reason why the concept is of a special sociological value: everyday life involves all these discrete elements; it is their unity and their totality, and “it determines the concrete individual” (p. 31). Everyday life, in the end, stands for:

“what is left over” after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by the analysis, and must be defined as a totality.... Everyday life is profoundly related to all activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum of total relations which make the human - and every human being - a whole takes its shape and its form. In it are expressed and fulfilled those relations which bring into play the totality of the real, albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc.... The substance of everyday life - “human raw material” in its simplicity and richness - pierces through all alienation and establishes “disalienation.” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 97)

The critical study of everyday life, then, becomes a vast inquiry looking at professional life, family life and leisure, public and private activities, in terms of their many-sided interactions. The goal is to extract “what is living, new, positive - the worthwhile needs and fulfillments - from the negative elements: the alienations” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42).

The central notion serving as a tool for performing a critique (as opposed to mere description) of everyday life for Lefebvre (1991) is the Marxist concept of alienation. The

¹⁸This idea is in fact very similar to Feenberg's (1991) argument in his *Critical Theory of Technology* (see Chapter 1).

source of alienation is the commodity relation in which the product of worker's labour acquires independent existence and comes back to confront the worker as an alien power. Productive labour, the essential activity in which man's powers are realized, becomes external, alienated from the worker, governed by an autonomous external agency which he, the worker, cannot even know. This results in a relationship of the worker to his own activity as something which is alien and does not belong to him, a relationship of self-estrangement, of loss of active human will and spontaneous creativity. Thus, estranged labour reduces man's conscious being to a mere means for his physical existence, depriving his life of what is essentially human (see p. 59-63).

Lefebvre (1991) discusses the forms of alienation in political life, where the State takes on a power superior to the life of society. Leisure and recreational activity can also be alienated to the degree to which they are constituted as distraction, compensation for work, and escape. Social organization takes over this allegedly spontaneous need and its related activities, directs, shifts and modifies it in alienating forms.

No form of life or activity however can be touted as inherently alienating, Lefebvre (1991) claims. Complexes of heterogeneous activities making up people's everyday lives have to be examined in their historical concreteness. The notion of alienation has to be applied to concrete situations in everyday life. Only on this basis the distinction between what is "life-enhancing" (p. 82) (opposite to alienated) and what is alienated can be made. This is the task of the "critique of everyday life" (p. 83) - to promote a critical and self-critical consciousness, higher than "the consciousness exerted when we make the occasional uncomplicated choice" (p. 83) of action in everyday life.

The result of such an investigation is, Lefebvre (1971) concludes, a "sort of contrasting diptych" (p. 35), where the first panel represents the misery of everyday life and the second panel portrays the power of everyday life (see p. 35). This double-sidedness of everyday life, the

bifurcation in its character will persist in further critical studies and deserves a closer look. Lefebvre provides a long list of illustrations for both sides of the quotidian. Its negative content revolves around the tedious tasks and humiliations to which the working class is subjected by virtue of capitalist social relations - preoccupation with bare necessities, abstinence, hardship, and suppressed desire. The positive content stems from the ability to create "from the solids and spaces of everyday life, to make something lasting for the individual, the community, the class, the reproduction of essential social relations..." (p. 35).

At the heart of this distinction between the positive and the negative content of everyday life is Lefebvre (1971) extended notion of production, which, I would argue, represents one of his most important insights. He draws on the early work of Marx to challenge the narrowly economist notion of production and to endow it with a "more forceful and wider significance" (p. 30). In this interpretation, production is not merely the making of products:

...the term signifies on the one hand "spiritual" production, that is to say creations (including social time and space); and on the other material production or the making of things; it also signifies the self-production of a "human being" in the process of historical self-development, which involves the production of social relations. Finally, taken in its fullest sense, the term embraces reproduction, not only biological (which is the province of demography), but the material reproduction of the tools of production, of technical instruments and the social relations into the bargain... (p. 30-31)

The notion of production thus acquires its fullest significance as the production by a human being of his/her own existence. Everyday life emerges as the sociological point of interaction and feedback between all the different types of production. From this perspective, then, even if an individual's involvement in the process of social production taken in its economic sense is marked by alienation, still a whole range of diverse productive activities remain open at the level of everyday life for his/her free and creative engagement. Forms of alienation may have encroached on some of these activities (for example leisure) as well, but

that is exactly where the “critique of everyday life” enters the picture as a method for critical evaluation of social and individual practices and a search of directions and sources for change.

It is very difficult to compare the Schutzian concept of the everyday lifeworld with Lefebvre's (1971, 1991) materialistic critical concept. In the first case the everyday lifeworld is an ideal construct, an attitude, a standpoint from which the subject perceives and acts. Its structures are ontologically unalterable, no matter that they can take on different content in different historical times. In this sense, the Schutzian concept of the everyday lifeworld makes no claim to suggesting directions for change at the individual or social level. Its very essence is its taken-for-grantedness.

In Lefebvre's (1991) version, everyday life represents palpable dynamics of matter and energy, and most importantly, of “human raw material” (p. 97). It is one definite section of the material social world seen from the perspective of and chosen as a focus by an observer - the section which represents “the meeting place of all human activities, their bond, their common ground” (p. 97). In Schutzian terms, this can be recognized as the zone of “working.”¹⁹ Here we reach a point where the phenomenological and the critical studies of everyday life strike an implicit agreement - everyday life is the terrain at which the individual is an actor physically and mentally involved in producing, in its widest sense, the social world and his/her own self. Schutz is interested in how this terrain is experienced from within the acting individual's head, while the critical materialist scrutinizes this terrain from outside, after having abstracted it from all “distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities” (p. 97). The phenomenological perspective is geared towards understanding and description, the critical materialist perspective

¹⁹Note that Schutz's definition of working is specific. It includes human actions which gear into the world by bodily movements: “The wide-awake self integrates in its working and by its working its present, past and future into a specific dimension of time; it realizes itself as a totality in its working acts; it communicates with others through working acts; it organizes the different spatial perspectives of the world of daily life through working acts” (Schutz, 1970, p. 126).

is geared toward evaluation and change. The phenomenological account gives primacy to the active material and symbolic construction performed by the individual and defines social reality as its outcome. The critical materialist recognizes an outer and typically anonymous force - social relations such as the commodity relation - as organizing and dominating the living process of everyday life.

I argue that both these perspectives are necessary for understanding the complexity of everyday life. Examining users' experiences with the Internet I will apply the phenomenological approach in order to discover how the new medium interacts with subjects' everyday lifeworlds. I will attempt to establish its relevance in particular social-biographical situations. I will also look for the transformations of the content of users' everyday lifeworlds brought about by the medium. At the same time, I will employ Lefebvre's (1971, 1991) critical method in order to identify the characteristic alienations Internet users get exposed to. I will examine in-depth the productive work, taken in Lefebvre's extended sense, performed by users through and around the Internet. In the process of this work, I believe, users create meanings, spaces, social relations. They build up themselves as human beings in new ways and importantly, they produce the Internet as a medium of social communication. On the basis of the version of this medium that I find in users' everyday lives I hope to be able to advance a critique of the real with the possible, along the lines suggested by Lefebvre.

Agnes Heller: particularity versus individuality.

An original conception situated in the Marxist tradition but accentuating subjectivity as the hub of everyday life has been advanced by the Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller (1984). As Heller herself admits, her project has been inspired by phenomenological philosophy (Husserl, Heidegger) on one hand and Marxism (Marx, Lukács), on the other. Its logic runs in

many ways parallel to Schutz's, and yet differs in being materialistically grounded. Heller's concept of everyday life involves subjective consciousness (and attitudes) as a principal component, but unlike Schutz's "everyday lifeworld," does not represent an attitude itself. It is "the objective fundament of every social action, institution, of human social life in general" (p. xi).

Sifting through the idiosyncratic categorial system employed by Heller (1984), one uncovers an elaborate structure of everyday life comparable in consistency and detail to that of Schutz but premised on the materialistic notions of individual and social reproduction. In Heller's definition, everyday life is "the aggregate of those individual reproduction factors which, *pari pasu*, make social reproduction possible" (p. 4). Everyday life is constituted of the activities in which the person objectifies him/herself in many forms. In the process of these activities a constant feedback between the subject and the (objectively existing) social world takes place. "He shapes his world (his immediate environment) and in this way he shapes himself" (p. 6).

On one hand, the person grows into a ready-made world and accommodates internally to this world's requirements by learning how to use things and institutions and how to follow customs, that is by acquiring an average competence vis-à-vis the system of objects, habits and institutions of society. On the other, the complex of everyday activities of the person includes a causative component as well – "making to grow" (Heller, 1984, p. 7). Each subject represents a component of the world in which others are born: his personal experience is expressed when he transmits his world to others. The subject is objectified through communication and work, through symbolic and material products. Thus everyday life can be once again defined as the objectifications of the person that take place in his immediate environment. All objectifications

of the person in higher forms, such as science, art, religion, morals, etc., are dependent on the objectifications taking place in everyday life.

Heller's (1984) conception shares with Schutz's phenomenological account the realization that "Man always perceives the world into which he is born in a certain perspective which has himself as origin; and in terms of this same perspective he seeks to manipulate it. The process whereby he discovers the world centres round his self" (p. 9). From this particularistic viewpoint stems the particularistic motivation at the centre of which is the desire to preserve oneself as a unique human being, in Heller's terms - to preserve one's particularity. Unlike Schutz, Heller does not attribute ontological unalterability to the particularistic attitude. She sees it as inevitably limited and hampering man's self-identification with humanity, that is with a higher order of existence.

To the "particularistic person," one moved primarily by particularistic motivation, Heller (1984) juxtaposes "individuality" (p. 15). The notion of individuality is developed on the basis of Marx's (1844) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and refers to man's being a "conscious species-being" (discussed in Heller, 1984, p.17) meaning that his life is an object for him. Man recognizes himself as man, as belonging to a species, and hence treats the species-being as his own essential being. Because of this, his activity is free activity.

As a consequence of alienated labour, man's species essential activity - work, becomes an outside, alien force to him and thus is reduced to a means for preserving his particular existence. In this way the particular, the alienated person is born. In this treatment of the role of alienation, Heller's (1984) argument regarding alienation is indebted to Marx's conceptual system and runs in close parallel with that of Lefebvre (1991). In a similar way, she constructs a dichotomy, an opposition at the level of personality between the particularistic, alienated person, the person struggling for individual survival in isolation from his fellow-men and

individuality, the person who relates to himself as a species-being. Persons who have achieved individuality see themselves “from the point of view of species-being, from the point of the actual stage reached in the development of the species at a given time. They perceive themselves as objects of their own conscious activity and realize that they should not make their being, the forces of their being, “nothing more than a means of satisfying the needs of their existence” (Heller, 1984, p. 17).

Thus, Heller (1984) gives the name “individual” to the person for whom his own life is consciously an object of reflection and action. The individuality orders (within the given conditions and possibilities) his everyday life on the basis of his conscious relationship with the species-being. The individual is the person who “synthesizes within himself the contingent singularity of particularity and the generality of the species” (p. 20).

Therefore, in Heller's (1984) conception, the standpoint of the natural attitude becomes an object of critique as an expression of alienated existence, as particularity. The transcendence of this standpoint, its substitution for a standpoint grounded in species-being is the criterion for disalienation and acquisition of autonomous choice in matters of daily life. The means of this change of viewpoints is critical consciousness - the act of consciously relating to the species-essence which is determined by the desire to actualize, expand and develop one's human potentialities.

Because everyday life is defined by Heller (1984) as objectification of the person, a process in which the person as a subject becomes “externalized” (p. 47), it is also the territory *par excellence* for the appropriation of “species-essential objectivations [sic]” (p. 118). Persons must appropriate objectivations in order to objectify themselves under their guidance (see p. 118). Species-essential objectivations are the consequences of externalized, objectivized human activity which confront each particular person as a given and thus represent referential orders

external to the activities of the person who activates them while appropriating them. These objectivations, objectivations "in-itself" (p. 119), are essential for the existence of society. They represent a necessary precondition for all human activity. They include three different interconnected constituents: (1) tools and products (human artifacts), (2) custom, and (3) language. The realm of the in-itself is the realm of necessity.

The objectivations "for-itself" (Heller, 1984, p. 120), on the other hand, represent a sphere of objectivation that is appropriated as a matter of free volition and reflection. It embodies the crystallization of previously willed and reflected acts. Human consciousness and intention play a leading constitutive part in them. They include the spheres of art, science, philosophy, etc. Objectivations for-itself embody and express human freedom.

Finally, in relation to these two types of objectivations, Heller (1984) introduces the category "being-for-us" (p. 120). It means that a state of affairs, a content, or norm, becomes internalized and reflected upon by the subject as adequate, and thus becomes an element of his/her conscious practice. Thus the alienated everyday life is the realm of the in-itself where the person is guided by the species-essential objectivations in-itself to which he/she merely submits. Non-alienated everyday life, on the other hand, is the realm of the for-us where objectivations in-itself have become the object of reflection and a dual adequacy - to truth content and norms and to the anthropological singularity of the actor - has been established.

Going back to the problem of personality with these categories in mind, Heller (1984) asserts that individuality relates in a relatively free fashion to the species-essential objectivations in-itself which he receives as datum of everyday life. He/she makes his own existence an object of reflection and intention asking him/herself the question "How should I live?" To answer this question the individual brings values and insights achieved in the sphere of objectivation for-itself to bear upon his/her relationship with the objectivations in-itself. He/she constructs a

worldview to guide his/her everyday life. In that way, individuality can be seen as the being-for-itself of personality. The degree of development attained by individuality is the yardstick of personal freedom at any particular time. When the so attained worldview is internalized and successfully deployed in practice, everyday life becomes "being-for-us" (p. 125), an action terrain for a humanized personality.

Thus Heller's (1984) criterion of non-alienated everyday life is tied to the viability in a particular society of the superior type of personality that she labels "individuality" - a person who consciously reflects on his/her own being in relation to the ideals and achievements of humanity and respectively conducts his/her everyday life in a fashion that actualizes his/her essentially human norms and potentialities. To what extent this type of personality will be represented in a given society depends on the social relations organizing it and the degree of alienation they produce.

Heller's (1984) account of everyday life differs from that of Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) in that it involves a measure of interaction between being-in-itself (the everyday lifeworld that is taken for granted in the strict Schutzian sense) and being-for-itself that compares to the theoretical attitude in Schutz's terminology. While for Schutz the theoretical attitude represents a completely separate finite province of meaning, for Heller it is, or at least can be, part of everyday life. People can draw on achievements in social knowledge (objectivations for-us) in order to understand and re-organize their everyday lives. This is the path of disalienation - liberation of the person from social necessity achieved through the realization that there are higher possibilities open to a human being than mere survival.

There is a degree of idealization in Heller's (1984) treatment of the sphere of objectivations for-itself, that is, science, art, morals and religion. This sphere is postulated to embody human freedom, presumably from the forces of nature, blind following of custom and

non-reflective norms inscribed in language. The specific forms in which alienation can pervade this sphere, such as ideology for example, are not recognized. Heller works with an abstract notion of knowledge devoid of power bias and touted as the necessary prerequisite for man [*sic*] (and mankind) to be able to step from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom.

Despite this, Heller's (1984) study of everyday life offers useful insights into everyday life. Noteworthy, for example, are the commonalities Heller finds between the world of objects, language and custom as constituents of the sphere of species-essential objectivations in-itself. She points to the fact that these entities are closely intertwined. Language and custom are involved in making sense of and using tools and implements (technology). Furthermore, tools, language and custom share certain properties, one of which is their ability to signify, that is to represent ideas and/or practices. As Heller's example goes, the signification of the plough is that we use it to turn over soil. The gesture of bowing to someone (a custom) signifies greeting, respect or even subservience. More importantly, and here we get close to the analogy between technology and language suggested in the previous chapter, Heller argues that "a custom or an implement can be polysemantic as much as a word" (p. 125). Voloshinov's (1929/1986) concept of polysemy refers here to the different social functions which the custom or implement can perform, the different meanings they can acquire.

All three forms of species-essential objectivations in-itself exhibit a considerable level of inertia and act as a conservative force in social life. They serve as referential systems imposing certain means and rules that individuals have to orient to in order to objectify themselves in socially relevant ways. At the same time, the three forms of objectivation are not immune to change. Change is continually being brought about in these objectivation systems by virtue of new experience, new demands and needs, new methods of production and distribution, etc. What Heller describes as the essence of everyday life - species-essential objectivations in

itself being appropriated by the person in the process of his/her objectification and reproduction - is concordant with Voloshinov's (1929/1986) idea of language as a system versus speech as use practice and de Certeau's (1984) more embracing concept of systems being put to use by practitioners.

The transcendence of objectifications in-itself, the liberation from the dictate of social necessity imposed on the person by the pre-given structure of these objectifications can be achieved, from Heller's (1984) perspective, through critical distancing and reflection based on social knowledge (objectifications for-itself). However, Heller does not demonstrate sufficient sensitivity to the diversity of social knowledge and the power relations determining its structure. This deficiency will be overcome through later conceptions of standpoint and situatedness of knowledge such as those proposed by Smith (1988) and Haraway (1995).

With a view to my further investigation, I would like to highlight the normative dichotomy of particularity versus individuality that Heller (1984) introduces. In my analysis of users' practices I will attempt to find whether the Internet reinforces particularistic (isolated, self-centred, consumptive) existence or on the contrary: does it support the development of individuality – a person aware, open and responsive to shared values of community and humanity?

Towards a Synthesis: Lifeworld and System

Several attempts at creative synthesis of the insights of Schutz's phenomenology and critical theory have striven to elaborate a multi-focal optics combining the analytical powers of both perspectives. Habermas (1984) has identified the limitations of the Schutzian everyday lifeworld in its "culturalistic abridgment" (p. 138) of social reality. According to Habermas, Schutz's interpretation of society commits the fallacy of "hermeneutic idealism" (p. 148). This

internal perspective, through the eyes of the actor, “screens out everything that inconspicuously affects a sociocultural lifeworld from the outside” (p. 148): “From the perspective of subjects who are acting communicatively, no alien authority can be hidden behind cultural symbolism” (p. 149).

However, as authors in the Marxist critical tradition have argued, there is more to society than what acting subjects directly perceive, interpret, communicatively negotiate with each other and pursue through their motivated actions. In fact, subjects' goal-directed actions are shaped and coordinated also through “functional interconnections that are not intended by them [the subjects] and are usually not even perceived within the horizon of everyday practice” (Habermas, 1984, p. 152). Lefebvre's (1971) diptych of the power and the misery of everyday life is generated exactly by this state of affairs. On one hand the diverse activities of individual people making up everyday life constitute something much bigger and more powerful than any individual product taken by itself - social organization, material and spiritual culture. On the other hand, the imperatives of this same social organization come to overpower individual wills and enslave human beings in relationships unintended, unwanted, and often incomprehensible to them.

Different thinkers take different avenues toward representing the relationship between the two components of the so emerging conceptual dichotomy. For Habermas (1984), these are the notions of System and Lifeworld and the process of progressive colonization of the latter by the former. Smith (1987) matches the Habermasian uncoupling of System and Lifeworld with a “bifurcation” (p. 84) of her own - on one hand, a world directly experienced from oneself as centre, and on the other, an external organization of social relations – “concerted sequences or courses of social action implicating more than one individual whose participants are not necessarily present or known to one another” (p. 155).

There is however an important difference in how Habermas (1984) and Smith (1987) interpret the relationship/interaction between System (external organization) and Lifeworld. Habermas (1984) perceives the two entities as embodiments of qualitatively different types of rationality with the forms of system aggressively invading the lifeworld and seizing its traditional territories. For Smith (1987), although (abstract) social relations cannot be immediately discerned by actors in the everyday world, they are constituted through the activities and rationalities unfolding within it. For her part, she finds the paradigm of this reciprocal constitution in Marx's analysis of the commodity relation and his theory of alienation:

It takes only a little imagination to see that all such [social] relations are present in and produced in the organization of activities at the everyday level as well as entering the everyday into relations that pass beyond the control of individuals (p. 134).

Smith's (1987) sociological project calls for the examination of the everyday world as problematic, which represents a turning around of the Schutzian definition of the lifeworld as unproblematic. The problematization of the everyday world, as performed by Smith, represents an effort to bridge conceptually and practically the split between the immediately experienced local, subjective world and the social relations to which it is articulated:

The problematic of the everyday world organizes inquiry into the social relations in back of the everyday worlds in which people's existence is embedded. It opens up the possibility of exploring these relations as they really are, of discovering how they work and how they enter into the organization of the local historical settings of our work and experience and of our encounters with others. (Smith, 1987, p. 134)

The goal of Smith's sociology is thus to create "a knowledge that is 'for us,' that will explicate the social determinations of our own lives and experience" (p. 153). Such a sociology must provide for subjects the means of grasping the social relations organizing the worlds of their experience. These social relations can be disclosed fully only by a specialized investigation such as sociology. But this inquiry, although involving the special skills of the sociologist, must be

understood as a co-operation between her and those who want to understand the social matrices of their experience. It is a form of “consciousness-raising” (p. 154), aiming to find the objective correlates to what had seemed a private experience. Note that Smith recognizes the need to appreciate, involve and build on existing local knowledge of everyday actors when practicing a scientific-theoretical investigation of their condition from the perspective of sociology. This distinguishes her idea of knowledge for us from the universal validity that Heller ascribes to theoretical modes of knowing – objectivations for-itself.

In this way, I would argue, Smith's (1987) conception overcomes the deficiency of the other approaches considered in this chapter while integrating the strengths of each of them. At the beginning of her story of everyday life is the infinitely rich subjectively centered and locally experienced (Schutzian) lifeworld of the thinking and acting individual. This lifeworld is articulated to a structure of social relations (System in Habermasian sense), concerting the actions of multiple individuals from a position external to their lifeworlds and thus organizing the subjective experiences in accordance with the imperatives of the “abstract mode of ruling” (Smith, 1984, p. 81). This mode of ruling, for its part, is itself produced not in some specialized distinct compartment of society but in the everyday practices of numerous thinking actors.

The way towards liberation from such imperatives subordinating the lifeworld by robbing human actors of their autonomous will is the way of joining a specialized reflective practice (sociology) with the local competency of the inhabitants of subjective lifeworlds. The result of such a combination will be a “sociology for” a particular type of human actors sharing similar experiences and subjected to similar forms of oppression. It will help these actors understand their own particular situations in relation with the abstract principles of ruling organizing it. In this version, coming to consciousness through critical reflection is as crucial as in the model proposed by Heller (1984). It involves taking a theoretical attitude - constituting

the concrete lifeworld(s) as problematic. The advance consists in the fact that the knowledge involved does not originate from universal species-essential objectivations for-itself but from a dedicated effort at illuminating this particular situation and its specific articulation to the abstract system of domination.

Taking an example from Smith's (1987) sociology from the standpoint of and *for* women, I will strive to develop an analytical approach for generating knowledge from the standpoint of and *for* simple customers of the Internet. It will be a joint product of my informants' local knowledges and my own theoretically informed epistemology. The goal will be to discern both the forms of empowerment and the alienations brought about by the penetration of the Internet into everyday life and, in this way, to articulate the possibilities and the limits of conscious choice in Internet use.

Technology in Everyday Life: A Critical Phenomenology?

In this section, I will consider the place ascribed to technology in the different conceptions of everyday life I have reviewed. What kind of relationship exists between technology and everyday life according to the authors discussed here? And subsequently, what are the implications of different technologies that have found their way into everyday life? From a causative perspective, I would like to know whether everyday life changes to accommodate the various technologies penetrating into it from the specialized spheres of science and engineering. And vice versa, does everyday life itself induce transformations in technological systems and artifacts and what are the mechanisms of such transformations?

From a normative perspective, the question is how the effects of such changes can be evaluated vis-à-vis the normative dichotomies discerned by Marxist critiques of everyday life: when are these effects alienating and when are they life-enhancing and empowering. Obviously,

this series of questions is prompted by my interest in user agency. If everyday life is the terrain of non-specialized activity of human beings objectifying and reproducing themselves, then it is also the terrain of the *users* of technology. That means, it is a terrain where human actors objectify themselves drawing upon and appropriating socially given technical means (as one of the species-essential objectifications in-itself) with a view to their own situated plans and motives. It will be logical then to expect that technology, being one of the social spheres of objectivation, is both formative to users' action and transformed by it to a certain extent.

Will we be able to see on this terrain how users make “innumerable and infinitesimal” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiv) transformations geared towards adaptation of technological systems to their own situated interests? Or, will we observe how System (or the social relations of ruling) embodied into technical devices organize the innumerable and infinitesimal acts of everyday life and subordinate them to formal rationality, further alienating human actors from their products of all kinds? In other words, the task of this section will be to elaborate an account of the technology-everyday life relationship that is both phenomenologically and critically informed.

Technology in the phenomenological lifeworld.

I will use a little help from Ihde's (1990) *Technology and the Lifeworld* to specify the role of technology in determining the content of a subjective everyday lifeworld in the Schutzian sense. Ihde's (1990) phenomenology of human-technology relations distinguishes four types of such relations.

The first type, what he calls “embodiment relations” (Ihde, 1990, p. 73), refers to the case where technology is taken into subjective experience as a means of perception of the world thus transforming the subject's perceptual and bodily sense: “In Galileo's use of the telescope,

he embodies his seeing through the telescope thusly: Galileo - telescope – Moon. Equivalently, the wearer of glasses embodies eyeglasses technology: I - eyeglasses – World” (p. 73). The technology is between the seer and the seen in a position of mediation. But the referent of the seeing - that toward which the sight is directed is on the other side of the optics. If the technology possesses technical characteristics allowing the user to see through it in the literal and figurative sense, or after a necessary learning process through which the user's capability of seeing through the technology is acquired, it becomes a part of the way the user ordinarily experiences his/her surroundings. An embodiment relation between technology and user is established: My glasses are “taken into my own perceptual-bodily self experience thus: (I-glasses) – World” (p. 73). Ihde draws attention to an essential ambiguity existing in this relation: it has a necessary “magnification/reduction structure” (p. 74). Embodiment relations simultaneously magnify and amplify or reduce and place aside (screen out) what is experienced through them. The moon observed through a telescope is a different entity from the moon crowning the night sky perceived by the naked eye. The person experienced through the telephone is brought to me across a big distance at the expense of being reduced to a voice.

Ihde (1990) terms the second type of human - technology relations “hermeneutic relations” (p. 80). They involve technology into the representation of something that can be read off the technological medium. The subject's attention is focused on the technical artifact itself, be it written text or map, but what is seen in it is the reference to something beyond itself - a landscape described in words or cartographic symbols, for example: “the chart itself becomes the object of perception while simultaneously referring beyond itself to what is not immediately seen” (Ihde, 1990, p. 82). In this case the transparency of the technology is hermeneutic rather than perceptual. It requires knowledge of how to read the instrument, the text or whatever kind

of technological representation the subject is dealing with. Ihde describes formally this relation as I - (technology-world) (p. 86).

A third type of relations distinguished by Ihde (1990) is what he calls “alterity relations” (p. 97) in which technology is experienced as an Other or quasi-Other, i.e. an animated being different from myself. Examples of this type of relation are idolization of artifacts in religious practice, and more recently - involvements characteristic for human-computer interaction such as playing a game *against* the machine, blaming the machine for failing you, etc. The formalization employed to distinguish this relationship is: “I - technology -(world)” (p. 107), indicating that the world in this case remains in the background and technology emerges as focal entity with which I momentarily engage.

Finally, Ihde (1990) recognizes a fourth type of human-technology relations which differs from the previous three in that it does not implicate technology directly in a conscious process of engagement on the part of the human. Ihde refers to this type as “background relations” (p. 108). Technologies falling into this type of relations comprise a context of daily practice without being drawn into the foreground of action. Automatic and semiautomatic technological systems such as lighting, heating and cooling systems exemplify this type of relation. We live in their midst without consciously attending to them and often without realizing to what extent our existence is conditioned by them.

I will use this detailed analysis of human-technology relations to go back and re-examine the structures of the everyday lifeworld laid out by Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) and reflect on how technologies are involved in constant transformation of the concrete lifeworlds of the subjects who use them. Let us start with the world within actual reach of a technologically equipped subject living in the contemporary technology-rich society. What is now accessible to our immediate experience from the point “Zero” position of our actual body includes multiple

technological objects with which we stand in a hermeneutic relation, that is objects representing something beyond themselves. The most typical examples would be the books on my shelf, the photographs in my album, the thermometer on the balcony, the computer printout I received from the insurance office, and of course the ubiquitous television set. Through these technical representations we can perceive things that are distant or past in the here and now of our actual reach. The implications of this ability are equally important for the formation of our stock of knowledge and our action plans.

Nowadays, in our zone of actual reach we also find a growing number of technologies allowing not just perception of remote natural and social objects and relations, but also the manipulation of such objects and relations. That is, our “secondary zones of operation” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 44) are extended explosively by new technological means that enter our primary zones of direct action. The embodiment relation identified by Ihde (1990) as (I-technology) -world at the perceptual level takes on a deistic sense. Things that I do within my primary zone of operation - dialing a number, talking in a microphone, typing on a keyboard, etc. translate into actions gearing into the world far beyond my doorstep, affecting distant objects and people. Thus over the telephone, I can pay a bill, get a loan, break up with my boyfriend (or fight with my husband), help my child with his homework. My networked computer allows me to download a file from a remote server, request a book from the library and give advice to my friend overseas. More and more, our zone of actual reach comes to resemble a control tower from where we can perceive distant objects and social entities by reading them off technical representations- I (technology-world) - which extends our zones of actual and potential reach. We can also exert action upon distant objects and people through technological levers - (I-technology)-world - which extends our secondary zone of operation and our province of possible operation.

If we recall the amplification/reduction structure of the human-technology relations Ihde (1990) proposed, we will have to introduce a qualification on what seems to be an unquestionable growth in power for action. First, our mediated actions are to a greater degree shaped by the technologies involved and second, the structure of these technologies determines the specifics of the occurring amplification/reduction. I am able to order a library book from my place of residence or work (amplification of scope of action) but I will have to adopt the categories of classification imposed by the library database and forfeit the chance to receive guidance by a human assistant through an interactive exchange (reduction). I am able to give support to my distant friend (amplification) but I can do it only in the form of electronic text. She will not receive comfort from my voice and encouragement from my touch (reduction).

Something that Ihde (1990) fails to explore but which emerges as an important issue related to the structure of amplification/reduction implicit in technological mediation of perception and action is the question of how exactly the trade-off between amplification and reduction is constituted. It is true that I am interested in amplifying my scope of action by paying my bills online, but the reduction I incur - the lack of contact and guidance from a human bank clerk - is far from being an objective necessity imposed by technical possibilities alone. It is inscribed in the technological system by design performed under the objective of reducing the human work force involved in banking services. The reduction I suffered in supporting my friend is brought forth by the limited capacity for human emotional contact designed into a system whose primary function is the exchange of research and business information.

Technology intervenes powerfully in the temporal arrangements of the everyday lifeworld most notably with regards to what Schutz has called fixed course of temporality - the principle of first things first. Although the search for life-prolonging treatments is on-going, the

fact of human finitude vis-à-vis the permanence of world time remains unchanged. So does in principle the historical situation in which one is born - time-machines remain a matter of fantasy. The fixed course of temporality however has been an aspect of the lifeworld effectively addressed by technological invention and perfection. The phenomenon of waiting in which Schutz finds a typical expression of the incongruence between subjective time on one hand and biological time, world time and social time on the other is undergoing substantive transformations. I do not need to wait any more for my sugar to dissolve in the glass of water if I want to drink sugar water - an example Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) used about 40 years ago. I can simply use instantly dissolving sweetener, a technological product eliminating the waiting time. If I want to ski, I do not need to wait for the snow to fall but can take the plane and go to a part of the world where it snows now. I do not need to comply with the rhythm of social time and the biological time of my fellow-man/woman: my professor is asleep at 2 a.m. (social time) and I cannot immediately share with him the brilliant idea that dawned on me, but I can send him an e-mail message following my spontaneous impulse and stream of consciousness at the moment. I can take work (writing, accounting) from my company home in a computer file and do it on my computer at the moment I choose (subjective time) after the office is closed (social time).

In all these cases what I do is using technology to bring biological time, world time, social time in closer conformity with my subjective time. In a sense, this can be interpreted and experienced by the actor as an increase in personal freedom, spontaneity and control, or in other words as empowerment and disalienation.²⁰ These new technologically created possibilities

²⁰On the other hand, however, I have to wait until the web page I have requested from a remote server downloads onto my computer. Thus it should be noted that while resolving some incongruencies between subjective and world, biological or social time, technology creates others.

seem to address a pressing need for democratization of everyday life. Alberto Melucci (1989)

characterizes this need - in matters of time - thus:

the need to escape from external constraints and to achieve a level of self-determination of both complete life cycle and daily life. The need to establish a new rapport between inner time and social time creates a demand for reversible time, for autonomously chosen and regulated units of duration unburdened from the rhythms of clocks and calendars. (p. 178)

Let's take the example of information technologies introduced with the promise of delivering education and training at any time, independently of the stage a person finds herself at in her life cycle. You may not be young and mobile (traditional social expectations related to enrollment in a university or training course) any more, you may be doing something else in the course of your day, but you still can take distant education programs supported by various information technologies.

The feeling of freedom and empowerment that stems from these enlargements of one's action zone in terms of space and time drowns technological critiques and renders us oblivious of the reductions entailed. We lose the immediate sensory experience of objects, deprive ourselves of face-to-face contact with people, get caught in sequences of operations and waiting time periods imposed by the technical equipment, and ironically, overwhelmed by the new possibilities *suggested* by this equipment, we often fail to exercise our imagination to envision possibilities of our own. This is a subtle form of reduction that, as I will argue later, can be brought to light through the critique of what is real versus what is possible proposed by Lefebvre (1991).

Importantly, a remark Schutz (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) himself felt necessary to include in his discussion of the variations of technical possibility given to members of every particular society should be heeded: A distinction should be made between the degree of extension of operation (and of reach) that is possible due to the condition of technological

knowledge in society and the one that is typically accessible and employable by typical persons in daily life. Social structures demonstrate typical distribution of the prospects of access to what Schutz called “extensional factors” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 44). This state of affairs must be considered “in the empirical analysis of the life-world of the Eskimo, of the modern American, etc. even if it need not be considered in the formal analysis of the structure of the life-world in general” (p. 44). In critical terms, this is the problem of unequal access to technology. In the Schutzian analytical system, unequal access is related to differences in the everyday lifeworld experienced by people occupying different positions in society. Thus, the horizons of potential reach and the limits of zones of operation and provinces of the practicable vary according to social position. However, it will be noticed immediately, that the social categories of people who lack the bonus of the amplifications technology brings forth, do not become subjected to the reductions involved.

Technological mediation, and particularly information and communication technologies, similarly recasts the structures of anonymity spanning the most intimate we-relations and the most distant they-relations. The concepts of actual reach, restorable reach, attainable reach, zone of operation, province of the practicable, etc. can be applied to characterize the different kinds of relations that can be established between Myself and Others. Communication media spanning distance contributes to the restorability of old and attainability of new we-relations by allowing me to access the conscious life of an Other even if only in an curtailed fashion. Similarly, they-relations, relations with types of people I have never met can be filled with additional content with the help of communication media. Examples of that are mass media images of various social groups brought to me by introducing a particular person belonging to that group. I experience the previously anonymous type of the striking Ontario teachers or Bosnian war victims, for instance, in more concrete human detail reading a newspaper article or watching a

television program about them which mimics remotely a we-relation. The anonymous type of the "computer expert," for example, can be brought closer to life for me if I post a question in a computer-oriented newsgroup and receive an answer from the programmer Joe Doe written in his own words, in his own subjective time. In this imaginable quasi we-relation, Joe Doe would have also experienced the anonymous type of the computer dummy through the individual characteristics of myself - my language, my shared frustration, etc.

Applying Ihde's (1990) typology of human-technology-world relations in the case of the social world, we can explore the amplifications and reductions involved in mediated communication. We will notice an interesting merger between the embodiment relation and the hermeneutic relation in acts of mediated interactive communication. When I relay to an Other my state of mind using a technology, what I do is enter an embodiment relation with the technology: (I-technology) - social world. This can take the form of writing, speaking in a telephone tube, shooting a video, etc. The response of the other comes to me through a hermeneutic relation: I - (technology-social world). The end result is that from my here and now, that is from within my zone of actual reach, I can initiate social contact and become the addressee of response, or somebody else's initiation. The amplification of sociability that comes with this represents a qualitative leap. Restorability of we-relations, attainability of new such relations, access to richer content regarding social types, transformability of functionary types into individual types, etc. grows exponentially. I can gear further into the social world and in a wider variety of ways. That is, my means of social production, understood in the wide sense suggested by Lefebvre (1991), grows in diversity and power. I can objectify myself in new forms and for new purposes.

Along with it, however, I have to sustain multiple reductions - of intensity and spontaneity, of reciprocity, etc. Technology becomes an extension of my social self on one hand

and a representation of the social world on the other. Respectively, both my means of self-expression and the codes in which the social is represented to me have to be adapted to the structure of the mediating technology (and the social institutions and practices growing upon it). Thus I have to express my love for my distant mother through the single medium of my voice amplified by the telephone/telecommunication system over a period of time constricted by the high cost of the long distance call. The human detail that adheres to the type of the striking teachers through the newspaper report is, I realize, sifted through the typical discourse and organization of news production and dissemination. These reductions, we could hypothesize, can become sources of technologically produced alienation: oppressive and manipulative practices can grow out of them overshadowing the possibility for empowerment. One example of such alienation can be found in uses of personal information, information created by the person him/herself over a technological medium, for purposes other than the ones intended by the person. In this case, analogously to what happens in the commodity relation, the product of human activity confronts its creator as an external alien force.

Down to this point, technology was examined in its capacity to contribute to the formation of subjective everyday lifeworlds in principle. The question of how and why technology would actually be drawn into a subjective lifeworld and become one of its formative components was not raised. Neither was it asked whether technology remains a constant, an ontological given, throughout its interaction with subjective lifeworlds. To set out looking for answers to these questions, we have to recognize that technology is always encountered by acting subjects as an element of their specific social-biographical situation. The degree to which it acquires relevance to subjects and is oriented to by them is determined by the subject's pragmatic interest with a view to mastering the situation.

Let us recall that intrinsic relevances are “the outcome of our chosen interests, established by our spontaneous decision to solve a problem by our thinking, to attain a goal by our action, to bring forth a projected state of affairs” (Schutz, 1970, p. 113). Imposed relevances, on the contrary, are the outcomes of our being not only “centres of spontaneity” but also “passive recipients of events beyond our control” (p. 113) that occur without our interference. Imposed relevances are not connected with interests chosen by us. Having no power to modify them by our spontaneous activities, we have to take them just as they are (see p. 114). In an attempt to join the analytical forces of phenomenological and critical theory, I will suggest that imposed relevances at the levels of both the situation at hand and the social-biographical situation point to the phenomenon of alienation. Intrinsic relevances, on the other hand, are the substance of autonomy and spontaneity, albeit their scope meets its limits in the social structure and culturally available systems of meanings, goals and desires.

At the level of the situation at hand, then, technology, in this case the computer, belongs to my zone of secondary relevances as an imposed relevance - institutional convention obliges me to resort to it as a writing tool in order to produce my text in an institutionally acceptable form. From the perspective (standpoint) of my social-biographical situation, computer technology represents an imposed relevance in the sense that computer/technological literacy is a requirement for me if I wish to master my situation as an aspiring academic, no matter that I have never had the spontaneous interest in word processing. At the same time, as an object of academic specialization chosen freely by myself (out of the culturally available repertoire of academic specializations in my field), information technology stands in an intrinsic relevance to my present social-biographical situation.

Imposed and intrinsic relevances can be analytical markers for differentiating between user oppression on one hand and on the other, user spontaneity and reflexive choice vis-à-vis

technology in everyday life. When technologies are imposed upon the acting subject as necessarily relevant to a certain kind of activity by a power structure, institutional norm or uncritically accepted social convention, technology (along with the forces it represents) governs everyday life producing alienation. In the cases when technology is recruited by the user herself as intrinsically relevant to a meaningful activity oriented toward a chosen interest, a creative appropriation is taking place. The act of such an appropriation redefines the nature of the technology at hand.

Thus, drawn into diverse social-biographical situations as a matter of intrinsic relevance, technology acquires new practical definitions. It becomes implicated in new systems of action and generates new ways of acting, new “behavioural genres” (Voloshinov 1929/1986) relative to the status quo at the moment preceding the innovation. The subjective meaning attached to the technology by the individual at the centre of the particular social-biographical situation expands the spectrum of the potential meaning of the technology. Whether and when this potential meaning will infiltrate the objective meaning of the technology, the meaning that the majority, or at least a significant number of members of society agree upon, is to a great extent a matter of (1) degree of typicality of the particular social-biographical situation and (2) the degree of social power associated with this social-biographical situation.

Technology as system.

Analyzing everyday life in modern capitalist society, which he chose to label “the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption,” Lefebvre (1971, p. 68) recognized the “programming” function of technology in everyday life. For him, the motor car – a paradigmatic technology in contemporary society - “directs behaviour” in various spheres from economics to speech. It imposes laws and fosters hierarchies in everyday life, produces social forms and

institutions that use it and that it uses (see p. 101-103). To the extent that the human agents of everyday life accept and submit to the laws imposed by objects like the motor car unreflectively, their relations with objects and with each other via those objects are alienated.

A whole critical tradition of social studies of technology led by Marcuse (1964) and including labour process theorists such as Braverman (1975, c1974) and Noble (1984) and philosophers of technology –Winner (1977), Leiss (1990) and Feenberg (1991, 1999) among others - has demonstrated the disciplining, action-directing function of technology. These theorists have seen in technology an instrument for organizing human action under the imperative of capitalist class relations. That is, technology is a medium translating abstract social relations of capitalism into concrete human relations and actions. Coming from a different perspective, the sociologist of technology Latour (1992) has found “the missing masses” (p.225), the previously failing account of how social practice gets coordinated, in the compulsions produced by technology.

Joining this line of argument in technology studies with Habermas' (1984) model of System and Lifeworld, Feenberg (1999) has proposed that technology be recognized as a “coordination medium”²¹ (p. 176) in the sense in which Habermas (1984) describes money and power. Technical control exerted through and by devices, Feenberg (1999) asserts, introduces instrumental rationality characteristic for System into the lifeworld of acting subjects. Technical rationality operationalized as productivity and effectiveness becomes reified and organizes action eliminating the necessity of linguistic negotiation (which is constitutive of the Habermasian lifeworld). Feenberg goes on to insist that even if there are grounds for

²¹It seems to me that one extreme example of such a recognition can be found in Manuel Castells' (1996, 1997, 1998) trilogy *The Information Age*. In this grand narrative of the “network society” Castells performs a curious blurring between System and Medium in the Habermasian sense. Computer networks become both a medium of social coordination and the System itself as their logic pervasively determines the activities of social actors and the relations among the latter.

recognizing technology as a medium of systematic coordination of social action, technology still has to be critically questioned on its own grounds - something that is missing from the Habermasian treatment of System. Technology does not embody universal rational principles as Marcuse (1964) has convincingly demonstrated. The socially shaped design of technology determines in the end what kind of social relations technology as coordination medium will help to establish and sustain.

I would like to suggest that technological design is coterminous with the structure of amplifications and reductions that a particular technology introduces into the lifeworld. At the same time, it is obvious that the decisions on what should be foregrounded (amplified) and what can be left out (reduced) are a matter of system of relevances - socially established (relative-natural attitude) or personal - of those who create and use technology. Systems of relevances, on the other hand are intimately connected with social-biographical and socio-historical situations and hierarchies of interests and plans. This translation exercise demonstrates that technology can be easily seen as emerging from the lifeworlds of designers and users and then taking on an organizing role into these same lifeworlds as well as the lifeworlds of countless others. Importantly, in order to penetrate and organize a newly encountered lifeworld, technological design has to be decoded along the lines of this lifeworld's system of relevances. Some of its functionalities will intrude on the subjective lifeworld in the form of imposed relevances but other features will resonate with its intrinsic relevances.

Therefore, examining the place of technology in the everyday life of thinking and acting subjects, the Habermasian uncoupling of System and Lifeworld has to be dialectically negated. System and lifeworld, coordination and communicative understanding, abstract social relations and local action contexts, alienation and spontaneity, have to be re-coupled. This will mean to recognize that instrumental and communicative action are most of the time two constitutive

vectors of the same physical act performed by a subject; to keep in mind that alienation comprises both expression/objectification of the person and estrangement; to remember that imposed and intrinsic relevances are present in any action-situation. Smith's (1987) work points to an elegant way to implement this re-coupling:

The very ordinary presence of the objects of our daily lives, chairs, tables, are ... socially organized in our everyday practices and organize their concerting. The terms for socially constituted objects are anchored in and anchor a social organization of actual practices in and through which table becomes table... (p. 124)

But if this is so, if objects, technology included, are constantly reconstituted by the practices they organize, then different or changing situations of human action represent a source of object/artifact/technology mutation and change. On this basis, I will argue that the meeting between technology and different social-biographical situations resembles the meeting between technology and different cultures. Subjects in different social-biographical situations reconstitute the structures of amplification/reduction properties of a technology with respect to their specific systems of relevance. What entails is a different subjectively experienced and actualized technology design and a different brand of use genres anchored on it. Different categories of users objectify themselves differently through principally the same technology thus inducing variation in this technology as an object. Once this is recognized, the analogy with the evolution of language intrudes with a new power. What escaped the Habermasian (1984) interpretation of the interaction between System and Lifeworld was the phenomenon recognized by de Certeau (1984), Voloshinov (1929/1986), Bakhtin (1984). If it is true that System continuously colonizes the Lifeworld, the opposite is also taking place - the Lifeworld encroaches on System, undermines and changes it.

History of technology has shown that new technical inventions have traveled sometimes a long way before they could meet the system of relevances that would resonate with the

potentialities of their design. Initial designs have been transformed under the pressure of typical interests and action plans. People sharing similar social-biographical situations have been discovering different “affordances” in new technologies. According to Gibson (1979, p. 127), “affordances refer to what an environment offers - relative to the person or group perceiving or recognizing that quality of the environment” (quoted in Mynatt et al., 1998, p. 130). Technologies have been experienced as affording actions geared toward mastering of various social-biographical situations. As such, they have acquired intrinsic relevance for the respective persons and groups. As critical examiners of technological innovation have demonstrated, however, the structures of power in a particular historical social formation have given preponderance to designs suiting the dominant systems of relevance.

How often has technological design responded to the relevances of powerless social groups? Not very often for sure. But even though such avenues in the evolution of technology may not have been realized, they have been there, and still are - in the case of the Internet - able to offer a basis for a critique. A critique of what is real against what is, or has been, possible.

The task of identifying alternative possibilities in the evolution of the Internet necessitates directing one’s research interest to spaces and instances in everyday life where the creativity of users’ engagement with technology can be observed most directly. Among the various backstages of human behaviour, that is, settings or situations where the social actor can forgo formal rules and align one’s actions with one’s system of intrinsic relevances, the home emerges as a particularly good candidate for closer investigation. Home is that position in everyday life which the individual experiences as one’s own. It is a “protected place at one’s disposal where the pressure of the social body on the individual does not prevail, where the plurality of stimuli is filtered, or, in any case, ought to be” (de Certeau, Giard & Mayol, 1998, p. 146). Hence, taking technology home means endowing it with personal functionality and

significance, subordinating it to the pragmatic interest of mastering one's situation. Home, I will argue in the next section, can be viewed as the base of the powerless where rationalizations of technology alternative to those imposed by the dominant ideological order take place.

Conceptualizing the Home

Everyday space, as Heller (1984) notes, is anthropocentric. It is organized from the spatial perspective of the subject at its centre. The categories of left and right, near and far, up and down represent the relative dimensions of everyday space. Among these relative categories organizing everyday space for us is the concept of home. In a way, home can be perceived as the physical locus where everyday life can be observed in its most representative form. From there comes the temptation for many researchers to identify everyday life with the activities performed in the home. The notion of everyday life that has been presented in this chapter is much more complex. It has been my attempt to appreciate the place of this notion as a systematic component of a variety of social theories. Consequently, now that I turn to the notion of the home, I would like to constitute it against the background of these same social theories.

Heller (1984) defines aptly the relation between home and everyday life:

Integral to the average everyday life is awareness of a fixed point in space, a firm position from which we "proceed"... and to which we return in a due course. This firm position is what we call "home."... "Going home" should mean returning to that firm position which we know, to which we are accustomed, where we feel safe, and where our emotional relationships are at their most intense. (Heller, 1984, p. 239)

In Schutzian terms, I believe, home can be described as a familiar zone of operation, a set of recurrent unproblematic situations explicated in accordance with a system of mostly intrinsic relevances. The fellow-men and women with whom I share the home are in an intimate we-relation with me, a relation constantly reproduced, easily restorable and attainable. With

these people I share common intrinsic relevances and we recurrently confirm for each other the validity of our grasp of the surrounding world (see Schutz's, 1964, essay "The Homecomer").

Czikszentmihaly and Rochberg-Halton (1981) suggest a definition of 'home' that emphasizes its role as a site of identity-formation. For them, the home is a "space for action and interaction in which one can develop, maintain and change one's identity....The home is a shelter for those persons and objects that define the self; thus it becomes, for most people, an indispensable symbolic environment" (p. 144).

Related to the critical understanding of everyday life as the terrain of the reproduction of the person as a whole (Lefebvre, 1991; Heller, 1984), is an interpretation of home as both a source of emotional support and solidarity and an economic unit and resource system. In this sense, Silverstone speaks of the (1994) "domestic." The domestic, he claims, is "the site and source of our activities as consumers and also as citizens...and through consumption, paradoxically but plausibly, it is becoming increasingly significant in the modern public life" (p. 50-1).

Thus, the domestic can be seen on one hand as the sphere of immediate we-relations and communicative interaction making up what is often called "private life" as opposed to the public realm of Gesellschaft - the market and bureaucratically administered formal organizations akin to the notion of System. In this capacity, the domestic serves as a small realm of freedom, spontaneity and authenticity, a "kind of balancing mechanism providing meanings and meaningful activities to compensate for the discontents brought about by the large structures of modern society" (Berger et al., 1974, quoted in Weintraub, 1997, p. 21).

On the other hand, along an alternative axis of distinction between public and private, the private realm, and by implication the domestic, can be characterized as the atomized capsule of individual existence and particularistic interest focused on self-preservation, physically

isolated and alienated from the political community. From this perspective the private is tied to the development of the home into an autonomous consumer unit and a retreat from the public realm of community (see Tomlinson, 1989).

The atomic unit of the "home-centered society" bewailed by critics such as Kumar (1995, p. 155) and the emotionally intense domain of non-instrumental relationships and refuge from the constraints and pressures of formal institutions (see Morley, 1992, p. 105; Weintraub, 1997, p. 20) are thus two alternative images and, actually, two of the multiple sides of the home. It can be noted that these distinctions follow principally the same fault lines as the System-Lifeworld and particularity-individuality dichotomies at the heart of which is Marx's concept of alienation. Which one of these sides would be reinforced by the arrival of a new technology, in our case the Internet connection, into the home? Will the lifeworld of the home be invaded by the systems of market and bureaucracy through the medium created by the new communication system? Or, will the narrow particularistic capsule of self-preservation centered existence in the home be opened up for higher concerns and involvement in public life? These are open questions for empirical investigation and topical issues for political debate to which academic research should be adequately oriented.

In her study of computerization of industrial organizations Zuboff (1988) argued that information technology is characterized by a "fundamental duality" (p. 9). It has the capacity to "automate" and to "informatize" (p. 10). To automate means to replace the human body and the human mind with a machine and thus disempower the worker. To informatize, on the other hand, is the capacity of computers to "introduce an additional dimension of reflexivity," to produce "a voice that symbolically renders events, objects and processes so that they become visible, knowable and shareable in a new way" (p. 9). With the penetration of the smart machine (Zuboff, 1988), and the smart network into the home, a similar dilemma emerges. Computer-

network technology has the potential to isolate the home – to reinforce bad privateness as discussed above. But it can also associate it with the public world of citizenship and community in new ways by rendering this world new symbolic visibility and accessibility. My empirical study will have the task of identifying the demonstrations of this dual potential in the daily lives of particular people. I will attempt to uncover how home Internet users make an active effort to define and perform the choices available to them in assigning a place and role of the smart network in their homes.

In this connection, I find it necessary to examine also the potential and the actual role of the home as a place of resistance and creative appropriation. Relative to the human actor, home represents an interior as opposed to exterior, or environment. A vivid illustration of this can be found in the life stories collected and analyzed by Bruner (1987). He notices a recurrent figure in the “psychic geography” constructed by his narrators: For each of them home is “a place that is inside, private, forgiving, intimate, predictably safe. The ‘real world’ is outside, demanding, anonymous, open, unpredictable, and consequently dangerous” (reprinted in Mackay, 1997, p. 108). The movement from home into the outside world is accompanied by a struggle to create for oneself “homelike” special places - allowing, permitting and teaching. Bruner says of one of his story-tellers: “It is as if Carl manages the ‘real world’ by colonizing it with ‘special places’ that provide some of the privileges of home”²² (reprinted in Mackay, 1997, p.109).

Discussing the interplay between the powerful and the powerless, de Certeau (1984) acknowledges the capacity to create “an ‘interior,’ a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as a base from which relations with an exteriority ... can be managed” only to subjects with will and power “a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution” (see p. 35-36). From a

²²This observation points to the possibility suggested earlier in this chapter for a process of two-way colonization running between System and Lifeworld.

phenomenological perspective however, the thinking and acting subject, regardless of his/her actual social position of power, always constructs a base of his/her own, no matter how physically ephemeral it could be. I contend that this base is identical with what in the natural attitude we call "home." Home is the locus in which the powerless can withdraw and elaborate a strategy vis-à-vis her environment.

Bell Hooks (1990) offers a powerful confirmation of this role of the home in her analysis of the symbolic production and self-reproduction of segregated black people, particularly women. Houses, she writes, were women's special domain "as places where all that truly mattered in life took place - the warmth, the comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being, there we learned to have faith" (p. 42). These homes were sustained by black women who had to go and work outside the home serving white people - an oppressive Other, a system of domination. But then, after a hard day of work on the terrain of the Other (to recall de Certeau's vocabulary), these women came back home "to make life happen there." Hooks goes on:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed to our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (p. 42)

Therefore, throughout their history, African-Americans have recognized the subversive value of homeplace and the importance of having access to such a place. Domestic space has been a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity in the context of black liberation struggle. The structure of homeplace as a site of resistance has been defined by black

people's struggle to "uplift themselves" as a people and resist racist oppression and domination (see Hooks, 1990, p. 47).

Abstracted from this concrete historical experience is a general understanding of resistance as "opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system" (Hooks, 1990, p. 42). Exactly in this sense home was experienced as a site of resistance in totalitarian systems where public spaces were inescapably dominated by State ideology and command. Home was the place nurturing alternative moral values and critical thinking in the face of an outside world constructed as an all-embracing brainwashing and disciplining apparatus.

These maybe extreme social contexts illuminate a side of the home which, I believe, is important to appreciate also vis-à-vis less total forms of system domination. In the final account, home is "that place which enables and promotes varied and ever changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference" (Hooks, 1990, p. 148).

As one of the central sites of everyday life, home is the place where objects from the exterior, products of a market system, messages of political and commercial propagandists, technologies originating from the domains of industry and science are taken in and used in the course of everyday life and as a matter of subjective motivation. Within this space, the ordinary men and women elaborate their distinct styles or ways of using of the macro order of society reflected in this society's artifacts. Indeed, one can agree with de Certeau (1984) that these creative ways of operating, remain dispersed and fleeting from a macro perspective and do not crystallize into a visible product of their own: "The television viewer cannot write anything on the screen of his set. He has been dislodged from the product; he plays no role in its apparition" (p. 31). But then again, isn't the subjectivity of the user as an autonomous human being resisting assimilation the ultimate product of these ways of operating? She may not be producing

anything exchangeable or capitalizable in the narrow sense of the term and under the rules of the market system, but she is still producing in Lefebvre's (1971) extended sense - a space, an identity, a genre, a culture.

Summary

The examination of such home-spun genres (ways) of using a new technology (the Internet); the possibility and the reality of their proliferation and socialization; and finally the question concerning the consequences they breed for technological design and institutionalization represent the focus of the empirical study to be reported in the following chapters.

The patterns of Internet use observed in the empirical material will be analyzed and evaluated in light of the concepts and normative dichotomies that emerged from the theoretical studies of everyday life and the place of technology in it reviewed in this chapter. I will address the following questions:

- What kinds of transformations do Internet users' everyday lifeworlds undergo?
- What are the isolating and what are the associating properties of the medium?
Does it contribute to increased alienation and "bad" privatization of domestic life or does it create new opportunities for socialization and participation in the life of various communities?
- Does Internet use result in subordination of the home to economic, political and cultural domination or in its revitalization and empowerment?
- Do users passively accept technological form and content or do they demonstrate resistance and creativity?

- **Are we-relations in the home undermined by the new medium or is the medium involved in new forms of reinforcing these relations?**
- **Are gender inequalities exacerbated in domestic practices of Internet use or are gender gaps in technological and communicative competence closing?**

In the next chapter I will present the research methodology that guided the investigation of these questions.

Chapter 3

Research Design

Grown-ups love figures. When you tell them that you have made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, "What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?" Instead, they demand: "How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?" Only from these figures do they think they have learnt anything about him....

But certainly, for us who understand life, figures are a matter of indifference. I should have liked to begin this story in the fashion of the fairy tales. I should have liked to say: "Once upon a time there was a little prince who lived on a planet that was scarcely bigger than himself, and who had a need of a sheep ..."
(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1943, *The Little Prince*, p. 20)

Introduction

In this chapter I describe and reflect upon the research design that I devised and employed in studying the integration of the Internet into the everyday lives of domestic users. I explain the conceptual model that served as the basis upon which I approached the gathering of data about the activities in which the medium was implicated and about the meanings and consequences of these activities for the people who performed them. I discuss my methodology in the context of the controversies spurred by the tradition of media audience ethnography that I have chosen as my methodological paradigm. I explain how I went about recruiting participants in my study and take the reader through the process of collaborative construction of meaning in which my respondents and I were jointly involved. Then, I share the challenges, puzzlements and interim despair associated with the qualitative data analysis that I carried out.

I give the story a happy end pointing to a thematic structure emergent out of the confusing murmuring of everyday practices (de Certeau, 1984, p. 200) to which I had turned my ear. I admit that this structure is not the only one that can be used to make sense of the everyday

practice of ordinary Internet users. I recognize in it the marks of my theoretical bias and interest. Yet what I find valuable in this thematic structure is that it is a product of the joint effort of myself, a carrier of a set of scholarly discourses, and my respondents, the everyday practitioners, spinning around the Internet operations and interpretations of their own.

The Research Rationale

In a 1987 essay, Cowan proposed a network concept related and yet different from that advanced by actor-network theorists such as Law (1987), Callon (1987) and Hughes (1987) in the same programmatic collection that spelled out the social constructivist approach to technology. Instead of the novel technical artifact, Cowan placed the consumer at the center of the network. Her effort was to start understanding that network from “the consumption junction, the place and the time at which the consumer makes choices about competing technologies” (p.263). Cowan (1987) wanted to know how the network looked from the consumer's point of view. She believed that this consumer-centred version of an actor-network would work better in explaining the success or failure of given artifacts. The consumption junction represented for her “the interface where technological diffusion occurs” and also “the place where technologies begin to reorganize social structures” (p. 263).

Although she recognized the consumer as a “person embedded in a network of social relations that limits and controls the technological decisions that she or he is capable of making” (p. 263), Cowan (1987) did not chart ways of exploring this particular network of social relations in its capacity to affect the shape of technologies. Because of her emphasis on diffusion, and hence positive consumption decisions, she chose to define consumers “in terms of the artifacts about which they are making choices (as for example, ‘a prospective purchaser of a washing machine’) as well as by other appropriate socioeconomic variables...” (p. 263).

Thus the social network in which consumers are embedded was reduced to those elements, and links, which contributed to the positive consumption decision vis-à-vis a given artifact. Despite intending to look at the network through the eyes of the consumer, Cowan actually constructed it from the perspective of the market researcher. Note her remark: "Market researchers and advertising agencies are quite accustomed to this form of categorization; sociologists of technology might do well to adopt the practice" (p. 264).

The consumption junction perspective that I would like to propose here aims at pursuing the unexplored potentialities of Cowan's (1987) idea of consumer-centred network of relations. I believe that instead of defining the consumer (user) in terms of the artifacts offered to him or her by the market, we should do the opposite - define the artifacts becoming available at the market in terms of the consumers - the specific social-biographical situations of diverse users and user groups in which these artifacts find application. To reverse the task this way would mean to set out answering those seemingly simple-minded questions that de Certeau (1984) raised in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*: "The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumer of newspaper stories and legends - what do they make of what they 'absorb,' receive and pay for? *What do they do with it* [italics added]" (p. 31)? De Certeau was vividly aware that the analysis of production, distribution and diffusion of cultural products and artifacts had to be complemented by the analysis of these products and artifact as parts of the "repertory with which users carry out operations of their own" (p. 31).

To implement this particular project, we need to imagine the consumer/user in his/her everyday life, as the point "Zero" of his/her own coordinate system, at the centre of his/her system of interests and relevances and most importantly - in action.

In fact, the person living his/her everyday life is immersed in a network of activities at

the most immediate level of experience and simultaneously in a collateral network of social relations that spans beyond the immediately experienced, as Smith (1987, 1999) has pointed out. An artifact, a cultural product or a new technology acquires meaning and relevance, and hence comes to be defined, with regard to these overlapping networks of activities and social relations. Once entered into the remotest margins of the subject's zone of relevance (this is what advertising and promotion usually aim at), it gradually works its way toward the centre of this activity network. In the cases when an artifact acquires centrality in a person's activity network, it obtains the power to reconstruct that network. However, note the two-directional "subject-object" dynamics that Leont'ev (1978) points to. In activity (in use) an object (an artifact as well) is transferred into its subjective form, and vice versa - this subjective form is "objectivized" (p. 50) in the process and product of activity.²³ Are these subjective forms of a technology - the Internet - consequential to its social evolution? On the basis of Voloshinov's (1929/1986) model of the generative process of language, I contend that they are. As Suchman and Jordan (1988) insisted, the design of an artifact is only ever completed in use.

Throughout the study that I will describe in the following chapters, my main interest has been to identify the variety of "subjective forms" that a new technology - the Internet - takes when it gets drawn into diverse systems of activities characteristic of distinct socio-biographical situations. The repertory of new "little behaviour genres" (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 97) that grows on the basis of this objectification in activity of subjective interests and motives represents an active force in the transformation of technology away from its designer envisioned and intended character. This emergent repertory is at the same time a strand in the transformation of culture

²³Leont'ev (1978) writes: "But what is human life? It is the totality, more precisely the system of activities replacing one another. In activity there does take place the transfer of an object into its subjective form, into an image; also in activity, a transfer of activity into its objective results, into its products is brought about. Taken from this point of view, activity appears as process in which mutual transfers between the poles 'subject-object' are accomplished. 'In production the personality is objectivized [*sic*]; in need the thing is subjectivized [*sic*],' noted Marx" (p. 50).

related to new technology.

Yet, investigating and cataloguing these new subjective forms and behaviour genres would remain a merely descriptive exercise if no heed is paid to the dynamic of empowerment and alienation inherent in the appropriation of the Internet. The most important discovery to be made is whether and how people struggle to preserve personal autonomy and control over their lives, to master their situation, in the face of a technology representing an epitome of the universalizing and generalizing relations of ruling (see Castells, 1996, Smith, 1987, 1999) of contemporary capitalist society. How is the relationship between resistance and acceptance played out in the everyday lives of Internet users? I will seek the answer of this question by looking into what de Certeau, Giard and Mayol (1998) called "ordinary culture" (p. 255) - "the subtle combinatory set, of types of operations and registers, that stages and activates a making-do [*faire-avec*], right here and now, which is a singular action linked to one situation, certain circumstances, particular actors" (p.256). Thus I will look for acceptance and resistance at the level of microscopic daily acts and arrangements - using software, following hyperlinks, joking on a chat line, moving the computer from the living room to the basement, etc.

The study reported in the following pages is grounded in an image of the Internet user as an active practitioner of his/her everyday life that is, for its part, made up of a network of activities corresponding to the user's social-biographical situation and aimed at managing, or in Schutz's terms, mastering this situation. The Internet, as a new communication technology and medium, becomes relevant to some of the goals and activities performed within different social-biographical situations both at the level of imposed and intrinsic relevance. The interaction and mutual transformation among these types of relevance will be one of the lines of my analysis.

I will attempt to capture the meanings and definitions that the Internet obtains vis-à-vis various activities performed by users. De Certeau's (1984) question "What do they do with it?"

will be answered in its double subjectivation-objectivation sense. Thus, users' appropriations of the medium will be seen as adding social functionality to it and in this way demonstrating and expanding its multiaccentuality. It will be of particular interest to me to uncover those affordances discovered by users that stem from the intrinsic relevance of the Internet to their social-biographical situations and empower them to master or change these situations in a desired direction. Finally, I will attempt to advance a critique of the "real," industrially fostered shape of the Internet from the perspective of "what is possible" (Lefebvre, 1971). This would mean to extrapolate the observed little behaviour genres initiated by Internet users not to a larger general population but to the institutional process of Internet-building. What should the medium be like, what features should it have if the applications and meanings discovered by users are to be taken seriously and at an equal level with the visions and interests of engineers, managers and marketers?

Based on such a reflection, a bottom-up, grassroots-up, building of the new communication medium as a technological and social structure can be started off.

Research Framework

The construction of my research framework began with the choice of the main character of the Internet story I wanted to tell. I defined the type of Internet user that I wanted to investigate as the "simple consumer" (Latour, 1987, p. 137), technology's Other, the man and woman not holding expertise in the ways of the Internet. I further specified my definition of this user as someone who taps into his/her own resources to acquire a computer and pays for the Internet connection to a commercial (or non-profit) provider. This specification of the user category I wanted to study aimed to exclude the early adopters and the people (most typically information technology professionals and academics) for whom the use of the Internet was

immediately related to earning income and profit.

The terrain at which I wanted to meet the so constructed character was his/her home. In this case, I decided to operationalize the relative phenomenological notion of home (see Heller, 1984) as an inside, a territory which the practitioner of everyday life experiences as familiar, safe and manageable, through the actual homeplace of my characters. Granted, not everybody's homeplace is equivalent to this relative notion of home. There are people without a home anywhere; people with homeplaces experienced as the direct opposite of the notion I am employing here, and of course people who feel at home somewhere else, not at the place where they sleep, rest and reproduce. Recognizing all this complexity, I made a conscious decision to bracket it out in the name of the real focus of my interest. For the purposes of my research, which aimed at tracing the activity of the user, I was determined to look at cases where home (a safe and familiar terrain, a base where the person feels in control) and homeplace (the place of residence) coincided. The very set up of my meeting with respondents presupposed such a coincidence. I was asking Internet users to accept me, a complete stranger, in their residence, to show me their interior, to tell me their Internet stories. To be able to accept the role of the host in a situation like this requires self-confidence, a feeling of safety and a substantial degree of control over one's domestic time and environment. I am aware that people who did not feel that way in their homes were practically excluded from the study.²⁴

The essential third choice, the choice of method was the easiest to make. I felt that my quest for subjective meanings and my commitment to the user's standpoint necessitated the employment of a qualitative methodology. I found an appropriate methodological paradigm in the established strand of media studies often referred to as "audience ethnography" (Morley,

²⁴Seiter (1999) reminds us also that people who work long hours to make the ends meet, that is the low-paid, in her words – impoverished - working class people can hardly afford to spend time participating in studies like this.

1992) or “reception ethnography” (Moore, 1993). This research tradition originated from British cultural studies and represents a strategy for capturing the contextualized audience activity in reading, or decoding, media texts. Seiter (1999) identifies several distinctive features of this so called “ethnographic” research orientation in comparison to the long-established functional tradition reigning in the field of mass communication research. According to her, the researchers who pioneered the ethnographic audience investigation were interested not so much in observable behaviour, but in *structures of meaning* produced by the audience. They found it important to examine the *contexts* of media reception. They sought to establish *rapprochement* with their respondents and treated language as *discourse* rather than as a means for exchange of positive, unequivocal information as in the case of eliciting clear-cut answers to standardized questionnaires.

The characterization of audience ethnography articulated by Moore (1993, 1996) and Morley (1992) is similar. These authors also foreground natural settings, context, holism and subjects’ own viewpoints as definitive of the way in which ethnographic audience research projects are framed. Projects of this kind, Moore (1993) explains, took to heart Hobson’s (1982) call on media theorists to acknowledge the medium’s place as “a part of the everyday life of viewers” (quoted in Moore, 1993, p. 42) and not to isolate the text from the conditions of its reception.

In short, this tradition adopted the “simultaneous commitment to ‘real’ situations and grasping the understanding of informants” that, according to Hakken (1999, p. 46), separates anthropological ethnography from Modernist science. It however did not always live up to the requirements of classical ethnographic methodology. Some of the projects cited as representative of this tradition have been based on brief periods of contact between researcher and subjects in the form of an in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interview (see Seiter, 1999;

Gillespie 1995). The lack of long-term participant observation, considered a hallmark of ethnography, has raised questions whether this kind of research genuinely deserves to be called ethnography at all. For example, Gillespie (1995), who has provided an exemplary case of long-term participatory ethnographic study of media use by Punjabi youth in Southall, England, insists on reserving the term “ethnography” for research that involves long-term immersion. “The ‘native’ view envisioned by classical ethnographers is hardly to be grasped through a series of one-off ‘in-depth’ interviews or brief periods of observation” (p. 55) Gillespie charges.²⁵ Nightingale (1989) has gauged the audience ethnography trend against the widely accepted definition of ethnography given by respected anthropologists such as Marcus and Fisher (1986). According to this definition ethnography is:

A research process in which the anthropologists closely observes, records and engages in the daily life of another culture – an experience labeled as the fieldwork method – and then writes accounts of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail. These accounts are the primary form in which fieldwork procedures, the other culture and the ethnographer’s personal and theoretical reactions are accessible to professionals and other readerships. (p. 18)

Nightingale (1989) finds few of these canonical practices making up the “ethnographic process” (p. 55) in audience research projects that have been labeled ethnographic: “Not only do they not set out to provide an account of an ‘other’ culture, but in many of them the only contact with the ‘other culture’ is an interview or the reading of a letter” (p. 54). Commitment to recording and providing descriptive detail is also conspicuously absent from them, Nightingale complains.

Identifying my methodological stance with that of audience ethnography and employing short-term interview and observation techniques (which will become clear later in this chapter),

²⁵Anthropologist David Hakken (1999), for his part, has identified a similar problem in “ethnographic” projects in the field of information system development. Hakken is critical to such “appropriations of ethnography” where engagement with informants tends to be “shorter term, possibly involving attendance at some meetings and doing some interviews” (p. 43).

I realize that the genuineness of my “ethnography” is questionable from this classical anthropological perspective. Yet, I believe ethnography remains the closest conceptual framework against which my methodology can be defined and understood. What is carried over from ethnography into the kind of research design that I have constructed is not so much a canonical set of techniques but rather a specific *engagement* between researcher and respondents. I have been committed to first, studying a naturally occurring practice,²⁶ second, interacting with my informants in their natural settings, third, grasping their understanding, and finally, maintaining an open *dialogue* with them. Like Schröder (1999), I see this latter condition as belonging to the core of media ethnography. This dialogue, Schröder states, represents an interactive human encounter in which contextualized meanings are exchanged through language.

It should be noted also that the situation created through my research design - a home visit - is much more “real” (and therefore ethnographically valid, as Hakken, 1999, has suggested) than an allegedly “participant” observation conducted by a researcher on a household’s everyday life would have been. Given the private character of domestic life in Western culture, as Moores (1996) has rightly observed, to expect us to “live alongside our informants ‘immersed’ in the routines of a family or household group, is in most cases unrealistic” (p. 31). Participant observation in domestic settings, I believe, would be also disruptive and distorting to the fabric of family everyday life. This life is closed to outsiders by definition. Or more precisely, outsiders are given one acceptable role in family daily life – that of, in the best case, a welcome visitor. (And this is precisely the role that I chose to play vis-à-vis my respondents.)

²⁶Unlike some of the studies cited in the Introduction where computers and Internet connection was provided to subjects by the researchers, all my respondents had brought the medium into their homes themselves.

Do these intrinsic properties of domestic contexts imply that they have to remain forever sealed off from ethnographic research? I think this is a rhetorical question the answer to which depends to a large extent on ethnography's readiness and potential to expand its self-identification beyond canonic principles for the sake of penetrating non-typical terrains. I find encouraging signs of a new more tolerant and exciting conceptualization of ethnography in Marcus's (1995) idea of mobile, multi-site ethnography. This kind of ethnographic practice arises, according to Marcus,²⁷ "in response to empirical changes in the world and therefore to transformed locations of cultural production.... Empirically following the thread of cultural process itself impels the move toward multi-sited ethnography" (p. 97). This ethnography also represents a response to the need to track complex objects of study throughout society.

Following the cultural process of a new medium's social shaping, I have found in my theoretical investigation that the home, the domestic context, represents a crucially important site of cultural production. The penetration and examination of this site, in fact of the multiple domestic sites populated by Internet users, requires ethnographic mobility, re-thinking of old and invention of new ethnographic techniques. I cannot claim that the validity and reliability of such a new set of ethnographic techniques would be beyond questioning. But I am convinced that in order to upgrade these techniques to the status of a trusted method, the research community has to apply them in practical research situations. Thus I see my own project as one such methodological experimentation.

Respondent Recruitment

Already at the stage of recruiting respondents, I had to start imagining and modeling my

²⁷As a matter of fact, this is the same anthropologist on whose (Marcus and Fisher, 1986) definition of ethnography Nightingale (1989, cited above) based her critique of audience ethnography. In his 1995 article Marcus refers to media studies as "one important arena in which multi-sited ethnography has emerged" (p. 103).

relationship with respondents. I invested conscious effort in elaborating an encounter strategy that would ensure reciprocity and some degree of reduction of the characteristic power differential between an academic researcher and a human subject. Although I did not expect my economic and even social status to be higher than that of my respondents, I still was going to play the role of the learned person vis-à-vis them. I had the background of my academic education and the promise of a prestigious academic degree awaiting me in the future that could potentially represent a source of inequality. Ultimately, the very game of the scholarly research that we were going to play together gave me the power of interpreting their stories in a written document and for a larger audience while the echo of their judgment of me and their interpretations of my performance was to remain limited to their own personal worlds. While I had no opportunity to change the macro rules of this game, I wanted to do my best to make its micro procedures fair and equitable as much as possible. Thus I took steps to expose myself in a way similar to the one I expected my respondents to expose themselves. For that purpose, I created a web site where I posted the call for participation in my project (see Appendix A). In this call I briefly explained my research interest and emphasized that I wished to learn from domestic users how they were actually using the Internet and what it did for them - a matter in which they themselves were the most knowledgeable experts. I was not going after "objective" technical or theoretical knowledge that they might have of the medium. I was asking for simple descriptions of their subjective everyday experiences involving the Internet at the practical and the semantic level: What do you do with it and what does it mean to you?

I also found it important to underline that by responding to my call people would be teaching me and helping me learn what I wanted to learn, as well as finish my degree. Upon reflection, I think that this particular element of my definition of the situation in which my respondents and myself were to be involved offset to a significant degree the power advantage I

as a researcher was bound to have in an interview process. They were extending their generosity to me, doing me a favour that I was appreciating with gratitude and humility.

I also included in the site a page describing myself as a professional, through my academic curriculum vitae, and as a human being. To accomplish the latter, I wrote a short text representing a definition of my own social-biographical situation. I described myself as an East European immigrant to Canada, daughter, mother, and graduate student still battling for ground in my new environment. Although I have not asked the people who responded to my call to share their impressions of my self-description, it is my belief that some of them at least decided to participate because they could relate to my situation - be it as a working mother, a newcomer to the country, someone with a precarious social status, someone in need of assistance, etc. I also made it clear that this project was of a purely academic nature. By implementing it I was seeking to satisfy my own scholarly interest and not the commercial interest of any particular Internet business which could have been easily the case given the seeming similarity between what I was studying and market and audience research. Exposing my actual social position and sincere interest in being informed by the participants in my project, I think, I managed to go a long way toward reducing the possible anxiety my respondents could have had if the situation was perceived differently. By talking to me they were communicating with a person pursuing meaningful goals rather than an institution seeking to objectify them for a purpose they could not perceive or understand.

After I put up my project pages on the university web server, I went on to attract potential participants' attention to my call. My natural target was Internet users in the Vancouver area as they were within my potential reach in terms of distance and expense. I posted short announcements with a reference to the project web site in Vancouver and British Columbia newsgroups. I came in contact with the board of directors of the Vancouver Community Net

(VCN) serving, among its other functions, as a low-price Internet service provider, and reached an agreement with them that they would put a short announcement of my study on their homepage. I also asked friends and colleagues to search through their social networks and try to recruit participants in my study. I published ads in two local community newspapers.

The return from these attention-attracting tactics was uneven. I received a few responses from people using the Vancouver and British Columbia newsgroups, but most of them were professionally involved with computers and/or the Internet and thus did not qualify as “simple customers” (Latour, 1987, p. 137). In the end, only one respondent was recruited through this channel. The Vancouver Community Net announcement was much more productive and a total of nine respondents were recruited from among the VCN clients. These people were typically low-tech users in the sense that the Internet features they had access to through the VCN were quite limited and exclusively text-based. Most of them had known close to nothing about computers and networking at the beginning of their VCN experience. Through the mediation of friends and colleagues, I was able to recruit 12 respondents of different levels of computer and network proficiency and equipment. The ads published in the newspapers returned nothing.

Data-Collection Procedures

I prefer to think about what I did as visits to and dialogues with fellow-men and women in overlapping sectors of our everyday lives. With a view to the scholarly goals of those visits and dialogues however, I will have to step into the discourse of social science and call them procedures for data collection. These data collection procedures, as I originally planned them, included four complementary and partly overlapping components. Each of these components was meant to allow for a different view on the same object - the cluster of activities and relations implicating the home Internet connection.

First of all, I wanted to hear the stories of my respondents regarding how and why the Internet connection arrived in their home and how its use gradually took shape (see Appendix B: Interview Protocol). The model underlying my interview protocol presented the Internet connection as the point of intersection of several heterogeneous networks. The physical network included the household's computer and wiring, plus the other domestic objects to which it had a relationship, the Internet provider and the conditions for access among many others small but crucial technical elements. The information network was constituted by the sources of information available on the Internet to which the family members turned. The social network spanned all the people, organizations, real and virtual collectivities and loose formations with which the household was linked via the Internet. The activity network was knit by the interrelated actions that the household members performed on and through the Internet (my expectation here was that they would represent components of diverse activity systems such as work, play, learning, socialization). The semantic network included the meanings produced and expressed in relation to the Internet - its perceived role, value and significance. Juxtaposing the structures of these networks at the individual and the family level, I expected to be able to discern patterns of domestic Internet use that would later be interpreted in their capacity of definitions of the Internet as a communication medium from the side of the domestic user.

Second, I wished to see and examine and experience those spaces in the respondents' homes where their computer and Internet use took place. That was what I called the tour of the computer and Internet related spaces in the respondents' homes. An important feature of these tours was the fact that the users themselves were my guides explaining how these networked niches in the home were gradually carved, in what relationship they stood to the rest of the domestic space and how they organized activities and relationships in the home.

Third, I asked to be taken on a tour of the "computer space" constituted by Internet-use

practices, that is, the traces of Internet use deliberately saved in the memory of peoples' computers or, as it sometimes turned out to be the case, in their accounts on the provider's server. In the language of networking interface programs these were typically bookmarks, favourites, address books, mailboxes, etc. This particular procedure allowed me to examine the electronic artifacts created by users as they moved in and consciously manipulated the substance of cyberspace. Note the difference between this approach and the examination of log files, cache files and other traces that users leave unconsciously as they move in and manipulate cyberspace. The electronic artifacts I examined had a meaning for users. They represented tokens of interests, activities and relationships in which people were involved as knowledgeable actors.

Finally, where possible, I carried out short group-interview sessions in which I asked respondents' family members to talk about the Internet use in their home. In practice, finding other family members at home during my visits was rarely the case no matter that I always asked the main respondents to invite other members of their households to participate in the interview. In the few occasions when that happened, the participation of family members took place on an ad-hoc basis: a spouse, or a child would join the conversation for a short period of time to contribute comments concerning the main respondent's use practice and to provide a general outline of his or her own Internet experiences. In the remaining cases information on family members' use practices was usually received indirectly from the main respondent's verbal account and the examination of the family computer space, when the computer happened to be used by other family members as well.

The conversations (interviews) with main respondents and family members were audio taped. Both audiotaping and note taking were performed during the two kinds of tours - of the real and the virtual spaces constituted by Internet use. The audiotapes were later transcribed verbatim and analyzed. Only two interviews were carried out differently. One took place in a

cafeteria, as this was the choice of the respondent. The other was conducted through e-mail: the interview protocol was sent to the respondent and she e-mailed her answers back. The two tours were not possible in these two instances, however, the respondents were asked to give a verbal description of their homes' Internet related spaces. My use of the data produced by these two interviews is very limited.

Most of my visits started with an informal exchange in which the main respondent and I negotiated details such as where exactly our conversation was going to take place - in the living room or the kitchen, whether we would have coffee or tea, etc. In many cases we talked about our personal and family history, how he or she came to live in that location, what the neighbourhood was like, etc. Then, we moved to the more structured conversation starting with the respondent's reading and signing the informed consent form. After the form was completed, I could turn on the tape-recorder and begin with the questions of my interview protocol. In most sessions this structured, researcher-directed format was only followed for the first 10-15 minutes of the conversation. Thereafter, the roles usually changed with me responding with queries and requesting additional explanations on the basis of what my conversational partner had said. The function of my questions and comments was indeed to direct the flow of his or her talk to topics and issues of interest to my research. I was at the same time careful to ensure enough room for my conversational partners to suggest issues and questions for exploration stemming from their own systems of relevance.

The tapes have captured this complex negotiation of the course of the dialogue. My respondents were most of the time aware that I was supposed to sit in the drivers' seat, that it was my goals that the conversation was intended to serve. And yet, they took their chances to initiate change of direction, or switch to a narrative mode when they felt strongly about something or wanted to present a coherent interpretative account of an experience. I, for my

part, struggled to stay on topic while at the same time tolerating and even encouraging digressions that arose my curiosity and tapped into unanticipated areas and issues. In retrospect, I have to admit I have cut short quite a few potentially revealing digressions. At several points of the transcripts, I caught myself silencing the respondent, unable to recognize what promised to be an insight or an enriching detail of his or her story. Unfortunately, it is impossible to recreate these moments. Even if you can, in principle, phone, e-mail or even meet the person again and ask for further explanation, the momentum of the narrative is lost. In the speech genre of the "active interview" (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) that I was invoking, knowledge is not elicited from people, it is discovered in the process of exchange and can also die with it if not properly handled. These failures admitted, I tried to practice a whole register of voices - from mildly authoritative - directing and demanding where I could sense a need for structure in my partners, to almost passively accepting and uncritically encouraging back channel responses where my partners had stories of their own to tell.

After we finished the interview, we usually moved to the computer where the respective basement room, closet or kitchen corner, whatever happened to be the case, was briefly examined and discussed. Then, we would turn on the computer and start the virtual tour of the computer space of the user and his or her family. The main benefit of this procedure was that it allowed the respondent's verbal account of his or her Internet use to be confirmed and specified. Secondly, users' technical skills and challenges could be discussed in a hands-on context. Contrary to my expectation that the users would have introduced a personalized order in their computer space, from which I would be able to read their use patterns, this was actually observed only in the cases where the users were, as I initially thought, technically inclined. The rest of the virtual tours revealed a rather disorganized picture of imposed technical features on one hand, and on the other, users' refusal to take these features into account and arrange their

computer interior in accordance with them. I was able to make better sense of this difference when I related it to respondents' Internet stories later in my analysis. It turned out to be an indicator of two quite distinct types of relationships that users were forming with Internet technology. I will discuss these relationships at length in the next chapter.

A shortcoming of the procedure of the virtual tour of the user's computer interior was the lack of a technical tool for capturing the successive screens that the user and I were moving through. Although I audio taped their talk as they led me through their computer space, later, it proved to be very difficult to interpret the transcripts without access to the visual images (the particular computer screens) the verbal explanations were referring to. I asked some respondents to send me the lists of their bookmarks and address book entries by e-mail, but this did not solve the problem because establishing the link between an indexical verbal comment ("this is," "as you see," "here are") to the concrete item it was pointing to remained a matter of guessing.

I still believe that methodologically the virtual tour was a valuable procedure. It gave respondents the chance to validate and concretize their narratives. Looking at bookmarks and contact addresses they were reminded of significant experiences and could recreate them in remarkably vivid form. Thus the electronic artifacts - ephemeral and yet material traces of past events - served as "trails of crumbs," as one of the women in my study put it, tracing my respondents' trajectories in cyberspace. In future research employing this procedure I would take care to equip myself with a screen-capturing device, preferably synchronized with the tape recorder, so that the link between the verbal explanations of the respondent (guide) and the visual content of the tour could be preserved.

Closing my research design outline, I have to mention the failed pie. In my original plan, I had included a procedure where I would ask the respondents to cut a pie representing their Internet use into slices proportionate to the frequency with which particular types of activities

such as (1) work, (2) learning, (3) socializing, social relationship building and maintaining (4) consumption (ordering products, paying bills, etc.) and (5) entertainment characterized their use. I had hoped to be able to identify types of relevance and corresponding user types with regard to these activities.

Indeed, in some cases users could methodically slice the pie and assign percentage measures to the frequency of the different types of use. More often however, the different types of activities enlisted above collapsed into one another, leaving the user unable to disentangle learning from entertainment, socializing from work, etc. The puzzlement with which most respondents approached the task of cutting the pie convinced me that the typology of activities I had devised had no personal meaning to users. It was particularly difficult for them to do a quantification of the frequency of their use along the different types of activities. That is why I decided to abandon this procedure and to try to extract categories of use out of respondents' own accounts instead. Indeed, this was a strategy better suited to the phenomenological underpinning of my research. As my later data analysis demonstrated, most of the time people were turning to the Internet in response to specific aspects and problems of their social-biographical situations (isolation, dispersed social networks and communities of interest, etc.) and not in pursuit of some highly rationalized goal pertaining to a clearly definable sphere of activity.

The Respondents: Social-Biographical Situations

The group of people who volunteered to take part in the research - the self-selected sample of simple customers of the Internet - was rather diverse. Looking at participants' socio-demographic characteristics, there was only one point of relative convergence - they were mostly people of modest income: the annual income of their families fell between \$20, 000 and

\$50, 000 (Canadian).²⁸ The remaining socio-demographic characteristics were widely divergent. The respondent group included 10 women and 11 men of different marital status, both single (6 women, 3 of them raising children; 4 men) and living with a partner (4 women, 7 men; all but one of these couples had children); people aged from 22 to 73; a range of educational levels - from high school to graduate degree; people with different employment situations (see Appendix C, Table 1 for a socio-demographic and social-biographical features of respondents). Socio-demographic diversity was a desired feature of this group with a view to the exploratory nature of the research. The goal of this project was not to establish a relationship between a particular socio-demographic position and the medium of the Internet, but rather to uncover what elements of different social-biographical situations make the Internet relevant to people.

Note the distinction between the notion of position and that of situation that is made here. Position refers to the practice of classifying subjects with regard to theoretically pre-established systems and hierarchies of relations in society as this is done for specific purposes by social scientists, economists, marketing agencies, etc. Situation suggests a subject-centred perspective with regard to action. Appropriating the Schutzian concept of situation, I see the users of the Internet as interested actors struggling to master a particular social-biographical situation and, in the process, facing the need to acquire new knowledge and resort to new means for action. Thus the Internet becomes relevant for people in the context of diverse situations and their corresponding action courses. What are these situations? Are they randomly variable, or do they share certain common features? What aspects of the Internet as a communication medium do they bring to the fore? What kinds of practices involving the Internet originate from them?

²⁸As a point of reference, consider Statistics Canada specified "low-income cut-off lines" (or "poverty lines") for 1996. For a big Canadian city these are respectively: 4-member household - \$32,238; 3-member household - \$26,133; 2-member household- \$21,415; 1-member household - 17,132

Are these practices taken into account in the institutionalization of the Internet? These are the concrete questions that I will address in my interpretation of the data in following chapters.

Data Analysis

The verbatim transcripts of the interviews were entered into the qualitative analysis software QSR NUD.IST. This software allows in-depth scrutiny of every chosen element of a transcript (word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, etc.) and its categorization with regard to a predefined and/or emergent set of concepts (analytical categories). It further supports the comparative examination of excerpts originating from different interviews (or generally, documents) subsumed under the same category as well as the search for relationships between and among categories.

I used NUD.IST to analyze all individual interview transcripts. I dissected each transcript into excerpts addressing different topics (as intended by the respondent) or related to concepts that interested me. I classified all these excerpts under different “nodes” or categories derived from their topics. I had a preexisting taxonomy of topics, the discussion of which I had elicited through my interview questions. I also identified a multitude of new topics initiated by the respondents that emerged from the interviews. Thus at this stage, I performed a qualitative content analysis of the transcripts assigning excerpts to topics: what the respondents talked about (see Appendix D for a list of themes). As a matter of fact, this analytical procedure left me with an intimidating number of different topics that demonstrated very few points of convergence. This was a terrifying moment of my research. I could not figure out what I could find in this body of data other than a number of disparate individual stories. The experience of a disabled single woman communicating with a support group via the Internet, the hobbyist-like engagement with the medium of a retired mechanical engineer e-mailing children and friends,

the Internet research of a nutrition consultant, etc., seemed to have close to nothing in common.

My model of the Internet connection as a point of overlap of several heterogeneous networks - physical, social, informational and semantic - felt too artificial to provide a basis for re-assembling the various subtopics emerging out of respondents' talk into a meaningful structure. My typology of activities underlying the pie-cutting exercise was not supported by respondents' experiences. I felt like an archeologist in the middle of a rich excavation, surrounded by thousands of small fragments of artifacts, but having no idea about which pieces belonged together and what was to be put together out of them. I was in need of a different logic of making sense of the interviews, other than my original model.

After the first wave of panic subsided, I decided to leave my fragmented excavation for the time being and go back to the whole and intact transcripts of the individual interviews. I read each of them carefully this time looking not for labels that could be attached to selected fragments, but rather for the underlying structure of the narrative. At this stage I had to recall Mishler's (1986) discussion of narrative analysis and the lessons learnt from Propp's (1928/1968) study of the morphology of Russian fairy tales. I focused my attention on the different components of my respondents' Internet narratives and how these components worked together to produce a coherent story. From this perspective then, I could distinguish several recurring turns. First, in response to my request to tell me the story of how they came to know about the Internet and how they brought it into their homes, my respondents were actually producing an account that I later called "becoming an Internet user." Common for most of these accounts was the presence of the character of the person who helped my respondents, then new users, to come to grips with the new technology. The accounts typically culminated with a discovery - the discovery of one or two important and personally meaningful applications of the medium that justified its continued employment. An interesting twist of the narrative at this

point was the introduction of “because” clauses that connected the discovery with aspects of the respondent's social-biographical situation at the moment: “because I was isolated,” “because after my retirement,” etc.

The integration of the new technical device and the practices growing around it in the space, time and relationships of the family was another distinguishable component of my respondents' narratives. It was a story of the struggle for control over the process of change, and respectively conservation, in the home set off by the new medium. The communication with people and groups outside the home through the Internet represented yet another structural component of respondents' narratives.

It would be inaccurate to say that this narrative structure had emerged spontaneously out of my respondents' course of story telling. My questions had contributed significantly to people's recollection of particular sequences of events and focusing on particular aspects of their Internet use. And yet, as I pointed out before, they were not diligently reproducing the model of their experience I had charted in advance and based my questions on. The structure of their narrative was taking shape as a collaborative achievement of the respondents and myself. He or she was replying to the questions present in my interview guide in a selective manner, picking those that he or she preferred to elaborate on, branching into sub questions that I could not have raised and completely ignoring others. Thus unlike Propp (1928/1968) who found that “all fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure” (quoted in Mishler, 1986, p. 85), I cannot claim that I have uncovered a universal underlying structure of the Internet-use experience. My bounded claim is that the respondents and I had managed to construct a framework comprised of those themes and concepts brought by me from the literature that resonated with users' actual meaningful experiences of the Internet.

After I discerned these structural components of respondents' narratives, I could use

them to bring organization into the fragments that my analysis had created and to make sense of the commonalities and differences these fragments exhibited. Thus, for example, what the disabled single woman and the retired mechanical engineer had in common was that they both had received their outdated computers from close friends for free and had counted on the faithful assistance of those friends throughout the process of learning how to use the technology and what to do with the medium. Where their experiences differed was in how they felt about befriending others on the Internet and what they held appropriate behaviour with regard to such relationships.

Summary

The four overarching themes that I formulated as a result of this movement between content analysis, structural analysis and comparative synthesis are as follows: (1) "Becoming a domestic Internet user," that is, building the home Internet connection as a network of technical (hardware and software), social and cognitive elements and relationships; (2) "Situating the virtual," referring to the discovery by the user of these specific affordances of the technology that make it an effective tool for tackling and sometimes mastering his or her particular social-biographical situation; (3) "Making room for the Internet," meaning integrating the medium in the spaces, activities, interaction and value systems of the family home; and (4) "Virtual togetherness," dealing with the networks of relationships transcending the home that are weaved and sustained with the help of the new medium. I consider these themes at length in the following chapters. Under each of them I look for sources and expressions of user choice and activity with regard to the Internet. In each of these areas, I argue, the new medium stirs and transforms the preexisting arrangements of domestic everyday life. At the same time, by interpreting, deliberating and making action choices in each of these areas in the course of their

everyday lives, users participate in rendering the medium its shape.

Chapter 4

Becoming a Domestic Internet User

... the presence of a given kind of behaviour is the result of a sequence of social experiences during which the person acquires a conception of the meaning of the behaviour, and perceptions and judgments of objects and situations, all of which make the activity possible and desirable. Thus, the motivation or the disposition to engage in the activity is built up in the course of learning to engage in it and does not antedate this learning process. For such a view it is not necessary to identify those "traits" which "cause" the behaviour. Instead, the problem becomes one of describing the set of changes in the person's conception of the activity and the experience it provides for him.

(Howard S. Becker, 1953, "Becoming a Marihuana User," p. 223)

Introduction

In the conclusion of his article "Becoming a Marihuana User," Becker (1953) writes: "This analysis of the genesis of marihuana use shows that the individuals who come in contact with a given object may respond to it in a great variety of ways. If a stable form of new behaviour toward the object is to emerge, a transformation of meanings must occur in which the person develops a new conception of the nature of the object" (p. 242). In this chapter I set out to analyze the process of becoming a domestic Internet user combining Becker's social-process approach with the idea of "actor network" (Law, 1987, Callon, 1987) applied to the individual user's Internet connection.

In the stories my respondents told me about their encounters and early experiences with the Internet it could be noticed that the domestic Internet connection had been gradually built up both in terms of equipment, skills and conception of its nature and usefulness. It had emerged as a "heterogeneous network" (Callon, 1987, p. 93) of technical, social, cultural and cognitive elements that users were putting together throughout the course of everyday life. In the

following analysis I will attempt to identify the various components or “actors” participating in this network and explain how and why the connections among them arose.

First I will discuss briefly what relevance the home computer had for users before they had hooked up to the Internet. I will show that a deep-cutting computerization of the public worlds of work and education and the ideology of the “information society” accompanying it had compelled non-professional people to open their homes to computer technology. Interestingly, the quality of the technical devices present in these homes was pretty low as typically the computer had been handed down to these users at no or minimal cost by friends and relatives. On this basis, I identify an emergent social stratification among computer and Internet users calling for transcendence of the binary model of “haves” and “have-nots” in discussions of equity of access to this technology.

Second, I will take a close look at one of the central characters in the social process of becoming a domestic Internet user and a critical node in the actor-network making up the home Internet connection. I call this character the “warm expert” and reflect on his/her significance for the social shaping of technology.

Finally, I propose a typology of user-Internet relations connecting my empirical observations with the taxonomy proposed by Ihde (1990) and discussed in Chapter 2. I go on to examine the structure of amplifications and reductions of user autonomy and power for action implicit in these relations. I am particularly interested in the degrees of critical reflexivity and agency vis-à-vis the Internet (as technology and medium) available to users in these different relations.

The Home Computer

The computer was the first element to make its way into the future user's home. It usually had gotten there along the line of a productive activity such as work or study performed in the outside world. Most of the time, the need to use a computer (its relevance) was externally imposed by a certain organization, or the expense for buying one was justified by the expectation of increased efficiency in an income-yielding activity. Thus it was the dominant rationality of productivity and efficiency built into computer technology that was smuggling the machine in the homes of people in this lower-middle class social bracket.

We had the computer already. My wife had bought it for her research, she was doing her master's at [University]. (Theodore)

I went into business for myself for a few years. I had already a computer - a 286, it wasn't good enough for auto-CAD at that point. So I bought a 486 - at that time it was the best and today it is already old and out of date. So, I had everything already there, I only needed to add a modem. I got the modem when I got onto CompuServe. (Reiner)

[What were you doing with your computer before you got the Internet?] Writing letters, word processing. I did some work in security business for a while, I did the basics - selling security products like cameras. So I did bookkeeping and record keeping. (Jane)

Taking the computer home usually had meant taking work home from one's job-site or turning the home into the primary site of paid work. Thus it can be argued that the practice of "extending"²⁹ work time and work activities and importing them into the space of the home is no longer limited to professionals with higher education and college and university students as used to be the case a few years ago.³⁰ It can be observed in the case of workers with lower

²⁹This term is borrowed from a study of home-computer users in Norway carried out by Aune (1996) and applied here with modifications.

³⁰The typical extender is an adult, with a college or university degree, if s/he is not still a student. S/he is a family person. To be available to the family is the main reason given for bringing work home" (Aune 1996: 103). The "extenders" in Aune's study used the computer predominantly for work- or study-related tasks.

education and status as well. In my respondent group this category was represented by a homemaker who had done book-keeping work for a security-device distribution firm, a technician who had had an independent consulting business, a proposal specialist who wanted to be able to do writing and editing for her employer from home. The computerization of the home is a direct reflection of the sweeping computerization of production and education taking place in the world outside. Computer technology acquires imposed relevance in the everyday lives of broader social circles.

For another group of people, the imposition of the computer as relevant to their situation had a more or less ideological nature. "When we got the computer first, it was basically for the kids and for us to be upgraded, to be technically upgraded," Sophie explained. "To be technically upgraded" stood for an effort to keep up with technology even when no immediately instrumental applications of it could be found in the home. Similarly, Martha, a meat-wraper for Safeway, felt compelled to "upgrade" herself with computer equipment and skills in light of her job-related injury that made her look for occupational alternatives. Her exposure to computerized equipment for weighing and labeling at work, and the general discourse of the "computer age," had led her to look in that direction. The computer was presenting itself to her as a source of job opportunities, even if still vague: "And I took a basic programming course a year or two before that. I thought in this computer age I better stay in touch" (Martha).

For a third group of users in my study the computer was handed down by a friend or relative who was upgrading his or her own equipment at work or at home, or had access to a computer of depreciated value that could be given out for free.

Being retired I basically try to minimize my expenditure on and around the computer. I started with an MX which was free. Someone was throwing it out. Then I bought a second-hand 286, three years ago and then quite recently, this year, a friend of mine who is a computer programmer brought a mother board for a 386 and put that in the computer. So now I have a 386. All I needed to go out

and buy was a hard drive - I didn't have enough memory, so I bought a hard drive. (John)

This practice points towards an interesting mechanism of social diffusion of computer technology. The machine, although in a more or less out-dated version, becomes available to people in the social networks of computer- and computerized professionals. Non-professionals and "poor relatives" take up the computer waste and put it into uses of their own. Thus a second kind of extension – extension of the field of social penetration of computer technology can be observed. Notably, in some of the cases in this last group, the explicit motivation for accepting the free computer had been its communication function.

My brother had just upgraded his computer. My brother works, he is an actuary, so he uses computers all the time... So, he was upgrading and he offered me this computer. He had offered it to me 3 or 4 times before and finally I said ok because I had heard - I have had arthritis now since 1992 - that there was a site on there on which I could meet people with arthritis. So I said, here is my chance to use the Internet for something that would be useful to me.... I'd seen them, computers, in the library and I was sort of intrigued but I could never find how they could be of any use to me. I am not into learning something that is not useful. (Garry)

For Ellen, a former editor with a disability preventing her from working at the time of the interview, the home computer gained relevance when she became house bound due to her illness:

I was already familiar with the Internet through my work but I didn't actually have a computer at home until I became house bound. It was a while before I could even be able to think about the Internet. It was just about two years ago. My friend came and he said "I 'm going to set you up on the Internet, and I'm going to show you how to use it and this specific function was different from when I used to work. The main purpose was in order for me to be able to connect to a support group. (Ellen)

So, Ellen's received an old Macintosh from her friend and got an Internet connection through the local Community Net, also for free. Predictably, Ellen's equipment, as well as that of the other people in this group, was far from being top of the line. Interestingly however, these inhabitants of the margins of the computerized world seemed to find rationales for engaging

with computers (and the Internet) that were deviant from the dominant programs for action (Latour, 1992) embodied in the machines. These diverse appropriations will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

Hooking up

Let us now look into the types of motivations that led the respondents to make the step from an isolated (stand-alone) computer, a machine for word-processing, bookkeeping, game-playing, etc. into the Internet. Why did they want to bring home a new communication medium? How did the Internet as a technology gain relevance for the people interviewed?

Despite the fact that the respondents in this study were not computer or Internet professionals, quite a few of them had experienced an outside institutional pressure to hook up to the Internet from home. This was most notable in the cases of those who were involved in college or university education. There were also others who felt the need to be able to transfer files between their office and their home (Dana, Rita), or to do work- or study-oriented research on the Internet from home (Sophie, Vera, Dorris, Sandy). In these cases, one could discern a repetition of the pattern captured by Aune's (1996) "extender" metaphor. The Internet connection at home was seen as relevant in the context of the relations between work/education and family life. It was brought in as a mechanism for "extending" the work/education space, or maybe in this case for blending that work/education space with the home space:

The Internet came next because I was in nursing [college program], ... and they strongly recommended it as a research resource, for looking up all kinds of different things we'd need to do in nursing ... I thought I just could use the one [connection] at school to deal with the addresses that were assigned to us at school... But he [her husband] said that the reality was that it's easier to use it from home, from the comfort of my own home, and he was right, because as soon as I was done with classes, I wanted to come home. (Sophie)

Another type of motivation, not necessarily separate from the instrumental one, had to do with a more abstract exploration interest.³¹ In the sense in which I employ the category, the “explorer” is a user whose early motivation to hook up to the Internet is not predominantly instrumental and institutionally imposed as in the case of the extender. For this type of user the Internet acquires a non-utilitarian culturally imposed relevance.

Why I wanted to have an account? Because the Internet is something of fashion, there is a lot of talk about the Internet and I can see some business possibilities. The excitement to have something new was the primary reason. I wanted to try everything - surfing, the discussions, all those businesses that were going online. (Patrick)

I guess initially I was attracted by curiosity only. It was so much in the news, in the media hype and whatever. I guess you want to see what is really going on. I think one of my sons said once: “If you don't have it, you feel like an outcast. You don't know what is really going on. If you don't have e-mail, who are you?” So curiosity was at the beginning, but then I realized - hey, there is something really good happening. (Reiner)

A third type of motivation to install an Internet connection at home – most often driven by “the desire to deal with e-mail” (Don) - could be characterized as rendering the medium intrinsic relevance:

Then a friend started telling me about the Internet. He had a son in Calgary and another one in Montreal and he told me how every night he got e-mail letters from them and he would e-mail back. And I said: “How do you do that? How much does it cost you?” And he said: “It doesn't cost me anything. Would you like to try it?” So he came and hooked me up with CompuServe. (John)

Users such as Garry and Ellen, quoted above, also fell in this category. They were orienting to the Internet as a matter of free volition looking for non-conventional solutions to personal problems and needs.

³¹Aune, describes the “explorer” as another ideal-type of computer user characterized by a combination of type of activity one performs with the computer and style of work. The type of activity in the case of the explorer is a mixture of both work and leisure. His/her style of work is “expressive,” meaning that he/she (but most often he) is involved with the computer as more than a tool. For the “explorer” the computer itself becomes a goal (see Aune, 1996:102-3). I am adopting Aune's categories here leaving out their two-dimensionality. At this stage of my analysis, I find them appropriate for characterizing types of user motivation for adopting the Internet, for bringing it home.

What was common for most of the people across the three categories discerned in this section (with the exception of Rita and Carol) was their caution not to make unnecessary spending on the computer/Internet equipment and service - not having or expecting substantive tangible profit from it – because of their relatively modest disposable income. Yet, there were marked differences in how the reasonable level of expenses was perceived depending on the kind of motives people had for bringing information technology into their home. The divide ran along the lines of first, type of motivation for using the computer and the Internet (imposed or intrinsic); second, age; and finally, a third factor that I will call “relationship with technology.” The complex interplay among these factors was in the basis of the households’ “moral economy” (Silverstone et al., 1992, p. 17) when it came to determining the extent of resources that could be dedicated to acquiring and sustaining an Internet connection.

Intrinsic computer and Internet adoption motivation did not lead people to invest substantively in up-to-date equipment. Age was one factor determining whether the intrinsic motivations for both Internet and computer acquisition would lead to older and less powerful equipment and slower connection. Older people in the studied group typically had been reluctant to expend on powerful equipment. With younger people the factor that I have labeled “relationship with technology” seemed to have an expressed influence over the kind of equipment acquired. I will examine this factor in detail in one of the following sections.

The tangible outcome of these differently patterned motivations was a difference in the levels of power and speed of the equipment installed in the home. Thus a continuum between low-tech users and high-tech users could be discerned.

Low-tech users put up with a limited access to the Internet in terms of both time and features and, often, navigated much more cumbersome interfaces than those with up-to-date equipment, software and service. This difference resulted in two quite distinct kinds of Internet

use experience (the most decisive factor being the presence or absence of a graphical interface) and ultimately in different conceptions of what it meant to be a domestic Internet user.

Previous discussions about the issue of access to the Internet have worked with a binary model - a person either has access to the Internet or not. At this more advanced stage of the social diffusion of this technology, the question *what kind of access* is available to a user or a category of users needs to be raised more insistently. The answer to this question could orient the practical shaping of the Internet on the part of site and service designers.

The inequality in technical equipment poses also the problem of the new gaps emerging among people who have access to the Net. A whole new social stratification seems to be emerging among Internet users themselves. There exist high-tech along with low-tech users and both these categories, as well as the myriad of intermediary states between them, find meaningful uses of the medium, as I will show in the following chapters. However, the course of technical and institutional development of the Internet is being charted by commercial and political players with regard to the high-tech users only, or predominantly. Low-tech designs and technical solutions, one example is textual browsers, are not pursued. This marginalizes Internet users with older equipment and slow connections and limits the range of meaningful applications to which they can put the new medium. Respectively, the cultural forms designed on the presumption of low-tech devices remain underdeveloped and even become obsolete (for example the withdrawal of users from community nets).

I argue that if the Internet is to be developed as an equitable social resource, the actual circumstances and substantive interests of low-tech users have to be taken in consideration by software and service designers on one hand, and content providers on the other. What sense would it make to develop flashy Web-based job-ad sites if unemployed users cannot afford the type of connection that would allow them to surf the Web? Ellen, the user with a disability

referred to earlier, for example could not access the Web because of technical limitations and respectively could not find the information regarding treatments of her disease that she was looking for desperately. Another aspect of this high-tech bias of the medium was touched upon in the comment of one of my respondents who said that the BC jobs newsgroup had to be renamed to "BC computer jobs." How is the Internet serving parking patrollers, auto-body technicians and meat wrappers (all represented in my respondent group) if the majority of the positions advertised through this medium are intended for computer professionals? The existence of low-status and low-tech users is not taken into account to the degree necessary. Content presented on the Internet typically caters to users occupying higher educational, professional, income and respectively technical-equipment brackets. And this problem is about to be aggravated with the advent of e-commerce. This deficiency in application and content development can infringe on vital democratic processes, allegedly supported by the new medium, when it is reproduced by public organizations such as government, unions, civic associations, etc.

I will reserve further exposition of this problem and discussion of the possible solutions to it for the conclusion of this thesis. At this point of my analysis it would be useful to remember that the weaving of the complex network of actors and actants constituting the home Internet connection has barely begun with the arrival of the computer, the modem, the communication software and the Internet Service Provider's more or less responsive telephone number. In the following two sections I will consider two other critical and quite complex components of this network: first, the acquisition of the knowledge and skills necessary to operate the system and secondly, the emergence of a user-technology relation, or to paraphrase Becker (1953) – the acquisition of a conception of the object that would make the practice of use possible and desirable.

Networking Knowledge and Skills: The Warm Expert

The acquisition of a minimum of the necessary techniques is a crucial requirement if use of the Internet is to continue and stabilize. My respondents had traversed a complex path to pick up such techniques (combinations of knowledge and skills) in both formal settings - an Internet course at the college, an instructional session at the library - and within their own homes with the help of more experienced friends and relatives. Notably, even when the introduction to the Internet had been initiated somewhere else, the "domestication" (Silverstone, 1994, p. 97) of the medium, its appropriation unfolding in one's own home, had been intensively assisted by a close friend. The computer/Internet literate friend or relative was a recurring character in all respondents' domestication stories.

This character appeared initially in the role of someone who precipitated the encounter between the user and the technology. This was the person who "started telling me about the Internet" (Don), or insisted that "if you don't have it, you don't know what is really going on" (Reiner; see quotes above), or that the respondent should have it in order to be able to maintain e-mail communication with that friend or relative. In Jane's case that was her brother in Montreal who also gave her the modem; with Reiner, it was his son, etc.

An even more important role that the friend's character played in these stories however, was one that I would like to call the role of the "warm expert." The warm expert is an Internet/computer technology expert in the professional sense or simply in a relative sense vis-à-vis the less knowledgeable other. The two characteristic features of the warm expert are that he/she possesses knowledge and skills gained in the System world of technology and can operate in this world, but is at the same time immediately accessible in the user's lifeworld as a fellow-man/woman. The warm expert mediates between the technological universal and the

concrete situation, needs and background of the novice user with whom she/he is in a close personal relationship.

In Martha's story this role was played by a friend from a remote suburb who came to her house when she bought her new 486 and stayed there for a while helping her with her computer: "We played on the computer, we just played with it and he used a lot of metaphors."³² That friend was on CompuServe, so Martha too took a subscription with CompuServe. Subsequently, the correspondence with that same friend would make one of the main streams in the flow of her e-mail.

In Theodore's experience, the warm expert was a cousin (a professional "tech support person") living in the US who visited like a missionary the homes of his dispersed relatives in North America and hooked them up to the Internet. Theodore's modem and the idea about his first mailing list subscription came as gifts from that cousin.

Garry took it upon himself to learn how to use his newly installed computer and Internet connection relying on what he had heard at an introductory session in the library, and by trial and error. However, when he crashed his computer shortly after he started his explorations, he had to call on a computer knowledgeable friend:

So there was a misconnection in the mouse and the pointer wouldn't come up, so I thought it was something wrong and pressed every button on the key board in sequence trying to find out... And during that procedure I crashed the machine. That was the first thing I did. Luckily, I have a friend who is just super technical! He lives and breathes technical things... (Garry)

John was often walked through his computer problems on the phone by some of his expert friends. Sophie and her husband sometimes needed to call as far as California to receive personalized computer help from her husband's stepfather, a systems analyst.

³²Unfortunately, I did not appreciate the importance of this theme at the time of the interview and did not ask Martha to explain what these metaphors were. I can only speculate that these metaphors had the task of translating the concepts of the technological system into the lifeworldly stock of knowledge that tutor and tutee had in common.

In the case of Ellen, her friend gave her the computer along with the idea to connect to a support group for her illness: "David was the one who heard about it and told me about its existence. Because I was so ill that I couldn't really, wasn't in a state to do any research of my own." The same friend held her hand in both the literal and the figurative sense in helping her learn what sequence to go through in order to get connected. Ellen's mental problems stemming from her medical condition made the learning process extremely painful, but both she and her friend persevered:

So David would sit there and show me: here you do this and this, and he had to go over and over it again. I was like a two year old. When I would write down painfully and slowly all the steps and had no idea what he was talking about but only knew that I had to write this down and somehow there will be a moment - a day from now, or a week, or a month, when I will actually be able to follow it and to figure it out.³³ (Ellen)

Sandy hooked up to the Internet from home following the advice of one of her professors. She was planning to drop his course because it required Internet research. Sandy found it impossible to go to the campus computer lab given her part-time job, young child and family responsibilities:

And he [her professor] provided a guy named Stanley who came over and helped me to get hooked up to the Internet. Very nice, very nice guy, and since then Stanley and I have become friends. So we met at the university and he told me what I needed to have and then he said "I'll come over to your place" because I was confused. And he came, hooked me up and got me the software. (Sandy)

With Stanley's help, Sandy learnt how to use a chat program: "I think I phoned Stanley and he told me - by that time I had Netscape and a connection thing - so Stanley told me to go to this place called www.talkcity.com." Armed with this knowledge she went on to discover richer sources of technical help on the network itself:

³³I am convinced that many healthy people would recognize in this description their own first steps on the computer and/or the Internet. I feel compelled to express special thanks to my own David for holding my hand gently and patiently and to Richard P. who knew how to draw the cables of my first pathetic home computer.

Quite often, once I had that chat line hooked up, a lot of my help came from people in that chat line like Roland who had a computer science degree. And he made it easy. ... There's a lot of people online and if you go into the computer chat rooms, that would do the same thing, you just have to ask for the help and I think asking for the help and knowing where to go for the help is the hardest part online. (Sandy)

John and Alex also testified that in the complex process of social learning of the Internet not only face-to-face but also "virtual" interactions were involved:

I tried that [software] first and I got into some problems with it and somebody came back from Germany helping me with the solution to the problem in the newsgroup related to that particular program. And somebody sent me, without me even asking, an updated edit program better than mine was. All of a sudden this thing appeared. I guess I must have asked some question that prompted him to do that. So it is amazing to me how friendly, when you get into specific technical areas, how friendly the people are. (John)

Even though Roland was only a virtual presence for Sandy - she met him on a chat channel and had never seen him face-to-face - the relationship between the two of them illustrates the multiple strands that build up the tie between a novice user and a warm expert:

Roland's and mine relationship was mostly joking around, but we at some point got quite deep into his relationship with his wife and my relationship with my husband... Because his wife was very much like my husband - nag, nag, nag, you know. We talked about that. We talked about Star Trek, because I like Star Trek and he is a passionate Star Trek person. He had a Macintosh computer, I had the same. He is a computer scientist. He helped me a lot with my Mac. He was always finding stuff that I needed to download or go look at this or that. Sometimes we would surf web sites together, so we had Netscape up when we were chatting and he'd say "Go look at this site," and we'd go and see. At some point I decided to buy a new computer and I bought a really good Mac and he was instrumental in helping me decide what Mac to get and what features I needed. Just lots of technology stuff... He was into digital stuff - photography and movies, and ... He would make them, burn them on a CD ROM and mail them to me so I could see his family and stuff. I think he is just leaving his wife now. I haven't heard from him for a month and a half and I know that he is in an absolute chaos right now. (Sandy)

At the time we spoke, less than two years after her initial introduction to the Internet, Sandy was often called upon to teach other people who wanted to set up their own Internet

connections at home. In her teaching practice she drew on what she had learnt from Stanley,

Roland and her own discoveries:

Lots of people now get me to hook them up to the Internet because they know that I hang out there. One of the first things that I download is a chat line program and I say: this is where you go for help - and if they have a Macintosh I will set it up so that they just go in there - in the Macintosh room. And if you go in there and ask for help there are hundreds of people that will help you - they'll tell you where to go and what to do. Then you form relationships with other people who have computers.... [ISP] has their own software but I don't recommend people to use it - I recommend that they download their own. It takes more time to download it, but then they have learnt how to download software and they are not afraid of it. That's how Stanley taught me - "Don't use [ISP] software, Sandy, use your own software because you are in control of it."
(Sandy)

Martha, who was initially taught by her friend, also found herself on the other side of this ubiquitous process of informal mutual teaching about the technology and the medium:

... and it's the same that goes around, comes around. Whenever any friend, mostly women friends, whose husbands don't have the time to show them or don't know what this piece of equipment is in their home.... I'll go over for lunch, the trade off is they get me lunch and I show them how to get around on the computer. And it's not like having to take a full course in how to use this software or that software. In fact I have been paid by a couple of students because the word got around that I could teach people how to use their computers and I end up being paid for computer tutoring. So I've come quite a long way.
(Martha)

Note the translation of higher order institutional terms such as "teaching," "learning," even "using" to the level of the immediately experienced, to the situated indexicality of everyday life: Martha "shows" women friends simply "what this piece of equipment is in their home" and how to "get around" on the computer. The return for this showing, as in a typical "gift economy" (Mauss, 1967), is lunch and, as one can imagine, the usual kind of fun that (women) friends have spending time together. Having been in the shoes of her present students not long ago and, of course, being their friend and caring about their feelings, Martha had an empathic understanding of the difficulties they faced:

Everybody has to start. People I am teaching often say “this sounds stupid.”... But I tell them no, nothing sounds stupid. I remember having the same question. I was wondering what to do. It is a sequence, and sequences are hard for people to grasp. There are so many different sequences to learn in order to use a computer. (Martha)

Interestingly, the gender of the Internet teacher or champion who had helped my respondents with their first steps on both the computer and the Internet was in all cases male. However, the people in my study who had later become teachers and Internet experts themselves were both women. Indeed, they were divorced single mothers who at the moment of the interview, and for some time before it, had either worked part-time or had been in some sort of a leave from work. In that sense, they had a family situation different from the Standard North American Family pattern (see Smith, 1999, p. 159). They were in close to full control of their domestic time (unlike married mothers) and also had relatively more of it than women working full-time and raising children by themselves typically do. With this qualifying circumstance in mind, it should be noted that traditional gender inequalities with respect to technology did not necessarily play themselves out in the practices of the people in this study. In fact, as I will show in Chapter 6, in the homes where women were taking leadership in Internet adoption and use specific domestic arrangements and use genres involving the medium occurred. Thus women were laying their mark on the shaping of the medium.

The learning experiences of new domestic users of the Internet recounted here thus exhibit a profoundly social character. The obverse of this social learning process that non-professional domestic users typically engaged in, was the process of socialization of personal knowledge of the technology and the medium. Friends and relatives, and to some degree online helpers, had taught my respondents not only how to navigate the interface but also what they themselves had discovered the Internet was about. They were passing along their definitions of the new technology crystallized from their own experience. As the cases of Sandy and Martha

illustrate, the same had happened later, when some of my respondents had become capable of playing the role of the warm expert vis-à-vis less knowledgeable others.

Examining the mechanisms of “socialization of subjective knowledge” Schutz writes:

The general and fundamental presupposition for the acceptance of subjective elements of knowledge into the social stock of knowledge is their “objectivation” [*sic*]. This expression is meant to characterize, in general, the embodiment of subjective processes in the objects and events of the everyday life-world (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 264).

The ongoing process of everyday teaching others and learning from others that my interviews expose suggests that subjective knowledge, or in constructivist terms, subjective meanings of the Internet as a technology and communication medium are indeed “objectivated” in the objects and events of the everyday lifeworld shared by tutor and tutee. Thus, even though users, as de Certeau (1984) has observed, cannot lay their mark directly on the shape of the technology that they put into use, they still have the power to “objectivate” their subjective knowledge of it. Other people in similar social-biographical situations, having similar problems to solve, pick up the discoveries made and passed along by their fellow-men and women and spread them around. In this way, the particular category of everyday users produces its own culture of understanding and application of the medium. This practice, I contend, represents an important source of user activity in the generative process of technology. I will examine in more detail the characteristic forms of such situated rationalizations of the medium in the following chapter.

User-Technology Relationship

In her book *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* Turkle (1984) pioneered an investigation into the kinds of relationships that people from the first generation of personal computer owners (who bought and built small computers in the late 1970s) established with

computer technology. She drew attention to the fact that even though many users were buying the machines with clear-cut instrumental purposes in mind (word processing, record keeping, etc.), “once they are in the home, personal computers get taken up in ways that signal the development of something beyond the practical and utilitarian. People buy an ‘instrumental computer,’ but they come to live with an ‘intimate machine’”(p. 185). What made the machine intimate, according to Turkle, was the fact that its importance for users derived not so much from “what it might do” but from “how it made them feel” (p. 186). The home computer users of that generation tended to find in the machine a sense of transparent understanding and wholeness otherwise missing from their lives, particularly at work. “Relationships with a computer became the depository of longings for a better, simpler and more coherent life” (p. 174).

The work of Margrethe Aune (1996) that I referred to earlier in this chapter, transposes a similar inquiry into the world of Norwegian home computer owners of the early 1990s. Aune distinguishes ideal types of home computer users on the basis of “type of activity” they performed on their computers on one hand and “style of work,” on the other. While “type of activity” refers to the utilitarian or instrumental dimension of computer use, “style of work” is a category describing the relationship of the user with his/her computer. The two styles of work discerned by Aune – “instrumental” and “expressive” (p. 102) – bare close resemblance with the categories introduced by Turkle (1984): the “instrumental computer” and the “intimate machine” (p.185).

Interestingly, Aune (1996) did find some users forming an intimate relationship with their home computers indeed, but this relationship was in no way characteristic for all or most of the people she studied as it was the case in Turkle’s study. Users were demonstrating different profiles that Aune subsumed under several ideal-types.

The users Aune (1996) called “extenders” (p. 111) were people who did not feel intimate with the machine. They perceived it as a mere tool. The “explorers” (p. 111), on the other hand, demonstrated an “expressive relationship to computer work” very much like the early adopters studied by Turkle (1984). It was their own interest - stemming from need or pure curiosity - that made them buy a computer. Many of them had a “computer career” and had over time upgraded their equipment. Aune’s explorers got absorbed in the technology and very intense in their computer work (see p. 111).

When I tried to apply the instrumental versus intimate distinction to the group of Internet users I studied, I ran into a number of contradictions. The major obstacle in finding a neat correspondence between these previously proposed categories and the types of relationships with Internet technology that I observed in my respondents had to do with one particular type of users. These people’s relationship with the Internet was very intense. They were deeply interested in the technology and strove towards transparent understanding of how it worked, but at the same time, they did not seem to be emotionally involved with it, nor were they interested in the technology for its own sake. By means of the Internet they were pursuing particular interests and goals lying beyond the technology itself - in that sense the technology remained instrumental to them. At the same time, they invested considerable time and effort in keeping up with the latest technical developments and obviously found pleasure along with some pride in that. It was characteristic for this type of users that they involved the Internet in a whole range of different activities related to work, leisure, education/learning, socializing, etc. No matter that most of them derived no immediate benefits from their computer and Internet use and their household incomes were modest, they struggled to regularly upgrade their equipment.

In contrast, another type of users remained in a strictly instrumental relationship with the Internet. The spectrum of their Internet applications was much narrower than the previous

group. They were preoccupied exclusively with the particular goal lying beyond the technology to which the technology was nothing more than mere means. These people demanded a different kind of “transparency” - transparency in the sense of not noticing the technology, not having to pay special attention to the tool. Failure to find such transparency was a source of frustration to them but they were unwilling to invest time and money in upgrading either their equipment or their own skills for dealing with it. They admitted being too impatient and stated that they would never look into a program’s help. Those who had old computers and low-speed connections were annoyed by the ensuing limitations, but insisted that their equipment was just fine for their purposes. Put simply, they did not care about the technology as such. Here is one representative statement for this kind of relationship to technology. The respondent had complained about “the amount of time that I have spent in frustration over the computer,” so I asked him to explain what the source of his frustration was:

It seems to be quite simple: I don't know the terminology. I don't know what they are referring to. I remember my first question in that regard. They were referring to “default.” I had a different idea of what default was. And it's like, I had to learn that from hours and hours of making mistakes. I find that quite frustrating. I go to the help section and it doesn't help me because I don't know what they are referring to. And to be honest, I don't want to know the language. I just want the damn thing to work. (Garry)

For a third kind of users the technology of the Internet and the computer in general were exciting for what they were. The practical goals of their Internet use seemed to be overshadowed in importance by how the technology “made them feel,” to evoke Turkle’s (1984) formulation. Here is a short excerpt of the explanations one such respondent gave me while he was leading me on a breath-taking tour of his computer interior:

I have Windows but I don't use it except for certain graphics applications. I use text and I find it extremely simple in DOS, and you'll see why. In fact it is extremely simple to use my machine but I have done some tricky things that other people just haven't. I can provide anybody with very simple little routines to do what I do. Most of my gimmicks people don't use but I love them... There is nothing on my screen that I don't want on my screen now. It is clean and

simple... So, I have re-programmed the function keys to do certain keys, so to read the EV digest, I want List to come up, so I would just press F9.... That's one of the beauties of DOS, that it's fast, you saw that it is fast - I wanted to press this button right after this button, but I wasn't fast enough and it loaded the program. The beauty of this program is that [it] will only take about 100K... (Merlin)

Clarity, simplicity, beauty, tricks, gimmicks, love and hate defined the aesthetics of Merlin's computer and Internet use. His intensive preoccupation with re-programming, customizing, outsmarting the original software made him feel in control of his computer space ("There is nothing on my screen that I don't want on my screen now.") It gave him a sense of autonomy and achievement. Interestingly, the 58-year old Merlin had started his computer career as an enthusiast in the late 1970s. He was coming from the same culture that Turtle (1984) had described in her early account.

A similar relationship could be identified in the case of a young college student (Larry). Partly disassembled appliances lay all over Larry's room. He took pleasure in investigating what was hidden underneath their cover just for the challenge of it.

In this way, three types of relationships between users and Internet technology were emerging from my observations. I will initially label them "curiously instrumental," "indifferently instrumental," and "intimate" where the attributes curious, indifferent and intimate refer to how users felt about Internet technology itself.

In my attempt to interpret these descriptive categories, I will invoke and adapt Ihde's (1990) phenomenology of human-technology relations. Discussing the different ways in which technology is taken into the subjective lifeworld, Ihde posited four types of relations: embodiment relations, hermeneutic relations, alterity relations and background relations³⁴ (see Ihde, 1990 and Chapter 2). I was curious to find out whether there existed any correspondence

³⁴This type of relations does not represent a direction of my exploration in what follows. I have included it here for the sake of completeness.

between Ihde's scheme and the empirically observed relationships I just described. If I managed to discover such a correspondence, I would be able to apply the whole analytical system of critical phenomenology of technology that I tried to elaborate in Chapter 2 to my empirical material. Thus I would be able to go beyond the simply descriptive typologies proposed by earlier studies. I contend that such a correspondence indeed can be established and intend to illustrate this in the remainder of the present chapter.

In the case of the indifferently instrumental use of the Internet, I believe, we can distinguish a manifestation of the embodiment relation expressed by the formula: (I-technology)-world (Ihde, 1990, p. 73). The technology is between the seer and the seen, between the doer and the object of his/her action. The referent of the seeing and the doing is on the other side of the technological tool or system. Being able to see through the technology and hence its transparency (recall the glasses example) is a natural expectation of the subject in this relation.

The indifferently instrumental users took computer and Internet technology as an extension of their perceptual and actional bodily self, in an embodiment relation. They expected the technology to be unobtrusive and not to divert attention and/or energy from the beyond-technology referent. That is what the exclamation: "I don't want to know the language. I just want the damn thing to work" (Garry) stood for. For the people who found themselves in an embodiment relation with the computer and the Internet, the world was on the other side of the technology and lent itself to more or less successful comprehension and manipulation depending on how smoothly the technology was embodied. Interestingly, even the most poorly equipped and technically uninformed users seemed to have been able to work out, after some period of time, certain routine, even if awkward, ways of handling the technology so that it ended up withdrawing from their attention and yet serving their purposes.

The group of the curiously instrumental users represented a different relation with technology that could be grasped by Ihde's (1990) "hermeneutic" formalism: I-(technology-world) (see p. 86). Building on Ihde's definition of this relation, I propose that in this case the attention of the user was indeed focused on the technology, but not for its own sake, rather, *for what it represented*. And here, I depart from Ihde by investing a dual meaning in this statement. First, features and events of the world outside - a landscape (represented by a map or picture), a friendship (represented by an electronic message) - are read off the technological medium. But secondly, in a more global sense, technology and the world become inseparable: the world is seen as technologically defined and technology becomes a code for understanding the world. For these people what was important in their Internet use was not only what it allowed them to do but also *how it allowed them to relate to the world*. Here is the place to recall Martha's remark: "And I took a basic programming course a year or two before that. I thought in this computer age I better stay in touch." Staying in touch with a highly technological and further technologizing world was the high stake that people in this category had in the Internet. Alex made this sentiment explicit this way:

I have an interest in computers in principle and the Internet connection is a big inseparable part from this interest. This is an industry that is developing at a super fast rate, no other industry has ever grown at such a rate. In the coming few years there will be a huge boom - like for example the number of the people online has been doubling in 8 months. Last year it doubled in 3 and a half months, speaking about millions of people... (Alex)

Along with the ever growing number of people, there was a rising tide of information out there that Alex felt he had to deal with in order to remain in control of his life. For that reason, having the Internet connection was essential to him:

I like best the fact that I can choose the information that I want - because it is a waterfall of information that can drown you very fast. This doesn't scare me because I can pick and choose and only get a very small percentage of it. I have determined my interests. Of course, I always leave some space for chance, I go to places where I can see news from an area in which I have some general interest

and there I can find things of interest to me that I haven't specifically looked for. But generally, I myself decide what I want and what I choose. I don't wait for someone to chew it up for me. I like that a lot - you have a choice. (Alex)

In Sandy's world, information technology had two quite different, but, paradoxically, related faces. Sandy worked in a highly computerized environment and was an object of technologically mediated monitoring and control throughout her working time:

We sit 13-14 people into a, we call it, "pod" and a supervisor sits there and she can pull up on her computer everything that we are doing. So she just sits at her desk and watches all our little, we call them, heads on the computer and we are measured and we have daily stats and online stats - how many calls we made, how many minutes we spoke to that person, how many sales we made, what's our wrap time - that's the time from I stopped talking to you and I take the next call. It logs idle time; we had this joke that it logs how long you pee for and how many times. Because really, it does. (Sandy)

When she was being trained for this job, Sandy recalled, she was having nightmares about the computer chasing her down the street. She was terrified by the concept of somebody she could not see sitting behind a wall and knowing "everything" about her. She "didn't understand the technology" and at the same time "cared tremendously about the job." The huge pressure of the beginning by now had been relieved thanks to the good trade union at Sandy's workplace. Never the less, her relationship with technology at work remained the same - she was the object of it. In contrast, when she was at her computer and on the Internet at home, Sandy was in charge:

And I have set up this thing called My Yahoo which is through the search engine. I have it all programmed to load up to things that I am interested in - stocks that I own; and it tells me whether the stock is up or down and headline news stories that I am interested in - and it loads those automatically. It loads weather report - I check it every day; sports - baseball scores; I do my banking, I pay all my bills online now.... My chat program, my ICQ, stuff is neatly organized. The work is learning the technology, after that it's easy to organize. (Sandy)

"Organizing is essential," Martha insisted too. A substantial part of her world of interests and relationships with people was consciously structured into her bookmarks and e-mail folders. Having achieved a good command of the Internet technology, Martha could

navigate the world outside and order her relations with it in accordance with her felt needs, values and priorities. In this process she was not only extending and enriching the content of her lifeworld; she was re-inventing herself. Thus, Martha had gradually become a resource person for many of her friends and relatives. She had done research on film related jobs in Britain for her aunt, on the Gulf War syndrome for one of her brothers, on attention deficit disorder for her local support group, etc. She was learning that she actually enjoyed doing research and that: "I think I would be really good at researching. That's why I want to find a job in research. I am good at finding things."

She was also keeping up with technical developments in Internet technology and indirectly associating, through an electronic newsletter, with a community of web designers in Vancouver:

I keep track of it because I think if I get into this sort of industry, people have their companies on here, it's local, it's in Vancouver. It's a job potential, good way of collecting info on what's going on locally, people who are developing sites and making a lot of money out of it.

The three respondents whose experiences I have used as an example of the hermeneutic relation with technology, unlike Garry whom I quoted earlier, did want to know the language of technology in order to be able to relate to the world it represented and constructed. Here is what Sandy had to say in this regard: "I upgrade Netscape monthly. I have always been an all or nothing person - either you are in or you are out - there is no in-between in my life. Yes, I totally understand what is going on in the technology now. I even studied the computer language."

Knowing and speaking the language of Internet technology required constantly keeping an eye on the new technical developments which could become overwhelming. Not surprisingly, a big portion of these users' bookmarks and the newsletters and newsgroups they subscribed to were technically oriented. In terms of software and hardware, all of these people were constantly "upgrading." An interesting "information overload" paradox could be observed

in the practice of these users: In order to be able to better know, organize, control and master the world of information to which the Internet was giving them access, they needed to open the door for ever more information - about new programs, applications, upgrades, pieces of equipment, etc.

Finally, by his third type of human-technology relation - the alterity relation - Ihde (1990) seeks to characterize "the positive or presential senses" in which humans relate to technology as a "quasi-other" (p. 98). In that respect, Ihde observes, technologies emerge as focal entities that may receive the multiple attentions humans give the different forms of the other" (p. 107). This type of relation comes close to what Turkle (1984) meant by her metaphor of the intimate machine - a machine or technology experienced in ways, and producing emotional reactions typically associated with other human beings. The examples of this kind of relation, Merlin and Larry, found challenge in technology and appreciated its beauty. They strove to outsmart a program, to prove their own intellectual superiority over a machine, to overcome its resistance, etc.

These three human-technology relations do not exclude each other. They can coexist to different degrees within the same empirical relationship between a user and an artifact. Which type of relation would be preponderant in every concrete case seemed to be a matter of biographically and situationally determined structure of interests and relevances. On the basis of the cases I have studied, I would suggest that people who found themselves in a comparatively stable and generally unproblematic social-biographical situation were more inclined to look at computers and the Internet as means for achieving concrete well defined goals. For others, whose social-biographical situations were in flux or were fundamentally problematic, it was more likely that a hermeneutic relation with the Internet would be established. It may be the case that in such situations persons are in need not so much of concrete solutions of daily

problems, but rather of new ways of knowing and manipulating their environment. That is what the Internet technology taken into a hermeneutic relation allowed them to do.

Finally, the alterity relation involved playful experimentation with the computer and Internet technology and testing of one's own curiosities and abilities. This relation had been formed in the quite distinct situations of the young college student (Larry), on one hand, and in that of the long-unemployed 58-year old professional (Merlin) who similarly needed a confirmation of his wits and skills as well as escape.

Amplifications and Reductions

Different forms of alienation stemming from the characteristic amplification/reduction structures of Internet technology ensued for users standing in these three different kinds of relation with this technology. People standing in an "embodiment relation" with Internet technology seemed to suffer an immediate reduction in the range of approaches and possible operations that would get the task done. The technology providing an extension of their perception and action scope forced them to re-format that scope in not always desirable ways. Thomas for example, could gather information about his distant native country's political life from the Internet. However, the fact that Internet protocols did not support the Amhadek writing combined with the fact that he could afford only textual interface to the World Wide Web, prevented him from receiving material in the language of his country of origin. He had to produce his program exclusively out of English language publications and be constrained to their perspectives and agendas. Don could announce a meeting of his voluntary organization's Board of Directors by sending a carbon copy of the same message to all Board members which was a clear amplification of his communication power and efficiency. But at the same time, he had no way to get reliable feedback about who had actually received and read the message and

who hadn't. On one occasion when Don decided to rely on e-mail for doing this kind of organizing, the person who was supposed to host the meeting did not receive the message and everything failed. Thus the flexibility of synchronous human communication had to be given up and the affairs of a community were becoming dependent on a technical system. Vera liked drawing on online sources for her journalistic research but she was very wary of how much time she could sometimes waste in the process wading through intruding irrelevant material.

The struggle for control vis-à-vis Internet technology for this type of users centered on ascribing the technology the right place into their lives and, more particularly, learning what tasks and goals it could help handling and what it was inappropriate for. Contrary to Reiner's son, who had said to his father "If you don't have e-mail, who are you?" Vera advised her ex-husband who was eager to get an Internet connection thus: "Consider how much you actually need it. Why would you get e-mail if you don't need it?" Part of the struggle was also determining what can and what cannot and should not be given up in exchange for Internet time and virtual communication: "There are friends on e-mail, but we don't correspond that much. It's ironic, I don't know why... Because of time constraints, I don't have the time. There is a life that I have to live here too - you have your social connections, your friends here. You just don't prioritize these e-mail connections as much as others," Thomas contemplated.

The role the Internet was playing in the lives of users in a hermeneutic relation with it was more pervasive. The ideology of the "computer age," "the information society," concepts like "millions of people going online every day" borrowed from influential public discourses about this technology underlay these users' perception of it. The people in this category dedicated conscious efforts to studying and understanding the Internet with the purpose to be able to competently find their way around the "computer age" (Martha) they believed they were living in. Ironically, as the information overload paradox suggests, the more they tried to be

agents in the technologically mediated and constructed world, the more these people were becoming consumers of technological products. The nature of the “hermeneutic relation” where technology was an interface, a code for interpreting the world and expressing oneself in it, involved a substantial degree of submission to the technological lead. Technology was appropriating its appropriators.

But was this the whole story? Were these users victims of the powerful discourses and systemic imperatives of the network society (Castells, 1996)? Were the forces of alienation overpowering the forces of creative self-expression and individual control? The analysis of these users’ practices does not provide a unilateral answer. For them too, everyday Internet use was obviously a field of struggle for a meaningful balance between personal autonomy and inevitable submission to prescribed rules. In fact, what was beginning to emerge as a result of this struggle was a hard-earned reflexivity. People were beginning to reflect on the mechanisms of representation of the world implicit in Internet technology and content and the subtle ways in which these mechanisms both amplified and reduced personal control:

But I look through the similar kind of stuff and it seems that it is very shallow, yes you got links but none of these links.... Well, I can go to MacDonald’s and I can be linked then to Burger King, Wendy’s, etc., etc., and I am getting the same level. But I can go the rest of my life there and never have a nourishing meal, but not even miss it... (Don)

You can go into the American Yahoo site and you can search a route - how to drive from one city to another by the least amount of miles - it gives you a map. Which is very limiting because it is biased, based on their criteria. On one hand it frees me up because I don’t have to worry which way I go to Florida, but on the other hand, I haven’t learnt so much. And I am probably the only nerd who thinks about those things - most of them will print the map and drive to Florida. (Sandy)

But, in fact, she was not alone. Martha too was quite self-conscious as far as her Internet use was concerned. She admitted that initially she was “addicted,” and insisted that now she was trying not to take it too seriously. “I want it just to become a tool like anything else, like using the phone.” She repeated several times that the Internet is and should be “only a tool.” Thus,

Martha saw the restoration of the “embodiment relation,” the return to the ‘technology as a tool’ position, as the salvation from the overwhelming experience produced by the hermeneutic relation.

Don, the psychological counselor, explicitly called for careful gauging of the amplifications and reductions involved in a technologically mediated understanding of the world in a statement curiously intermingling everyday experience and the theoretical attitude:

If we are truly in an information age, then we are getting fully what we want. Now, question one is do we really need all that information, what is it really doing for our existence? Then another aspect, psychologically to me is this feeling where people are “Yes, we are talking to people in India, we are talking to people...” I say: Well, are you really? Number one again, whoever's got the computer there is economically, socio-economically, even educationally just about in the same bracket - whether I am a Christian Baptist Korean or a super reformed Jew raised in Canada whatever, we are speaking white middle-class language. Not to say that it is wrong or right, but I don't know the smell and the sound and the sight of where you really live, I am in my little cubicle, with my nice little screen and obviously your screen is going to look damn close to my little screen. Are we again enclosing ourselves in a very nice data-filled bracket? My thing is, why do I need all this data? I'd rather crush a leaf, smell a leaf and may be not even have to crush the leaf - this is still the environment. (Don)

Thus some users seemed to have started to relate to the Internet technology in a critically hermeneutic manner. Out of their intense preoccupation with the technology as an interface to a technological world, an awareness of the reductions and distortions implicit in this interface was emerging. In fact, as can be sensed in Don's reflection above, the critique of technology was translating into a critique of the world that it helped reproduce in people's everyday lives. The critical juxtaposition of the possible and the real (see Lefebvre, 1991), of the exciting illusion of equality and intercultural reach: “we are talking to people in India” and the reality of the narrow uniform middle-class “data-filled bracket” was anchored in the “nice little screen” which was screening out “the smell and the sound, and the sight of where you really live.”

I conclude that achieving this critical-hermeneutic relation with technology in everyday life is a potential source of disalienation of users. It is a prerequisite for technology to become

an instrument of critique of the real with the possible at the level of the everyday life of the ordinary men and women who get drawn into its network. The fluency that these users achieve with technology, combined with their critical understanding of the amplifications and reductions built into it, allows them to imagine alternative technical and cultural forms. Some of the users I met with had developed home pages and communication forums of their own and for organizations they were active in. Thus, in a small way, they were stepping onto the stage of the new medium as actors. Their competence was putting them in a position to teach and assist newcomers to the Internet world as demonstrated by the phenomenon of the warm expert. This enabled them to disseminate their critical understanding of the technology along with their skills in making a meaningful use of it.

These observations do not lead me to a grand optimistic theory of the Internet as a vehicle of empowerment. All I see in the practices of these users is the germs of a knowledge of the Internet that is "for us" (Smith, 1987, p. 153). A knowledge that helps ordinary users grasp the social and technological relations organizing the worlds of their everyday experience and conceive of adequate means of resistance. In the following chapter I will continue the examination of the creative appropriations of the medium undertaken by users. I will attempt to demonstrate the fundamental situatedness of Internet activities in users' everyday lives – a condition that generates both potentialities and limitations.

Chapter 5

Situating the Virtual: Little Behaviour Genres of the Internet

Introduction

In this chapter I continue the exploration of the social process of becoming a domestic Internet user started off in the previous chapter. Here, I examine in more detail that critical point in the process where users discover important personally meaningful applications of the Internet. I am looking for the emergence of what Becker called a “stable form of new behaviour toward the object” (Becker 1953, p. 242; see also Chapter 4) that is responsible for the continuation of use. In constructivist terms this can be seen as the stage of stabilization of the domestic Internet connection as a technology with a clearly defined meaning, even if only at the level of personal experience and for a limited period of time. This stabilization of the Internet as an object of relevance for users, I argue, rests on a conception of the medium representing its situated rationalization.³⁵

“Situating rationalization” is a concept in which I have blended and somewhat trivialized Feenberg’s (1991, 1993a, 1993b) idea of subversive rationalization, Haraway’s (1995) concept of situated knowledges and Smith’s (1987) notion of standpoint. The study that I report here, as pointed out in Chapter 3, follows the method of Smith’s sociology from the standpoint of women in locating a subject who is anchored in a material and local world and engaged in his/her projects as a knowledgeable actor. My goal is to grasp the logic and rationality of the applications users find for the Internet from their standpoint in the actualities of their everyday lives (their social-biographical situation): I want to know how and why the Internet becomes

drawn into the subjects' systems of relevance and activity? What I am hoping to uncover through this investigation is a repertory of uses of the Internet that are meaningful to people; applications that help users gain control over characteristic situations in their everyday lives. In such instances, users elaborate locally rational conceptions of the technology and ways of its application that correspond to the parameters of their individual situations.

These situated rationalizations would be too microscopic in scale and negligible with respect to the social genesis of the medium if they were isolated, random and infinitely diverse. The account offered in this chapter suggests that this is not the case.

Putting together coherent narratives about their experience with the Internet, my respondents felt compelled to provide a rational explanation of why they valued their Internet connection. In order to do that, they had to explicate aspects of their situations with respect to which their actions on and through the Internet made sense. Typical expressions of this rhetorical move were "because" clauses immediately following the statement of their discovery of a personally attractive function of the medium. A survey of these "because" motives brought forward by respondents reveals a set of recurring situational characteristics that made the Internet needed, useful and significant to users:

- (1) social isolation brought about by circumstances such as sickness, dysfunctional marriage, single parenthood, retirement, unemployment;
- (2) dislocation or recurrent change of location;
- (3) globally spread family and social networks;
- (4) lack of intellectual challenge in current work;
- (5) uncertainty or dissatisfaction with current job;

³⁵Typically worked out with the help and collaboration of other people such as the "warm experts" introduced in Chapter 4.

(6) sense of belonging to a dispersed community of interest, quite often - a community of suffering (such as rare diseases and adverse circumstances).

In what follows, I will discuss each of these situational characteristics in relation to the practices it brings forth. The attractiveness of the Internet, I suggest, offers a vantage point toward the human condition in a globalizing post-fordist capitalist society. Facing characteristic problems in their social-biographical situations, users discover affordances in Internet technology that help them re-gain some control over their lives. These are, then, the properties of the technology that users actualize on a systematic basis in the course of their everyday lives. By doing this they bring forth new and sometimes unexpected practices related to that technology. These "little behaviour genres of the Internet," as I would like to refer to them invoking Voloshinov's (1929/1986) theory of language, represent an important force in the dynamics of the generative process of technology.

Isolation

Maybe the most graphic crisis situation breeding loneliness and desperation was that of Ellen. About three years before our meeting, the 49-year old editor and free-lance writer had gotten sick with a rare, poorly understood and "devastating" illness which had had a debilitating effect on her social and intellectual functioning and had made her house bound. On certain days Ellen, who is divorced, has no children and no close relatives in town, couldn't walk to the store to buy herself food, and often couldn't even go downstairs to check her mail for weeks. Her local friends were puzzled and frightened by the change in her personality and practically abandoned her, at least for the first few months of her illness. In Ellen's own words, she was "in complete despair, really in a very desperate situation and terribly isolated, feeling very lonely

because nobody around including my doctor actually understood what I was going through and how much I was suffering from the illness.”

Against this backdrop, two years before our conversation, one of Ellen’s local friends came to visit her and said: “I ’m going to set you up on the Internet, and I’m going to show you how to use it.” Ellen had known about the Internet before she got ill and even used to belong to a professional editors’ list to which she connected from work. But the specific function that her friend was introducing her to now was “in order for me to be able to connect to a support group.” Since then, the Internet had become a “life line” for Ellen:

... and what I found was that it became a lifeline for me, literally a lifeline, *because* [emphasis mine] I was in complete despair, really in a very desperate situation and terribly isolated, feeling very lonely because nobody around including my doctor actually understood what I was going through and how much I was suffering from the illness...(Ellen)

Sandy, a 35-year old telemarketer was first introduced to the Internet through a university course she was taking at that time - about a year and a half before the interview. She worked part-time and had a young daughter, so she found going to campus to use the computer lab too demanding and was planing to drop that course. Her professor advised her that she could actually connect to the Internet and do her research from home and even put her in touch with a computer-enthusiast student who came to her house and set up her connection. Very soon Sandy “discovered” the chat lines and started visiting regularly a room where she could find Macintosh help: “the people in there would help you with all the technology stuff.” Fulfilling the requirements of her university course, Sandy diligently worked through the different chat programs and channels until she found her way to a chat-place called talkcity.com. There she actually discovered how the Internet was relevant to her life:

I went into this room about parenting. *Because* [emphasis mine] I lived in such isolation, because my husband didn't allow me to have any friends or anything, I discovered this whole area. He thought I was writing essays for university and I have a ripping good time [laughs triumphantly] meeting people in there and

having a great time talking to them. Just meeting people because I wasn't ever allowed to do that. In my relationship with him he was very controlling and isolating. I lived with a lot of fears. And now I could just lie to him about what I was doing and meet people. (Sandy)

Isolation and discovery were the two key words dominating Sandy's account of her early Internet experience. While Ellen's isolation was caused by a physical illness, Sandy's confinement was produced by an abusive marriage. Less intentionally than Ellen, initially following the externally imposed requirements of her university course, Sandy acquired the tools and the skills to explore and redefine the educational medium promoted by her university as an emotional medium. She found a medium that supplied her with social support and self esteem, so conspicuously missing in her original situation. This brought the end of Sandy's marriage - her online friends "held her hand" throughout the painful experience of leaving her husband - and the beginning of her struggle to resume control over her own life: "I think because I lived in such isolation and then all of a sudden I was reminded that I was a real person [speaks emotionally], with real emotions, and real feelings and I was likable by people. Because I was no longer isolated" (Sandy).

Isolation, albeit of a different form and origin, came up again as an element of Sandy's new situation following her divorce, which reinforced the relevance of the Internet. This time it had to do with her daily life as a single mother cautiously balancing her limited financial means:

Because [emphasis mine] once I get my daughter to bed at night, being a single mom now, I don't have a lot of social network availability because I don't have a lot of money - I am trying to pay for my bills here and this last year has cost me a lot of money, I have debts to pay. I can't pay a baby sitter so that I could go out and do something. So quite often I log onto the computer and read at web sites... (Sandy)

In the case of Jim, a 73-year old retired mechanical engineer, the Internet acquired relevance in the wake of the transition between employment and retirement. Despite the fact that this transition is considered a natural moment of one's social biography, it produces

isolation and loneliness never the less. First of all, Jim returned to his youth's hobby - radio-controlled motor gliders - as a way to deal with the void created by the departure of his children. Later, the Internet, mainly in its e-mail function, was recommended to him by a friend as a means for staying in touch with his children - his daughter and her family lived in Saskatchewan - and with his newly developed hobbyist network. Asked whether the Internet had changed in any way his pattern of daily life, Jim explained that what had happened was more complicated:

Because [emphasis mine] my life changed because of being retired. This filled something which I missed when I retired and that was daily interaction with people, the people at work, traveling to work in the car pool. I missed that a lot when I first retired and I usually go into the office every month or so. I find this [the Internet] helps to have this connection with people through the Internet - people on the mailing list and my friends, or unknown helpers, the general activity on the Internet helps to fill a void that I felt when I first retired. (Jim)

The capacity of the Internet to connect users with other people and to allow them to form new relationships from within their situation of being "house bound" - physically, socially or financially - had been the affordance discerned by these three respondents from their standpoints in everyday life. A similar element of limited physical and social mobility could be detected in the situation of other users who did not explicitly describe themselves as house bound. Jane, a suburban homemaker was quite well integrated in her local community, however she had to spend her days in domestic routines, practically alone, because most of the people she would try to communicate with when she had "the time to think about contacting them" during working hours would be at their jobs and unavailable. E-mail with its non-intrusiveness and flexibility was a good tool for Jane to perform her part of the communication with people while her children and husband were out of the house and she had her own time. Her addressees then could respond at their own convenience, most likely during the hours of the evening when Jane had to attend to her family's needs and was unavailable to take phone calls.

Merlin, an unemployed 58-year old mechanical engineer had suffered a major disruption of his established pattern of existence, or in Schutzian terms, his taken for granted lifeworld, when he was laid off from his job in Montreal after having worked for a company for 20 years. Merlin had been unemployed for 6 years at the time I visited him. His precarious financial situation had forced him to sell his house in Quebec and move to Vancouver where he and his wife could live in the house of his in-laws for several months a year, and rent a small apartment for the rest of the year. Although Merlin tried to stay active in the local Association of Professional Engineers, his daily access to a professional community was practically cut off. After having worked as an engineer for more than 20 years, this had obviously been a heavy blow for Merlin. His job and the professional interaction it involved had been an important part of who he was as a person. The Internet had helped Merlin to try to overcome this enforced isolation from his professional peers by joining a discussion list dealing with electrical vehicles. His original motivation was to educate himself, to expand his understanding of the area. However, the Electric Vehicle discussion list also gave him symbolic access to a “semi-professional community, you don't need to have credentials to get in it,” a pretty “grown-up group of people” as he characterized it, sharing knowledge and experience. Merlin used to download and read the digest of the discussion list every day and felt an old-timer in it, although, he admitted that he didn't contribute very often. He even visited the homes and shops of four list members when on a trip to California.

Merlin evaded explicit reflection about what the belonging to this community meant to him socially and emotionally. Instead, he spoke about expertise in handling technical problems, sharing stories of who built what vehicle, meeting some of the guys from the list at exhibitions. A sense of the importance of his Internet involvements in the context of his situation was

conveyed in a remark made by his wife.³⁶ Answering my question about whether or not she approved of his everyday, almost full working time, preoccupation with his computer and the Internet, she said simply: "It's saved his sanity since he's lost his job. So, that's fine with me."

In his *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams (1974) draws attention to the condition of "mobile privatization" characterizing everyday life in an earlier phase of industrial capitalist society and sees the technology of broadcasting as a resolution, at a certain level, of the contradictory pressures generated by this condition:

This complex of developments included the motorcycle and motorcar, the box camera and its successors, home electrical appliances, and radio sets. Socially, this complex is characterized by the two apparently paradoxical yet deeply connected tendencies of modern urban industrial living: on the one hand mobility, on the other hand the more apparently self-sufficient family home. The earlier period of public technology, best exemplified by the railways and city lighting, was replaced by a kind of technology for which no satisfactory name has yet been found; that which served an at once mobile and home centered way of living: a form of *mobile privatization* [italics in original]. Broadcasting in its applied form was a social product of this distinctive tendency. (p. 20)

The lives of the socially isolated people I talked to did not seem to match this description precisely. First of all, these people were not sufficiently mobile - their automobiles could not take them to places socially denied to them. Secondly, they felt ambiguous about the self-sufficiency of the private homes in which their existence was circumscribed. They were ready and eager, each one to a different extent and different degree of rationalization, to trade that privateness for human contact, community and broader social involvement. Their Internet-based practices could be characterized as constituting an attempt at "immobile socialization." Users employed the medium for associating with other people and social entities without leaving, which represented a resolution, at a certain level, of the pressures present in their

³⁶I have chosen not to give pseudonyms to the respondents' spouses whom I have interviewed for two reasons. First, I would like to avoid the overloading of the text with names and second, I want to keep clear the relationship between the main respondent and the spouse. I refer to male spouses as "husband" and female spouses as "wife." There were no homosexual couples in the group of people I interviewed.

original situations. That was not necessarily the safe and inconsequential socializing at which critiques of computer mediated communication have been leveled (Borgmann, 1992; Postman, 1993; Kumar, 1995; Slouka, 1995). In many cases, for example with Merlin and Sandy, relationships established online had been followed up in face-to-face contacts. With Jim, the distinction between “virtual” and “real” links had been less marked. He had been able to shuttle between involvement in actual events with his fellow-hobbyists and the electronic communication that sustained their organization.

In general, users encountering the Internet from within a situation of social isolation were fast to discover the socializing affordances embodied in the medium. These people defined and employed the Internet as a social technology, as a solution to the problem of loneliness, helplessness and the loss of self esteem often related to that. Typically commanding limited resources, and as a result deprived of mobility in the physical as well as the social sense, these users found in the Internet a handy and affordable means for transcending the limitation of their social-biographical situation. Sometimes, as in Sandy’s case, the Internet provided the means for transforming this situation radically. At the same time, their being “out there,” in cyberspace, the actions through which they geared into the virtual world - chatting, joking, sharing, helping and being helped, or in Sandy’s playful formulation “rescuing” and being rescued - constructed the medium of the Internet by rendering it particular properties that others would later (or simultaneously) “discover” or learn about and that would be deposited in the social stock of knowledge about this technology.

Dislocation

Alex, a 36-year old jewelry designer, and his family (wife and son) left their East European native country in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall. They had lived as refugees in

London for 4 years before immigrating to Canada in 1996. For Alex and his wife cyberspace had provided vital information about the economic and social landscape of the new place they were settling and most importantly, about the job market. Alex had explored the Canadian jewelry-making business through online indexes at the time he and his family were making a decision to move. Later, he drew on that information to find himself a job in Vancouver. Then it was his wife's turn to apply the strategies he had developed in finding employment as a proposal specialist. It had worked for both of them. The new social terrain seemed to have been more easily penetrable because of the availability of its charts in cyberspace.

The existing World Wide Web sites of newspapers from their native Bulgaria and of international news agencies allowed Alex and his wife to stay in touch with the imagined community (Anderson, 1983) of their small nation, even in the total absence of any mention of it in the mainstream news media of their new home country. The same practice of putting together a geographically and culturally fragmented identity could be observed in the case of Radul, a 36-year old auto body technician, originally from Rumania. He and his elderly father, also an immigrant to Vancouver, would regularly sit together in Radul's basement to read newspapers and listen to radio stations from their native town.

This practice was common in the cases of other immigrants in my respondent group (eight persons from Europe, three from the United States, two from Africa). One notable example of this phenomenon came from a respondent who was using the information about his native Ethiopia found on the Internet to produce a co-op radio program for the Ethiopian community in Vancouver. Theodore, a 45-year old parking patroller with a bachelor's degree in political science had been active in the founding of the Ethiopian National Congress, an organization meant to represent a united front of Ethiopians in exile "attempting to galvanize the opposition groups that are in Ethiopia." In the following excerpt, Theodore describes how

this political organization emerged out of the everyday life of Ethiopians in North America, sitting just like himself at the screens of their home computers:

It was out of the EEDN - the Ethiopian Electronic Distribution Network. This professor in Ohio was pushing for the establishment of the Ethiopian United Front. Individuals on the list started talking about this thing and said we should do something about it and so it started as a virtual organization and it transformed itself, there was a meeting in July of last year in Los Angeles - the initial meeting for individuals to get together and discuss this thing and then there was another meeting in 1997 October where the actual organization was proclaimed and established in Atlanta. I was in LA, but I couldn't make the last two meetings. (Theodore)

For Theodore and the rest of the immigrants in my respondent group the Internet was a cultural and political technology providing them the means for preserving an important side of their identities. They could stay informed and, when they chose to do so, to be politically active Bulgarians, Rumanians, Ethiopians, etc. while living in a different geographical location. In their everyday lifeworlds their original states and cultures remained within attainable and restorable reach (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Despite the novelty of the technology, one could recognize in this practice a repetition of the history of old communication technologies creatively employed by individuals and pockets of immigrants to sustain ethnic and cultural identities at a distance from their original localities. Early 20th century immigrants to North America, as Cohen (1990) has shown, did that with the phonograph and radio. Punjabi young people living in England in the 1990s incorporated a combination of communication media such as television, videos and radio in the negotiation of their ethnic and immigrant identities (see Gillespie, 1995). The use of the Internet with regard to ethnic and national identity repeated, but also expanded the earlier practices based on other technologies in terms of reach and possibility for action.

It was interesting to contrast the experience of immigration in the age of the Internet with that of earlier generations of immigrants as exemplified by another respondent, the 62-year

old Reiner, a retired mechanical engineering technician of German origin. Reiner's account presents a vivid illustration of the situated rationalization of the technology. Explaining how and why he began to use the Internet, Reiner recalled:

So curiosity was at the beginning, but then I realized - hey, there is something really good happening! And as you probably realize, I am not an original Canadian, just like you are. I am from Germany. And at the beginning when I first came here I was more of a Canadian than any Canadian probably. I said I am here now in Canada, forget about the past. And only later I realized, hey, there is something missing. My background is German. I was 28 when I came over. My background, my history is in Germany, my schooling is German. My wife is Canadian so we didn't speak German at home. I almost lost my German. It was so bad. When my mother was on the phone, I couldn't respond to her in German. So, I suddenly woke up and said there is something wrong... So, I realized - this WWW, it is not just English, it is German, it's Russian, Chinese. And suddenly I realize, hey, *I am connected again to Germany! Really, I am connected!* I can read German newspapers. I lived in Germany in Ausburg and I can read now (I just found it a couple of weeks ago) *Der Ausburger General (Allgemeine)* with the local news of Friedburg which is the town where I more or less grew up. *So, I am at home again!!* And I am reading another paper from Koblenz, where I went to engineering school and I lived there for 4 years, so I am still interested. So this is the biggest thing that the Internet did for me! (Reiner)

There is an irony in this comparison. The most post-modern of technologies is contributing to the persistence of typically modern sentiments and practices like these related to nationalism as a collective identity (see Anderson, 1983). Thus identity in the age of the Internet seems to be indeed constructed through the computer screen as Turkle (1995) has pointed out but this is occurring in ways quite different from those on which she has focused her account. My study found not electronic play lands such as MUDs, but rather cyber-projections of long-established social institutions to be formative to the personae of my respondents. The materials, the languages, generally - the resources on which people drew to construct identity both online and offline did not appear to be as free floating and randomly accessible as post-modern theorists (Turkle, 1995, Stone, 1995) may have it. They remained socially and biographically rooted and as unequally distributed as ever before.

Upon further reflection, a question arises about whether the very existence of cyberspace projections of “real” institutions is making the constructed character of these institutions themselves more easily recognizable and negotiable. Latour (1998) has pointed out that in fact “virtuality ... is a materialization of society and not a disembodiment of society” (paragraph 5). The digital images of social institutions, Latour argues, have provided us with a more material way of looking at what happens in society. They have made our social link visible in a much more simple and archaic way than before. Virtuality allows us to see “building blocks of social order being re-invented anew,” Latour claims (paragraph 8). But isn’t this the same insight that inspired Zuboff (1988) to write about information technology in the production process: “... the same technology simultaneously generates information about underlying productive and administrative processes through which an organization accomplishes its work. It provides a *deeper level of transparency* [italics added] to activities that had been either partially or completely opaque” (p. 9). This observation led Zuboff to believe that information technology could “informate” (p. 10) the human actors and open to them a new level of reflexivity.

Whether a new relationship between citizens and institutions was emerging based on this increased transparency of social process is a question that certainly applies to the experience of immigrants and imagined Canadians alike. An impulse to talk back to the online images of political and media institutions was clearly discernible in my respondents’ stories. Theodore talked back critically to a mailing list distributed by the Ethiopian government (and lost his access to it as a result). Garry, a 67-year old retired naval radio-operator, had turned the practice of talking back to mass media and governmental sites into his main activity on the Internet.

I was never writing letters like that before. Because e-mail has made it so easy to send a letter. I have often had thoughts about what had been said on the radio before. But now it is so easy for me to send a message that I just send it. I sometimes smoke dope and I don't think dope should be illegal. I have sent letters on e-mail through the Internet on that subject. I would never send that

before, but now its *so easy!* I have written to my MP, I got their addresses through the Internet, the minister of health, the minister of justice (Garry).

Sophie, a 35-year old nutrition consultant talked passionately about a health policy issue that she followed from a co-op radio show onto a web site suggested during the talk, and was finally left wondering how she could express her own feelings through the Internet:

...and I was reading, and reading, and I thought "This is awful!" Because who wants to read about this, who wants to know about this, because what can we do? ... Other than leave what you are doing now and go and [searching for a word] protest or whatever... It takes a heck of a lot... It is interesting, may be through the Internet, you can protest, people can protest, and that would be easier, because it's a link to everywhere, right? And that's what they are trying to do with these web sites. (Sophie)

The "it's so easy" sensation should not lead us, as analysts, to underestimate the significance of the impulse to talk back. We should consider whether "easy" is actually a code word for something else. People do not talk back simply because "it's easy" but because they have always had things to say to the world of policy and mass media. But these institutions have been experienced as a separate sphere of practice to which ordinary people have had no access on the terms of their everyday action. They have not been able to afford to "leave what you are doing now and go..." as Sophie put it. The handiness of the Internet access to these institutions - from amidst everyday life - now generates the feeling that they are within "attainable reach," that people, as citizens, can actually perform action onto them. Thus "easy" may actually mean "it is now possible for me to act politically from where I stand" and this is a very important attitude with regard to empowerment. However it is equally easy to see it fade away and get re-constructed as a naive illusion.

Some of my respondents thought that citizens' access to institutions of power was illusionary, that institutions would pay no heed to e-mail comments from ordinary men and women talking back to them on daily basis. But if this is the political reality, is there not a flicker of possibility here still? Institutions are modeling their Internet-based communication

with the public on the time-tested practice of public relations. They *present* themselves by their web sites and tend to employ the interactive features of the new medium at best for delivering individualized information in response to searches performed by clients. At the same time, citizens seem to want their voices heard and taken into account now through the new functionalities of the Internet. This suggests that there is indeed a democratic potential to the Internet - it's capacity to galvanize response and to conduct it back to previously one-way transmitters of powerful discourse. But in order for that potential to start materializing, innovative social and political interfaces between citizens and political institutions should be imagined and implemented to match the technical interface already in place.

Globally Spread Family and Social Networks

When I first moved to the States I was completely lost. I was in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the cornfields. I knew nobody. I had nobody around. I desperately needed human contact. You go there [to the university], your professor tells you to start studying this and that, to read this and that but everything else is just dead. (Myra)

The speaker of these words was a 28-year old Albanian woman who had moved to the United States to pursue an academic degree. The void Myra was describing was not the same as in the situations of isolation discussed earlier. Myra was a member of the nomadic tribe of relatively young and educated people of different national backgrounds who venture across state and cultural borders in their pursuit of a variety of personal goals. Yet at the level of everyday life, Myra and others like her still have a need "for human contact" in their here and now. Cultivating such contact however usually takes time, sometimes longer than the nomads actually spend in the same place. Note the pattern of living Myra sketches below and its "natural" match with the ubiquity of the Internet:

I was lucky in some sense because most of my friends from the time I studied and worked are now scattered around the world - doing PhDs and post-doctorates

here and there. As grad students or post-docs they all have *the access*, so we keep in touch that way. Well, I have made a few friends on the Internet too. [Where are your old friends?] Sheffield, England; several in France; several in Italy; several in Germany; in Russia, in Bulgaria; Japan; of course the States. They are not only Albanians, I tend not to make a difference. I have been here and there in Europe usually for 3-6 months exchange, working at a university you get those... I made friends here and there, basically all over the world. (Myra)

Like Myra, throughout their wandering, Alex and family had been leaving behind a scattered social network that could only be experienced as restorable and maintainable through e-mail and online chat - parents in Bulgaria, cousins in Spain, friends in London, the USA and throughout Canada.

The wish to stay in touch with one's globally dispersed extended family at the cost of a local phone call is a major impetus behind the adoption of the Internet in the home. Thanks to the channel opened by e-mail, the loved ones seem to be in a constantly restorable reach. As research on the telephone (Rakow, 1992; Moyal, 1992) has suggested, women are the main beneficiaries of this new possibility because it is their job to maintain the family networks. But men in Internet households, especially when they were the main users as was the case with Reiner, John, Don and Merlin, seemed to be getting more involved in this practice too. The question of what the communication within these electronically sustained family and broader social networks means to participants is worth an extended discussion. I will limit myself to putting forward an observation regarding the experience of electronic writing. Both men and women in my respondent group expressed in different ways a feeling of a dual liberation of their communication with close friends and relatives - from the cultural authority of the epistolary genre and the intrusiveness of the phone ring.

[How do you communicate with your sister in Toronto?] Well, since we have the Internet I prefer the Internet, it's easier, quicker, I can just sit down and write. I have noticed that my writing is often very messy which it wouldn't be in a letter. It's interesting, because as you are typing along, thinking and typing, and then you tend not to proof read too much here before you send it off. And it works like you just sort of, OK, next thing, right? But I don't mind writing

letters, but once I have the Internet, I prefer to use it. It is more like talking on the telephone, whereas writing down with pen and paper is more formal somehow, really from learning this in school, whatever, you are very strict how to write... I don't know, may be this is where it comes from, but I see that more as important in being correct in one's grammar, but on the Internet it is more easy going, something - more lax about. I won't think twice about writing her something and just sending it off. (Sophie)

My brother gave me the machine, but it has vastly improved my communication with my brother. He lives in south Vancouver. I never would think about phoning him if I hear a joke at the swimming pool. And he would do the same for me. And we would never had done that before, never. We exchange little things, really not very important but it makes it much more exciting when I meet the person I have something to discuss with them and so go on from there... Or, you are walking home after seeing [friend's name] at the pool and I think, oh, I've got to tell him about this and I go on e-mail. (Garry)

And I talk more to my brothers now. If I have a question - like this one line question - I probably wouldn't write to them. I might phone them but the chance to get them at home is very unlikely because they are never at home, and then the time difference - they are 3 hours ahead... That way I can just e-mail them and they can answer it whenever they want and it doesn't cost them anything. It is easy. (Jane)

Along with the transcendence of distance, the second notable functionality, "clicking" with users' needs was the element of time management. People in contemporary society are not separated only by space, but also by conflicting schedules. E-mail provides more room for negotiation between "subjective time" and "social time" (see Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 47). It produces moments of imagined intersubjective time out of temporally separated but mutually oriented (textual) actions. This worked particularly well for Jane, the homemaker, who had "the time to think about contacting" friends during the working day when people were at work and hard to get hold of. Jane went further to construct a shared world with her distant friends and relatives by looking at their local newspapers on the web: "it is kind of fun to see their headlines." Sandy did the same for her friend's local weather.

There was a whole range of conflicting evaluations expressed by my respondents as far as the norms of appropriateness and the overall value of this electronic social networking was

concerned. Different ideologies and sensitivities get tied into these debates that sound similar to earlier negotiations and struggles around the definitions of other new technologies of communication, for example the telephone. Is online chatting enriching or degrading; is sending multiple-recipient messages with jokes and other “cute junk” as one respondent called it, a reassuring form of phatic communication, or is it a de-personalized and superficial pseudo-contact? Considering, debating and settling such issues in their online relationships with others, users do important signifying work that contributes to the public understanding of the Internet.

Lack of Intellectual Challenge and Uncertainty or Dissatisfaction with Current Job

Job uncertainty and dissatisfaction were other recurring aspects of respondents’ social-biographical situations that motivated their Internet use. Having a job that is “boring and it takes absolutely zero intellectual capabilities” (Sandy), being “boxed in” (Theodore) in a job situation where the kind of the work was not gratifying but the pay was good, feeling in “limbo” (Martha) due to a work related injury and the unpredictability of insurance coverage and employment future, having been unemployed for an extended period of time (Merlin) - these were characteristic conditions that led people to look towards the Internet for intellectual challenge, self-realization, shortcuts to employment information and potential business opportunities.

Sandy, who was an object of pervasive performance monitoring by a computer all through her working day, was responding by learning and mastering the technology of the Internet so that it would serve her to arrange and feel in control of her personal world outside her telemarketing pod. Theodore was drawing on Internet sources to create his co-op radio show. His program was “as close as it comes” to his field of study - political science -- a field in which he never had the chance to work professionally because of his unresolved immigration status at the time.

Martha, who had injured her shoulder working as a meat-wrapper at Safeway had developed a passion and skills for Internet “research” and was starting to envision for herself a future as a researcher and Internet site developer. Sophie had voluntarily made it part of her job as a consultant at a nutrition supplement store to search the Web for specific information on herbs in order to better help her customers. She and her husband were thinking of opening their own herbal store with an Internet connection where they could “educate” people along with selling them products. Even Don who was otherwise making a conscious effort to remain cool and critical in the face of the common fascination with the Internet, was keeping his connection alive for the purposes of job searching. Thus job searching and “research” were emerging as two central applications meaningful to my respondents that justified their continuing Internet use.

The notion of “research” is particularly interesting as it points to a potentially important change in the way everyday life activities are performed. Routine ways of doing things and the application of unquestioned common sense knowledge have been considered among the main determinants of everyday life (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). In contrast, equipped with their Internet connections, the people I interviewed seemed to approach their everyday life activities with a heightened awareness of the diverse choices and possibilities available. They were taking a questioning and reflective stance vis-à-vis their environment and seeking to elaborate rational strategies for dealing with it. They were using the Internet to be creative, especially when such a chance was denied to them at their jobs. They were opening up new areas of meaningful activity in their everyday lives: Theodore’s radio show, Martha’s attention deficit disorder support group site (see below), Sophie’s customer education, etc., leaning on the Internet.

The interest in “doing research” was the most clearly expressed in the field of medicine, health and pharmacy. People were drawing on both medical school sites and newsgroups discussions in their effort to figure out and manage their health problems. Research was

performed on places to travel to, on apple trees to be planted in one's garden, on forage to feed to one's cows, on historical events drawn into current media discourse, on musical releases, on locating long lost members of one's family, on equipment and other items to be bought. All these heterogeneous interests and actions can be subsumed under one trend - the effort to make informed and thus rational choices about matters of daily action, including consumption:

Another aspect I like - when I want to buy something - whatever it is, be it shoes or books, I can actually get more information about products from the Internet than I can receive from sellers, or a clerk in a store. I think I probably get more factual information because it has been presented to you in a written fashion. It is different when someone puts it on paper and when someone gives it to you verbally. You never know whether this person actually knows anything. So, that I find very helpful - knowledge about anything I would like to purchase... information is very good for me. I can compare different offers on the Internet and I find I am going to the store much better prepared and I know much more even than the clerk. (Reiner)

For example, last week I needed a fax, I looked here [on the Internet] what faxes there are on the market... Instead of asking technical information from the store and the salesman, who know nothing about that, I went directly to the web site, looked up all things that I needed, downloaded them and chose exactly this fax, which helped me a lot because it saved me a lot of time searching the stores. It also saved me some money because I didn't decide to buy a more expensive fax given that this one would serve me just as well to do the same job (Alex).

Sense of Belonging to a Dispersed Community of Interest

Three distinct manifestations of this condition could be found in the situations of Ellen, Garry and Martha. Meeting other people with the same syndrome online, Ellen could "put her situation in perspective" and start learning what to expect and how to deal with the most difficult moments from others who had already been there; that is, she entered a process of socialization in her disease. At a later stage of her involvement, Ellen was among the initiators of a sub-list, a group of people who went on searching for alternative treatments including herbal, traditional and spiritual elements. In fact, from Ellen's account it sounded like one such treatment the group had been able to find consisted in their mutual emotional support. But

something more could be noticed in Ellen's learning how to live with her illness. Her online relationships and the self-understanding she acquired through them gave her the strength to start working on the reconstruction of her local friendships. Now she could reach out to people and tell them that despite the illness: "I am the same friend you once had."

For Martha, the rationalization and subsequent stabilization of her domestic Internet use happened in relation to a problem her son had as a child - his attention deficit disorder. Initially, Martha joined a chat room on this topic at CompuServe. Later, when her Internet "research" skills improved, she went on collecting information on the topic and putting it together for the purposes of the local parent support group she had helped organize. Martha's online and off-line activities helpfully complemented each other. She ended up becoming the web master of her local parent support group. She created a web site about attention deficit disorder featuring informative material found on the Web and publicizing local activities. Since the site was put up on the Vancouver Community Net server, Martha had been regularly receiving mail from parents in the area looking for information about the disorder and interested in joining the local support group.

This weaving of the local and the global, the "virtual" and the "real" through involvement in groups of common interest both online and face-to-face could be also observed in the case of Garry, who drew on discussions in the arthritis newsgroup to advise people with the illness as a volunteer for the local Arthritis Association telephone line. Jane was searching Internet sources for ideas to implement in her arts and crafts group at the local church. On one occasion she searched the Internet to help a friend with information about support groups for male victims of sexual abuse. Theodore's radio program was influential in the life of the local Ethiopian community.

Summary: Little Behaviour Genres of the Internet

In conclusion, I would like to go back to the perspective on the generative process of language proposed by Voloshinov (1929/86) in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. The special value of Voloshinov's theory, as I argued in Chapter 1, lies in his dialectical conception of language as a system that determines what speakers can and cannot say but that is also susceptible to transformations originating from the social process of speaking. Brought to bear on technology, or more precisely on what I have called the generative process of technology, this perspective would allow us to see the Internet simultaneously as a system that determines what users can and cannot do by virtue of given design, but that is also susceptible to change in the process of use.

Following Voloshinov's (1929/1986) model further, we would come down to the phenomenon of the little behaviour genres. Each of these genres is "a fact of the social milieu: of holiday leisure time, and of social contact in the parlor, the workshop, etc.; meshes with that milieu and is delimited and defined by it in its internal aspects" (p. 97). For Voloshinov, the everyday speech acts that spur the evolution of the linguistic system grow from little behaviour genres arising in typical situations. These situations, for their part, are determined by the larger process of material social reproduction.

Building freely on Voloshinov's (1929/1986) linguistic insights, it can be argued that users are indeed an active force in the generative process of technology but not in any random or voluntaristic way. Typical social-biographical situations in which subjects find themselves give rise to specific little behaviour genres including genres of technology use. Under certain conditions, such genres can induce changes in the technology itself.

In this study I have been able to identify a number of such genres invented by everyday users of the Internet: participation in online support groups; holding together a fragmented

national and cultural identity; sustaining globally spread social and family networks; political organizing from amidst everyday life; talking back to institutions of power; rationalizing everyday activities; connecting local and global interest groups, etc. Most of these use genres have been widely known and discussed in the cyberspace literature of the last ten years (for example the collections edited by Jones, 1995, 1997; Smith & Kollock, 1999). My effort in this chapter has been to reveal the link between these use genres and social-biographical situations typical of contemporary capitalist society. I have proposed a perspective on these genres that sees them as a product of situated rationalizations of a new technology. I have also attempted to explain how - in these particular use genres - the technology of the Internet has been bent to empower "boxed in" ordinary people to transcend certain limitations of their situations and to open up spaces for meaningful individual and collective action and creativity. I contend that by these creative engagements with the Internet, ordinary users have performed important signifying work contributing to the public definition of the medium.

A logical question to be asked in the face of such an observation is: do the empowering potentialities discovered by ordinary users find an adequate consideration in the political and economic processes shaping the Internet. For this to happen, the little behaviour genres enacted by everyday users have to be translated into Internet content and communication genres built into the technical and institutional structure of the medium. The Internet has to provide spaces and accessible resources for doing the things that ordinary users find meaningful and empowering as for example the case of the local parent support group using the server of the Vancouver Community Net, the mailing lists for associating with people with similar problems and beliefs, etc.³⁷ But, as Lefebvre (1991) has observed in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, the gap

³⁷Matthew, the moderator of an amputee mailing list, started his list at a time when he could use the equipment of a local organization. He had an interesting saga to tell about what happened after that organization withdrew its resources. Matthew's list was saved by its own participants who raised money for him to buy a computer. This didn't quite solve the recurrent

between the “possible” and the “real” can remain wide open, especially if the empowering potentialities discovered by users resist transformation into profitable business models for the industries operating the Internet. After all, from capital’s point of view “the important thing is that human beings be profitable, not that their lives be changed” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 230).

Recognizing the structural realities of the world we live in, however, should not prevent us from identifying the possible that is desirable from the standpoint of ordinary users. This will represent a starting ground for the development of the type of critique that Lefebvre called for - “the critique of the real by the possible” (1947/91, p. 9). A democratic counter-project for the shaping of the Internet as a communication medium can only be conceived of on the basis of a careful study and emphatic understanding of the situated rationality embodied in what the ordinary users of today are trying to do with it. In the absence of such a project, users will be forced to give up to the totalizing stabilization of the consumption possibilities (e-commerce, Web TV, etc.) foisted on them by the dominant economic and political rationality.

In the conclusion of this thesis I will attempt to derive suggestions for civic action and public policy from the set of user-initiated use genres I have been able to identify. Before I do that however, I will examine another form in which user’s interpretations of the medium are expressed. I will show how by choosing a location for the computer with an Internet connection in their homes domestic users perform a microregulation of the medium, which determines family-members’ roles and rights with respect to it. Placement encourages and discourages patterns of use within the particular domestic “moral economy” (Silverstone et al., 1992, p. 17).

problems Matthew run into trying to cover the bills for his busy electronic communications charged by his Internet Service Provider.

Chapter 6

Making Room for the Internet

Introduction

The title of this chapter plays on Lynn Spigel's 1992 book title *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. In her study, Spigel set out to find how over the course of a single decade television became part of people's daily routines and how people experienced the arrival of television in their homes. "Routine events such as television viewing are part of the often invisible history of everyday life, a history that was not recorded by the people who lived it at the time," Spigel (1992, p. 2) maintains. In order to be able to recover this lost history, Spigel turned to popular women's magazines from the postwar period saturated with representations of the new technology of television and the new practice of viewing in the home setting. These popular sources, Spigel believed, expressed a "set of cultural anxieties" about the new medium as they engaged the public in a dialogue concerning television's place in the home" (1992, p. 2). These dialogues had a formative role on how people made sense of television and its place in their lives. They contributed to the shaping of the way in which the new medium operated within the culture: "Television spurred a host of debates in popular media and what was said about the medium in turn affected television's ultimate cultural form" (Spigel, 1992, p. 4).

Engaging in this project, Spigel wished to complement traditional television "industrial" history that concentrated mainly on industry, regulation and technological invention with a social and cultural history of the medium. In this "other" history, Spiegel maintains, the role of women is central. Opposite to their marginal position in "industrial" history, women had to be

recognized as the main players in the integration of television into domestic life. Looking at popular magazines allowed this kind of television history to be written as magazines “gave women the opportunities to negotiate rules and practices for watching television at home. They addressed female readers not simply as passive consumers of promotional rhetoric, but also as producers within the household” (Spigel, 1992, p. 5).

Following Spigel’s (1992) example, in this chapter I make an effort to uncover the contribution of consumers to the shaping of the Internet as a communication medium by looking at the immediate domestic context in which it becomes incorporated. “Making room” in this sense refers to integrating the new medium into the space, time activities and relationships of the home. Unlike the case of television in Spigel’s study however, the appropriation of the Internet is not past history. It is possible for a researcher to observe this process as it unfolds in the present, in the space and time of real individuals, rather than restoring it from magazine texts.

In what follows, I identify three patterns of placement of the computer connected to the Internet in the homes I studied. I have labeled them respectively: “the wired basement,” “the family computer room” and “the gate in the living room.” I discuss the different normative dichotomies representing the domestic geographic system with regard to which the location of the new technical device is determined. Like Spigel (1992), I discover a process of intensive cultural production within the household, a production that is consequential for the public understanding of the medium.

The Microregulation of the Internet

The arrival of the Internet in the home stirs up anxieties and respective negotiations of roles and rules of using it. It precipitates a process that I would like to refer to as the

microregulation of the medium. This regulation involves making decisions about issues of placement, access, preferred, discouraged and forbidden activities on and through the Internet, allocation of resources, including time, space, money, attention, etc.

Underlying the microregulation of the new medium is a set of values characteristic of the particular family: the “moral economy of the household” (Silverstone et al., 1992, p. 17). Silverstone et al. insist on conceptualizing the home in terms of a “different kind of rationality – different, that is, from the rationality dominating the world of public affairs and the formal economy” (p.27). This alternative rationality, they suggest, guides the appropriation of commodities in domestic culture – their domestication. Commodities (media and technologies included) are redefined in accordance with the household’s own values and interests (see p. 16).

In their elaborate model of domestication of commodities Silverstone et al. (1992) have distinguished several dimensions of the process of making room for a new technology. They use the term “objectification” to refer to the physical dispositions of objects in the spatial environment of the home: “objectification reveals itself in display and in turn reveals the classificatory principles that inform a household’s sense of itself and its place in the world” (p. 22). The arrangement of physical artifacts making up a particular environment, Silverstone et al. argue, objectifies the values, the aesthetic and the cognitive universe of those identifying and feeling comfortable with them. It also reveals the “pattern of spatial differentiation (private, shared, contested; adult, child; male, female, etc.) that provides the basis for the geography of the home” (p. 23).

The integration of a new artifact into the existing fabric of physical dispositions of objects and into the patterns of spatial differentiation in a household requires creative engagement on the part of its inhabitants. As it became clear in the case of television, new technologies do not descend on the household along with a precise description of their

appropriate place and surrounding. Women, men and children living alone or together have to make more or less conscious decisions about where the novelty belongs. Thus, even if users of new technologies do not literally write and publicize their own definitions of artifacts' meanings, they objectify these meanings by inscribing artifacts into an already meaningful structure of objects. In this sense, Silverstone et al.'s concept of objectification stands for a form of "objectivation of subjective knowledge" as discussed by Schutz (see Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 264-286 and Chapter 2).

The concept of "incorporation," another central component of Silverstone et al.'s (1992) domestication model, focuses on temporalities (see p. 24). Although this term is applied by these authors broadly to cover "ways in which objects, especially technologies, are used" (p. 24), I interpret it as a reference to the temporal arrangements and patterns that arise around a new domestic artifact. The organization of time-sharing of the artifact among different family members and the way in which engagement with the artifact fits into the overall structure of the day of the individual and the household as a collective unit represent another type of code through which the social and cultural significance of that artifact is expressed. As Spigel has shown in her cultural history of television, the timing of housewives' engagement with the new technology of television has been at the root of both the development of particular television genres (cultural forms) and the redefining of the role of women within the home. This provides, I believe, a strong example of the intricate interconnectedness and two-way dependence between subjective time and social time (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) as they are structured around a technological medium.

"Houses are shaped not just by materials and tools, but by ideas, values and norms. They should not be regarded simply as utilitarian structures, but as "designs for living" states Corlin (1982, p. 173, quoted in Drucker, Tentokali & Gumpert, 1997, p. 46). Adopting the logic of this

observation, I would argue that the placement of technology within the physical and temporal setting of domestic life represents a *design for acting* with technology and as such, it is an important aspect of the use genres that I have set out to investigate. In what follows I will examine the search for the proper place of the Internet that my respondents and their families had gone through. The general driving force behind this search had been, as Silverstone (1994) has noted about television, the “struggle for control and identity, both by the household itself in its involvement with the world beyond its front door and by the individuals within it” (p. 103). Placing the computer connected to the Internet had been a statement of the acceptable and preferred ways of using the medium within each particular home, and simultaneously, it had reinforced the Internet-related roles and competencies of family members.

While in some homes among those that I visited the computer connected to the Internet had found its more or less stable place, in others it was or had been until recently a wandering object. Across the different homes there was no emerging convergence in the understandings of what the right place of the computer connected to the Internet actually was. Depending on the overall structure of the home (number of rooms and inhabitants), the types of activities associated with the computer, the identity of the main user and the degree of use by other family members, several patterns of spatial arrangement could be discerned.

The Wired Basement

The spatial pattern that I have called “the wired basement” could be found in its most representative form in the case of Reiner. The room in the basement of his single-family house that had been his office when he used to run his own business had become his computer and Internet room. Although his computer was not top of the line - it was bought for his business years ago - he had a cable Internet connection, one of the fastest available at the time. The space

had kept its business-like character, the bookshelves still stuffed with technical guides, books and CD-ROM packages. Several clocks on the walls showed the time in different time-zones. A television set connected to a satellite dish outside that Reiner used to watch German news programs from *Deutsche Welle* was also in the room.³⁸

For Reiner, who had retired from his job at the relatively early age of 56 and had only run his own business for a few years after that, this room seemed to accommodate the need for a space for intellectual, quasi-professional activity. It seemed to help him reproduce the pattern of going to work, withdrawing from the domestic space shared with others (in this case his wife and often the three little girls she used to baby-sit) and delving into pursuits of his own. He was going downstairs every day to attend to his interests in news, technical and political topics and German language programming. That is how Reiner's wife sketched the Internet-use arrangements in their home in terms of personal versus shared time and space. Note also the vertical gender-zoning of space in the home:

And also I find that it keeps him occupied and out of my hair. Because it was a bit changed after he retired and he was around quite a bit and now this takes whatever time I need to be alone and he is out of my way. And he needs that. He has an inquiring mind and it is very good for him. It is good for me too because he is busy with that... Now he comes up at 8 o'clock and he sits with me and watches TV with me. (Reiner's wife)

Reiner's wife had only abstract curiosity toward the Internet and somewhat of a dampened puzzlement as to what her husband was doing on the computer for all these hours. However, if the amount of time he was spending on the Internet had been an issue at some stage of his usage, at the moment we spoke things seemed to have settled down. His wife could not completely understand his attraction to the computer screen, but had learnt to see the bright side

³⁸This intense connectedness was in sharp contrast with the impermeability of the physical boundaries of his estate. Located on a 5-acres of farm land, his house was protected by a fence and guarded by two quite fierce dogs that scared me away at a safe distance from the door bell for a few embarrassing minutes after my arrival.

of it - it gave her the opportunity to enjoy her own "quiet time." She didn't exclude the possibility of becoming a user herself but right now, her hands were full with the job of close to full-time baby-sitting of three young children and her duties related to the house, the farm,³⁹ and the garden. Her lack of time during the day and tiredness at night had kept her away from the Internet connection despite her feeling of being "a little bit left out." Passing messages to Reiner that he would then e-mail for her to one of their sons and to a friend was as far as she had gone in using the net.

It is not quite the same as I would do it myself. My work stopped in 1966 so I had no dealings with computers. I am just awe struck, I am just amazed and I would be even more amazed if I knew what was out there... (Reiner's wife)

This state of affairs was, according to Reiner's wife, her "own fault" because all it would have taken would have been to ask Reiner to show her what to do. But then the time factor intervened again. And furthermore "there are a lot of things for me to do before I sit down in front of the computer."

The same pattern of division of space, time and computer/Internet competence between husband and wife could be observed in the case of another couple - John, a retired mechanical engineer, and his wife living in a single-family house in an affluent residential area. John had his computer and Internet hook up in a room on the ground floor where he also kept his technical literature, hobbyist magazines and motor-glider models. While Reiner's wife's lack of active interest in the Internet was nuanced with a certain sense of guilt, John's wife was completely comfortable with the fact that she didn't want to have anything to do with this technological marvel. She had the clear sense of inhabiting a sphere of knowledge and activity

³⁹Both spouses reported that after he retired Reiner had taken over from his wife the care for their animals. He expressed admiration of her for having been able to carry on that work along with raising five children for all the years he had been employed.

different from her husband's. The themes of time and passive sitting in front of a screen as deterring factors reoccurred in her explanation:

WIFE: No, I am not interested. I do other things. It takes too much time.

JOHN: [Wife's name] is the gardener.

WIFE: Can be quite time consuming.

JOHN: It's her hobby

WIFE: John likes to sit more than I do. I like to be moving.

MARIA: You can learn a lot about gardening on the Internet or maybe you prefer a book?

WIFE: Oh, I pick it up as I go. My father used to like to garden. First of all I learnt it from him, and later neighbours exchanged plants and things like that...

Similarly to Reiner's wife, John's wife had quit her job as a secretary in the 1960s to become a full time mother and homemaker. As John explained, she had never been an "adventurous lady." She always shied away from machines if she could. She never drove. In this home one could observe the same up-down gender zoning of space as in Reiner's case:

I go up there in the evening to watch TV only if it's something very interesting. Then I come down here until it's time to go to bed... One thing that puzzles me in this relationship is that she expects me to go up there and spend some of the evening with her, I ask her: "Why don't you come down here to spend some time with me?" She doesn't want to do that. (John)

Both these wives seemed to experience a kind of identity conflict when it came to using the Internet. Their sense of who they were and of their role in the home was incompatible with the idea of passively sitting in a chair in front of a machine, especially during the day. Their specialty was the immediate physical dealing with domestic objects, people and plants. For these women, the time when they could afford some passive entertainment were the evenings when they felt physically and mentally tired. In the television set they found an undemanding and yet engaging source of pleasure. The pressure they put on their husbands to come and join them in television viewing was reminiscent of the cultural pattern established in the post-war years of television being perceived as the hub of family togetherness (see Spigel, 1992). Thus, although after retirement husbands experienced a void in their daily life that they sought to fill

with intellectually stimulating and social activity resembling paid work, wives could never retire from their domestic duties. They continued to perceive their homes as work places where indulgence in a detached form of activity was simply out of place.⁴⁰ Moreover, they didn't seem to suffer as severe a break down in their social connectedness as their husbands thanks to established patterns of socializing with neighbours.

The wired basement was an exclusively male domain. Even if not always literally a basement in terms of architecture, it was characteristically a space where one person could seclude oneself for a lengthy period of time and attend to interests and pursuits of his own. With Reiner and John, the practice of "going downstairs" was a symbolic and relational substitute of going to work and their use of the Internet in a way emulated the "serious" activities they used to do at work. In the case of the 35-year old Norris, a single man with a part-time job teaching economics who shared the home with his mother, the wired basement served as both his office, information-gathering and entertainment centre.⁴¹ A transformed family den, it was pretty spacious and accommodated besides his desk a sofa and an old television set that Norris used to watch videos. Two more television sets were located on the upper floor and were used for family viewing.

Yet a third version of the wired basement was Radul's ground floor family room turned into a computer/Internet and TV/Nintendo room for he and his son. Radul, 40, was an auto body technician originally from Rumania who lived with his wife and 14-year old son. Radul had bought his computer a year and three months before we met.

⁴⁰Morley (1986) has observed a similar anxiety related to women's television viewing. Television was problematic for women because it necessitated inactivity in a space construed as both work and leisure.

⁴¹This description was verbally given to me by Norris. We met and talked in a college cafeteria. Norris was eager to respond to my questions but excused himself for not being able to invite me to his home at the moment. I decided not to insist on paying a home visit in his case as I suspected that religious, custom or other considerations might be deterring this respondent from accepting me, a woman, in his bachelor's premises. This may have been a prejudice on my part given my ignorance about Norris's original culture - he is a Tanzanian of Indian descent who had immigrated to Canada 20 years ago.

Mostly, I bought it for my son, you know, to work or to play games, and after I bought it, we said, oh, OK, let's try the Internet and see what's going on. I had had absolutely nothing to do with computers before that. (Radul)

Since then Radul had become quite interested in computer games himself and the Internet had turned out to be a great source of new game programs. The computer was initially installed in his bedroom but often the long downloads of games and other programs from shareware sites disturbed his wife who wanted to use the room for its main function - to sleep. Then, the family decided that the "TV room" on the ground floor of their three-level townhouse where their son and the neighbours' kids used to play Nintendo, would be a better place for the computer and its related activities. That is how that room had become a sort of (predominantly) male entertainment centre in the house. After supper Radul would "disappear," in his wife's words, to surf game sites, to download and play games. Radul explained:

Because, I tell you honest, I didn't have this kind of toys in Rumania. That's one reason. I bought this because I said, OK, I wanna do my pleasure. [We laugh.] I like it. I try to keep up with the generation of my son. (Radul)

In response to my question about whether he felt isolated from his family when he withdrew downstairs to deal with the computer, Radul replied that his son would often join him there to watch television or play Nintendo. They didn't do much together on the Internet itself, but sometimes, after a new game had been downloaded, Radul would show his son where to click to install it and often they would explore the new games together. Thus Radul's relative leadership in computer and Internet competence and his sharing in his son's interest in games served as a platform for a father-son bond anchored in technology from which the mother was practically excluded.

On weekends the Internet helped to transform the wired basement into a piece of Rumania and thus provided a space for another intergenerational bonding - that between Radul and his father who also lived in the Greater Vancouver area:

Because when my dad comes here for the weekends, he just sits in and I put on the radio, the real audio from Rumania and then he sits here hours and listens - music and news, and all that. Sometimes I like that too - some of the news, to listen how - And because we get the real audio from my city, from Timishuara, a few times I even heard my ex-boss's name on the radio, and I feel like oh! - I got those -uh, the goose bumps. Because I feel you know, I go back in memory, you know, because we worked together... (Radul)

Rumanian newspapers were bookmarked in Radul's browser and he would normally go over the latest issues and download articles to take to his dad when he went to visit him during the week:

He lived with us for 3-4 years after my mom passed away 5 years ago and then he moved to Burnaby, we found him like a bachelor - and now almost every second day I go to see him, to bring him some food and then he phones me "OK, just don't forget to make some newspapers for me." He likes politics, that's the truth, he likes to be updated. I don't read the whole article. Just at the time when I print them out what I think interests me, I read it. Not the whole thing because I don't even know, there are so many politicians now and all the time they are changing and I don't know what that guy did, or, I don't know - [But your dad follows?] Oh, yea he understands that thing. He cannot read the English newspapers, he understands no English, nothing. Me and my sister put the money together to bring them here. But to be honest, from now on, I don't recommend to any old people to come here. Now he started to be a little bit more mellow but before, he couldn't find it - you know. He watches the TV he doesn't understand nothing, he listens to the radio, then even the music here on the radio is not the same like, you know from - So I print him a paper, I make him happy. (Radul)

Radul's wife (37 and working at a full-time job) would sometimes leave her preferred leisure space - the main floor living room - to go "downstairs" and participate in listening to the Rumanian radio stations. Other than that, she had no interest what so ever in the computer and the Internet. Here, the wired basement was a clearly delineated male leisure space without much pretense for "serious" work-like activity apart from Radul junior doing some homework on the computer. Radul, the father, admitted that his computer/Internet engagement had nothing to do with his actual job and was just a strategy "to kill some time" and have some pleasure. As it was noted however, the Internet in fact played a significant part in his relation with his son and his father. It was not just an instrument for personal entertainment, but created - in the phenomenon

of the wired basement - a space for enacting and meeting of male cultures characteristic for the three different generations represented in Radul's family.

The Family Computer Room

The family office/study was a different form of spatial arrangement of Internet-related practices. It was a space shared by both husband and wife, and sometimes by more mature children. It had usually emerged as a designated space for in-home paid work, education, voluntary work and finally, entertainment. It could be observed in larger home units where putting aside such a designated space was possible. The family study was a more equal, even though sometimes contested terrain. There existed privileged users but others could lay claims on the space, the computer, and the Internet connection as well. In these cases, family members worked out rules of access. The women in such families in my respondent group were typically educated above the secondary level and employed in jobs for which computer competence was one, if not necessarily the central, prerequisite.

The most clear-cut case of an equitably shared family computer room was presented in Don's home. Don was a psychological counselor working from home. He had his office and reception room where he worked with patients in the basement of his single-family house. The computer with Internet connection was located in another room on the main floor. Don's wife, a bookkeeper employed outside the home, did some of her work and e-mail correspondence on that computer. His grown-up sons, 18 and 22, also used the computer partly for work and partly for games and pursuits of their own interests in computer technology, sports and other leisure topics.

Don would usually have undisturbed access to the Internet connection while the rest of the family members were at work or school. In his words, his main activity on the Internet was

“searching for employment” which involved regular visits to job-advertisement and government sites. Along with that, he maintained numerous contacts with family and distant friends, coworkers from his voluntary community board, and with some patients. Both he and his sons spent some time playing computer games but priority would be given to the family member with a more ‘serious’ need for the computer and the Internet at any given moment.

Theodore and his wife also shared a common computer room which had been set up initially so that Theodore’s wife could write and do research for her Master’s degree in psychology. After she had completed her program and started work for a governmental organization, Theodore had become the main occupant of the room. It was the place where he was gathering information on Ethiopian politics through the Internet and putting together a program for a community radio station. This activity was Theodore’s hobby, but was also a realization of his interests and skills as a bachelor of political science. Theodore had never had the chance to work professionally in that field because of unresolved immigration status at the time of his graduation. Instead, he had taken a job as a parking patroller which allowed him to effectively support his family. The computer room, then, was a constructed professional space for Theodore and the Internet was his access to a world of political information and action.

Although his wife’s graduate study had been the original reason for purchasing the computer and her student account had provided the initial access to the Internet, her use of the medium had remained very limited.⁴² Their 8-month old baby was also an indirect user of the computer room space by virtue of a few pieces of baby clothing hung to dry there.

⁴²Although I met and had a pleasant short conversation with Theodore’s wife, she had not agreed to participate in my study and Theodore did not feel comfortable to discuss her use of the Internet in any concrete detail. Everything he felt he could say without violating his wife’s privacy was: [Does your wife use the Internet at all?] “Seldom. Very rarely... She knows how to use it but doesn’t use it very much.” (Theodore)

The family computer room or office in Rita's home was shared between herself and her husband who was a computer professional. At the time of the interview, Rita's husband had started his own business and the family study was his main working place. However, Rita, a chartered accountant working for a big local company, had a separate computer for her own needs that she could use at any time in the same space. The children in this affluent home, a 13-year old girl and a 9-year old boy, possessed their own personal computers each in her/his separate room and used them for homework and Internet surfing, e-mailing and games. This was the only family in my respondent group whose annual income exceeded 100 000 Canadian dollars. They had a Local Area Network in the house, high speed (ADSL) Internet connection and individual e-mail addresses.

Spatial Improvisations: Work versus Pleasure

The idea of a computer room inside the home took different physical and conceptual expressions in single-adult homes. Sandy, a single mother of a 5-year old daughter employed in telemarketing, had set aside a bright room on the second floor of her house for her sewing machine, her books and her computer. "I also sew here and read" Sandy explained. The computer room in her case was mainly a leisure space and yet it had an intellectual feel to it. It was the room where Sandy was not a paid worker or a house-keeper but a social person and a self-motivated researcher and learner. Here, she could pursue her own interests and passions, and in that sense, the room was her demarcated zone of personal freedom. Not long before our interview however, Sandy had expelled reading as an activity from that room. The reason for that is only touched upon in the following quote and warrants further examination that will be provided in the next chapter. What I would like to emphasize here is an instant of microregulation of technology use through space designation and object placement:

I used to have the green armchair that is downstairs up here and I used to read up here at night. Now, because I decided that I don't want to see this man any more - the one I met online - for now, I took my chair downstairs and I separated them because otherwise the temptation for me to go on there and talk to him is too great. With the computer here it is like a bottle in front of an alcoholic... So I had to move my chair downstairs. I don't want to chat online that much any more, at least for now. I think I want to establish social relationships in the real world instead of in the virtual world right now. (Sandy)

Vera, a free-lance writer working from home and a recently separated mother of two children - 4- and 6 years old, organized her space along functional and emotional lines. In contrast to Sandy, Vera perceived her little office as "a really dreary room." That was the place where she used to write non-fiction such as magazine articles, and the guide book on which she was working at the moment. She also did her bookkeeping and some e-mail there using the fast and powerful Pentium computer hooked to the Internet. In contrast, when she worked on projects involving free creativity such as writing fiction (a novel) she tended to use a notebook computer in her bedroom: "Because there is a lot more light and I can see the plants." In order to connect to the Internet from her bedroom through her notebook computer, Vera had to plug and unplug the telephone line as opposed to the permanent hook up that she had in the office. In terms of Internet use, again, free interests and pursuits related to creative work, curiosity and correspondence with close friends would rather be performed in the bedroom than in the office. The office, on the other hand, was open to her children who would play games at the "fabulous" computer there.

Vera's case, where a home office existed in the strict sense as a place for doing paid work, demonstrates how the lines between (mandatory) work and leisure, imposed and intrinsic interests and activities are conceptually drawn inside the home. Like Sandy, she was demarcating a space for free play and creativity, but this space was extracted from the "dreary" site of paid work - the office.

Ellen, the 49-year old former editor disabled by a chronic illness, had set up her computer room (she referred to it as “my office”) in a walk-in closet adjacent to her bedroom. Ellen would squeeze in there when she wanted to communicate with her online support group, correspond with distant friends and relatives, or collect information about her disease from the Internet. Ellen felt it important to be able to keep her immediate space neat and manageable (“because I personally cannot live in chaos”) while recognizing that the outside world she was bringing inside her home through the Internet resisted any neat arrangement. It was messy and overwhelming, particularly to a person with limited physical energy and a number of mental problems. That is why Ellen wanted to be able to close the door of her office/closet and separate the peaceful, aesthetically organized interior of her bedroom from the piles of paper on her desk and the disarray of files on her small Macintosh.

Garry, a 67-year old retired naval radio operator, also living alone, had set up his computer room “like a little radio station.” The pattern of connecting one’s ship to the world of often vital information carried by the radio waves had been adjusted to include the computer and the Internet: “As you see, I’ve got my radios there and my short waves are there, my computers here, and under there is my keyboard and in here is my printer.” Garry was pointing to a neatly arranged set of pieces of equipment on and under his desk in a room adjacent to his dining room. Garry would come here when he wanted to communicate with the outside. On the other hand, as he explained: “I have a different room that is quiet and sunny and looks over the lawn and when I want to be alone and relax, I go there, but here, here is where the action is.”

The Gate in the Living Room

The “gate in the living room” was a form of spatial organization observed in families with a shared computer and no extra space to be assigned the function of a computer/Internet

room. Apart from this spatial deficiency however, there were characteristic features of these families' use practices that made the living room look like the most appropriate place for the computer with Internet connection to be installed. These features included first, the openness, or interfamily publicness, of Internet use that was encouraged in these homes. Second, Internet use was enmeshed in a set of other activities taking place in the same room and at the same time. Finally, in these homes the computer and the Internet were often used collectively or in the presence of other family members.

In Alex's family, both he and his wife were competent computer and Internet users. Alex, a 35-year old jewelry designer had developed an interest in computing as a matter of hobby and was the real computer/Internet fan in the home. His wife, a telecommunication engineer by background and proposal specialist for a networking software company by occupation at the time of the interview, had more professional knowledge in this area but was not so well versed in the ways and tricks of the Internet. Never the less she used the computer and the Internet on a regular basis for both work and leisure.

In the two-bedroom apartment where the family lived, the living room represented the only space, other than the bedrooms, where their computer with its manuals, disks and books could be installed. The computer desk was located across from the dining table and the television set. The television set, for its part, was placed on a wheel-table, which made it possible for television to be watched from both the sofa and the chair in front of the computer. This arrangement facilitated a seamless transition between routine daily activities and Internet use. Here is what Alex's daily Internet use would normally look like:

In the morning, I take a 15-20 minute break, I drink my coffee, [smoke] my first cigarette, I check my e-mail which comes mainly from Bulgaria and Britain. Because 8 am here is 4 PM in Britain, and 6 PM in Bulgaria. If someone has sent something during the day there, it must have already arrived. That's everything I do, nothing else, I turn the computer off. In the evening, when I come back [from work], while we fiddle about the house, preparing dinner, this or that, my wife

checks the e-mail first. Then, when my son goes to bed, about 8-9 PM, I check the news... (Alex).

Alex also said that often while he waited for a large file to download, he would turn his chair to the television set and watch TV. Television viewing and Internet surfing and communicative use were in open competition for Alex's domestic time. In his account, the Internet had taken over time traditionally spent watching television. Alex thought that the integration of the new medium into the life of the family had not taken away from the communication among family members:

I notice that the time in which most people would watch television, I spend on the Internet. In that sense, the communication at home isn't changed very much because whether you sit by somebody's side in front of the TV eating chips, or in front of the computer looking at the Internet and from time to time say: "Hey, come and see what an interesting thing I found," I don't find much of a difference. The only difference is that the TV pours it directly over you. If I weren't on the Internet, I would probably be watching TV because it is also a way to relax after work. Most people watch TV at that time.

Alex's wife did not accept his view of the Internet as being without consequences for the communication in the family. According to her, television viewing presupposed more sharing between family members while the Internet was "individually absorbing." She objected not only to extensive Internet use but also to any time spent with the computer "one-to-one." She preferred joint activities on the computer such as multi-player games (she often played computer games with their son), designing, etc. A good example of appropriate computer use for her was the collective creation of a Valentine card. Alex and their son had designed the card on the computer, she had cut it out and everyone was happy with their "interaction."

Echoing the same basic concern for family togetherness, Alex felt compelled to explain that: "There are many things that we do together as a family on the Internet - talking to people, showing things we have found to each other..."

Indeed, an examination of Alex's narrative reveals a lot of collective agency in his Internet use expressed through "we" and "our" pronouns. He and his wife, for example, jointly developed and implemented a job-search strategy for her, drawing on Internet resources. They had numerous family friends and relatives around the world with whom they talked and chatted over the Internet in multi-participant sessions that they found a lot of fun. They listened to radio programs together, etc. Although the issue of whether the Internet separated them, drew them closer together as a family, or had no effect on their bond was far from being resolved in this home, the very dialogue around it, as well as the positioning of the computer with the Internet connection in the middle of a shared and multi-functional domestic space, suggested a possible style of use anchored in the value of spousal equity and collective activities.

The family computer in Sophie's home had also been intentionally put in a place where it could be used by everyone:

We wanted a place where everyone could have access to it and we figured, if we had a den, that would be a good place, but we don't, so the living room was where everybody could have access to it. Because we just have the one [computer], if we had more than one, it may have made sense to have it in a study, or a bedroom, but just the one, we put it, you know, central. (Sophie)

Interestingly, the computer (hooked to the Internet) was occupying a television rack located centrally in Sophie's living room. It had literally replaced the television set. The family had a small television set located elsewhere in the house that was used for watching videos but they did not subscribe to cable vision. However, in the practice of this family the computer had not come to represent the successor hearth around which the family members would gather to enjoy time together as many advertisements picture it. Sophie, her husband and two sons, 11 and 13-years old, took turns using the Internet, each for their own interests and purposes, according to a casual schedule determined by their work and school time, and not the least

important, by the fee-schedule of their Internet provider. This was a typical example of time-zoning (see Munro and Madigan, 1990) of a shared, or “public” area of the home.

Sophie, the main user of the Internet, studied herbology from home by correspondence and the Internet was essential for her program-related research. She would also gather information to answer inquiries by customers of the nutrition supplement store where she worked part-time. Sophie would usually get on the computer to do her research in the morning when nobody was home and the access was free (their Internet service provider charged for the time online between 3 and 11 PM): “When I am working on research, I prefer some quiet, but I usually get that in the morning.” Her sons would occasionally go online in the afternoon, and her husband - after 11 PM.

One important thing Sophie wanted to ensure was that she or her husband were home when their sons went on the Internet. The location of the computer worked well in that respect. It was indeed central enough to allow the parents to keep an eye on what their boys were doing in cyberspace even when they were busy with something else around the house. Monitoring the children’s use of the paid time and the printer was one consideration:

They’d like to download a lot of pictures and things and get them printed out, but we try do discourage them because it is too expensive. I mean if they need a picture for a project or something like that, that’s fine. But if they just want to hang it on the wall or whatever, they’ve got to kind’a watch that. (Sophie)

The second, and more alarming reason for keeping an eye on the boys’ Internet use was pornography. Notably, Sophie’s anxiety did not stem simply from the knowledge of pornography being available “out there” in cyberspace. She was mainly disturbed by the fact that pornography was actively and uninvitedly reaching into her home and intruding on her and, potentially, her almost teenage sons’ attention. One small-scale technology out of control experience prompted Sophie and her husband to start looking for preventive measures against

the in-flow of pornography: "Because you can put in something very innocent and have quite surprising things come up on the Internet."

What had happened to Sophie was that she entered "Toyota Previa" as a search term in a search engine because she and her husband were thinking about buying one. All of a sudden, she was confronted with a number of shocking "previews" of hard core pornographic sites. The search engine, she thought, "must have misunderstood." Or, because she was in a car-related site, Sophie speculated: "maybe those [cars and pornography] go together, maybe people think they go together, I don't know." In any case, it was not only too easy to get into these hard porn previews, it was confusingly difficult to get out: "cuz when you push 'back' you'd normally get out of the site quite easily, but this one just kept going with this horrid stuff." If the kids had been looking at the computer at that moment, Sophie concluded, she would have been very unhappy. That was why she and her husband bought two different patrol programs and installed them on the computer. Only to be disappointed quite soon. The patrols, they found, were useless, "too overbearing, too knit-picky." Next thing Sophie knew, she couldn't get into a herbology site. The CyberPatrol was coming up saying that the site was being protected. In the end, Sophie and her husband decided that they simply had to be present when the boys were online.

Considerations of common access and monitoring children had kept the computer in the living room also in Carol's case: "For the first year and a half I had it right here in my living room, so I could see it, so I could see what was happening." Their Pentium PC computer with Internet connection was used by Carol and her two sons, 11- and 14-years old. Her husband, who was on his own Macintosh mostly for the purposes of his job as a movie producer, never figured out how to find his way to the Internet:

And he is a very intelligent man and very technically oriented but he could not master - and to this day he can't sit down on our computer and dial up the

Internet. We didn't have Windows at that time. He just didn't seem to be able to grasp it - he just cannot understand how everything can be in different places. He got left behind and he hasn't caught up yet. He just got too frustrated.

So, it fell upon Carol to follow their sons' exploits in cyberspace. Having the computer in the living room and going on the Internet herself helped her intercept a disturbing phenomenon:

Now, after about half a year, I don't know exactly how it happened, but my son somehow got connected to some pornography sites and we started to get a lot of pornographic mail, and we still do to this day. I get 2 sometimes up to 7 pieces of pornographic mail every single day on my AOL account. It's a line that says: "X-rated sites, open us up" and really horrible stuff... and I have that computer here in the living room and at one point my 11-year old downloaded pictures, *disgusting* [speaks with indignation] pictures, so I disconnected the Internet for about a week. They didn't know how I'd done it, I disconnected the phone lines from the box and I told them that if I ever caught them on... (Carol)

When she contacted their Internet service provider, America Online, Carol found that probably her sons were not to blame for what was going on. They had not been necessarily actively searching for pornography. Pornography had intruded on them by way of seemingly "innocent," as Sophie had put it, activities. AOL explained to Carol that "these pornographic people" would go into the chat rooms, and most certainly into the teen chat rooms that her sons frequented at the time, and they would collect up all the addresses of the users they found in there and start sending them stuff. Then, if one of her kids ever went into a pornographic site, his address would be picked up and "be sold over, and over, and over again" to similar content providers.

This put Carol on the alert and looking for measures to closely supervise her sons' use of the Internet. The placement of the computer in the living room contributed to that for some time.

But finally after that length of time my husband wanted the mess gone. The kids had their games everywhere and they were always downloading stuff and the computer was always sitting here in the living room and my husband wanted to

sit here and listen to music and, he is a very quiet man, and that really bothered him. (Carol)

Then, the gate in the living room arrangement in Carol's home was transformed into a family computer room set up. The computer and Internet activities were relocated from the central, shared, visible, lively space of the living room into a designated separate space with open access for whoever in the family wanted to use the computer:

CAROL: And so I moved the computer down to its own room and so that's where it is now.

MARIA: Is it like an office now? Do you work there?

CAROL: No, it's just our computer room. Because my little son has four friends that come and they all sit there all day Saturday and play Sim City. And that way they can be alone with their games and my older boy can be in the other room.

MARIA: Do you feel OK with the fact that you cannot monitor them?

CAROL: I go down and look at them very often. Now, that I am home,⁴³ if the door is shut I always open the door and look at them...

MARIA: So, you prefer the door to stay open?

CAROL: Yah.

MARIA: Do you yourself go down to do your stuff?

CAROL: Yah. Sometimes we have problems with that.

MARIA: Why?

CAROL: Because my son wants to be on it and I want - but we have a lot of computers in the house...

The competition with her sons on one hand and the felt obligation to weed off pornography from their mailbox had shaped Carol's temporal pattern of using the Internet. Thus, another example of time-zoning had been put into place in this family. Carol would go in the "computer room" more often at night "because the kids are in bed and they are not on the computer." Usually, in the morning she would do her "computer work" - writing reports, announcements, etc., related to the voluntary organizations she belonged to - and she might also "sit on the Internet to see whether I've got any messages and to clear off any pornography mail that's coming through the night."

⁴³Carol had quit her job a few months before our interview so that she could be there to meet the growing needs of her sons: "But I felt, ten years from now, who's gonna care that I did a wonderful job marketing [company's name], and I am still gotta have to live with these two boys as adults and what kind of adults are they going to be?"

Sharing computer/Internet related space and time with her 16-year old son was also an issue that Martha, a single mother, had to consider. Deciding where in her home to place the computer, she went through the options of her bedroom, where subsequently, her son would have to come to play “doom and kill and blast and that sort of thing.” Or, his bedroom which she could rarely find her way through but where, subsequently, she would need to go if she had work to do on the computer. In a two-bedroom townhouse, Martha had to be flexible and creative, and so she came up with the hallway:

So, because we have this hallway which is basically used as an access to the living room and we have access through the kitchen. So I turned the hallway into an office. And it works. It's a neutral place. I can look outside if I want and the [outside] door is open during summer time. I can be aware of what is going on. If I put it upstairs, I'd feel a little claustrophobic upstairs and there is where I sleep... I like to feel like I am outside all the time, people pop in and I don't feel secluded... This is a crammed space, but it works... And there is that feeling that everything is still close at hand.

A neutral place, where you do not feel secluded, where you can be aware of what is going on and have the rest of the home facilities close at hand matches the definition of the gate in the living room arrangement discussed above.⁴⁴ Martha dealt with the pornographic threat in a more relaxed manner than the previous two mothers, although she too had to do her share of monitoring her son's Internet use:

He has done the typical teen-age boy thing - gone to pornographic sites. He leaves a trail of crumbs behind. I can always tell where he has been. [Laughs.] I can check in the cache and see what graphics there are. So I say: oh, OK. But I don't make a big thing out of it because it is there. There is freedom of speech and there is going to be subversive information out there but I think it is like television - you don't have to turn it on, you don't have to go there. I knew that he would go through this stage and he did and it is not a big deal any more. (Martha)

On her part, Martha was sensitive to the possibilities of having the private space of her home invaded and had elaborated strategies for protecting the boundaries of her (and her son's)

⁴⁴In Martha's case the computer desk was actually blocking one of the accesses to the living room and she called her computer space “my office.”

private space. One trick she used was juggling two e-mail addresses, one of which was anonymous in that it didn't reveal any personal information about her. She also avoided using newsgroups because of the well-known practice of advertisers collecting addresses from there and then distributing electronic junk mail. On one occasion, a Yahoo chat partner had led her son to believe that he was communicating with a 14-year old girl, when actually, after real addresses, telephone numbers and names were exchanged, it turned out that the chat partner was a boy sexually interested in Martha's son. That had come as a shock to Martha's son. She, however, had not disconnected her telephone line, as Carol had once done. Instead, she had taken the opportunity to educate her son about how "it is totally whatever you want to perceive and whatever they want to tell you. You are totally at the mercy of this thing, so you have to be very cautious."

Internet Parenting

Although the theme that I am discussing here is spatial arrangement, I cannot dissociate it easily from the intervening theme of Internet parenting. If we recall Radul's case, there we had a father who shared his son's interest in computer games and respective Internet sites. That was a predictable example of male bonding anchored in typical male things - technology, games and domestic leisure. No trace was to be found in Radul's account of any concern about the possible pornographic invasion into the world of his 14-year old son. In contrast, the three stories I just told all involved computer-and Internet-literate mothers vividly aware of the shadowy side of cyberspace and deeply concerned about the threats it bred for the moral and social sanity of their sons. For these mothers, the Internet had added one more line of development to watch for, one more area of their children's upbringing to work on. Or, to

confirm Cowan's (1983) earlier observation, new domestic technology was bringing in more work for mother.

In this context, it would be useful to recall Smith's (1999) observation that the "dominant school-mother T-discourse"⁴⁵ lays the primary responsibility for the individual child's school achievement, and even further, his/her success as an adult, on the family. The ideological code of the "Standard North American Family" (see Smith, 1999, p. 157-161) helps to translate in practical settings "family" into "mother." Thus, mothers are charged with the responsibility for the overall success or failure of the child in terms of academic and moral achievement and expected to do the work required for fulfilling that responsibility. Understood in that way, the work of mothering that had to be done in these Internet-connected families had become more complex and demanding. It required technological competence and knowledge of the medium on the part of the mother. The technological imperative was experienced by the women in these families in relation to their responsibility for the education and the moral character of their children. They felt it as a pressure to upgrade themselves as mothers with technological skills and knowledge.

Notably, the different reactions the three mothers had regarding cyber pornography were not based simply on different moral philosophies or parenting styles. At the core of those reactions was the felt technological competence and Internet-experience of the mother herself. Sophie and Carol were unconfident novice users. They were coming to know the new medium alongside and maybe even a step behind their sons. For them, cyberspace was still an unpredictable terrain, the technology was hard to harness and these two circumstances put together represented a major source of anxiety. Martha's reaction, on the other hand, was based

⁴⁵In Smith's (1999) terminology this concept refers to discourses mediated by texts representing "skeins of social relations mediated and organized textually" that connect and coordinate the activities of actual individuals whose local historical sites of reading/hearing/viewing may be geographically and temporarily dispersed and institutionally various (p. 158).

on the superior knowledge and understanding of both the technology and the medium that she had compared to her son. She was moving ahead of him, she knew what could be expected and she felt capable of educating him, while the other two women were looking for mechanisms for protection.

Furthermore, Martha was making a conscious effort to uncover to her son the creative and knowledge-yielding powers of the medium. She was in the process of developing a web site for his art: "He's an artist - he draws a lot and I want to get his pictures out there. It's a sort of self-esteem thing. He can feel really good about his work."

She had downloaded an English-Spanish translator program to help him with his Spanish classes and kept his bookmarks organized in a separate folder in Netscape. A look into this folder gave her a synopsis of at least some of the interests and pursuits of her son at any given moment so that she could better understand those interests and possibly shape them as far as she could: "Art Crime - he is very much into world graffiti and what people are doing out there and what kind of impact and statement they are making."

Thus, in Martha's case, a not so easily predictable mother-son bond seemed to be growing out of Internet use. The technology and the medium were becoming implicated in a previously not-so-typical relationship. Mother and son were jointly exploring cyberspace and learning more about each other along the way.

Jane, a 35-year old homemaker, and her 12-year old son represented another example of this phenomenon. Jane had two boys and a girl. Her husband, a metal builder, had no interest in the Internet mostly because he worked long hours, but also because, as he put it himself, he was more "mechanically inclined." Mechanical versus literary, or symbolic inclination was a line of identity formation in this family. The older boy, 14, according to Jane's characterization, was like his father:

interested in mechanical things, how to repair [machines]. He fixes cars, he can make an oil change. The big box outside [Jane points to a box in the yard] - he built that. He likes to work with his hands, to see how things work, and machines. He would use a computer to make a card for someone's birthday, or make a sign, or do a homework. He is not that interested in the Internet at that point. (Jane)

On the other hand, the younger son, 12, was perceived to be like his mom who said she liked to read a lot. He was also a voracious reader: "In grade 5 he read grade 7 books, if they told him at school to read 2 novels, he would read 10." He was attracted to the Internet "for the reading part." Jane and her younger boy would often dial up the Internet together after he came back from school. They tried different search strategies: "He'll show me different things he's done to find something, and I'll show him things that I have done and we sort of exchange information." She encouraged him and helped him correspond with e-mail pals from other parts of the country. This was also a collaborative project between the two of them as her son would write to those pen-pals about his Legos, Tamagochis and boy-scout activities, while Jane would add geographical descriptions of their location, their city and other information that she thought might be educational. Thus, in this family, the Internet was being appropriated by the mother as a tool for building a new kind of special bond between herself and her growing son.⁴⁶ For the time being, it was competing successfully with the "male" mechanical stuff involving machines, cars, carpentry, etc.

A complex dialectic of oppression and empowerment with regard to these women can be detected in their everyday stories. On one hand, the technological system was invading their homes through the ideologies of progress, personal success and motherly responsibilities. It was forcing them to do additional work in order to meet the challenges involved in ensuring

⁴⁶Pornography was not that big an issue in this home because they were using a text browser and still could not access any graphical files on the Internet. Never the less, Jane had learnt from her experience with newsgroups that: "you have to watch them [newsgroup postings] though. Some have really horrible pornographic stuff in the text, even on kids' stuff. People put really weird stuff."

adequate technological and moral education of their children in the unsettled context of the new medium. A boy's toy was turning into a mother's toil.

At the same time, the new medium was delivering a new tool into the hands of the mother to teach resistance, dignity and integrity of being (recall Hooks 1990; see also Chapter 2). Internet mothers, similar to the black women Hooks wrote about, resisted by making homes where their children could strive to be "subjects, not objects" (p. 42) vis-à-vis a powerful technological system driven, most notably in the pornography example, by the impetus to transform these children into perfect consumers.⁴⁷ In order to be able to play that role, mothers had to understand the technology critically and to imagine alternative possibilities for its use that would affirm the subjectivity of their children as learners and creators. The women I talked with found themselves at different stages in this process. The discussion of children's (boys') interest in cheat-codes for computer games illustrates the journey of critical discovery that mothers had to do in order to interpret the new phenomenon:

MARTHA: My son started getting interested in, for example he was playing a CD ROM game, he'd go to a site where there were codes so that he could do better at a game."

CAROL: ...but he also goes into the game sites, and he downloads cheat-cheats, do you know what that is, when you play a game on a Sony play station, but he can go on the Internet and find whole pages of codes, and he loves that. My son trades it with his friends.

Martha and Carol were just registering a fact they had observed in their sons' Internet use. Martha sounded quite indifferent to it, while Carol seemed to appreciate to some extent the subversive nature of this activity serving as a stimulus for her son to engage with the new

⁴⁷A comprehensive discussion of the commercial exploitation of children through the Internet can be found for example in the report *Web of Deception: Threats to Children from Online Marketing, 3/96*, issued by The Center for Media Education (CME), a US non-profit organization.

medium. After all, it put the Internet in service of his own pre-teen interests and socialization efforts (he traded codes with friends).⁴⁸

JANE: [Laughs.] You know what he does? He finds the Game Boy, the [unclear] video game thing. He goes on the Internet and he finds how to cheat so that he can get further ahead in his games, little tricks. The games usually have 8 or 10 levels and the farther you get the more interesting it becomes. So they want to skip levels cuz they want to get as far as they can.

This account of an annoying practice that my own son was involved in struck me with its emphatic quality. Jane had found an explanation of why her son did that from his own perspective - to get faster to more interesting levels of his computer and video games. She seemed to understand and justify the kind of pleasure her son was deriving from this.

Sophie, for her part, had gone a longer way toward relating the playful subversive activity of her sons with the big picture of the computer game industry:

SOPHIE: And they use it for, unfortunately there is a lot of cheating, what they call, oh, I am not sure what they call it, but anyway it's cheating. There's answers for games they play, so they go on there and I don't know how they find these addresses, but have them at school, friends have them at school... They go on there and find answers for games they can't figure out. So you'd say, why? That's the whole point of the game, challenge is over. *And then they want a new game* [emphasis mine]. I don't know, so, it's very different pace these days, I am not sure...

Summary: Inscribing the Internet

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, domestic interiors are designs for living. As such, they represent a material expression of families' interpretations of domestic technologies. In the case of the Internet, the placement of the computer with the Internet connection within the home speaks of the meaning of the technology for this particular family as well as the

⁴⁸My own son wrote a column in the school newspaper entitled "The Cheat Zone." There, he practically pasted cheat codes for computer games that he had downloaded from the Internet. My arguments that this was not a creative way to run a newspaper column were countered by statement of the popularity of this material.

microregulation of its use. By placing the device in a particular way, the families I studied were defining its properties. One of the main dimensions of interpretation and regulation expressed in these patterns of placement was constituted by the choice between individuality versus togetherness of use (see Fig.1, togetherness axis). This was the range between “It’s peaceful to me to be in the bedroom and close the door. Whoever is using it [the Internet] can be on one’s own in there” (Jane) versus the preference for joint activities and the refusal to accept a use practice that is “individually absorbing” (Alex’s wife). The values underlying these choices were on one hand the respect for the privacy of individual family members, and on the other, the felt need to reaffirm the family collectivity by engaging in joint activities.

The available technical configurations could clearly support the need for privacy much better than the desire for collective engagement. The togetherness ideal was much harder to sustain in the face of a technology anchored into the personal computer with its single-person operated input and output devices. In this respect, technological design was limiting the possibilities for collectivist interpretations and applications. The gate in the living room placement pattern represented an attempt to compensate for this technologically imposed disintegration of the family into separate individual spaces of attention and engagement. In homes where women played the leading role in Internet appropriation, togetherness or at least mutual awareness through central and public placement of the computer with Internet connection was being sought. In contrast, the wired basement pattern allowed different family members to be alone during certain periods of the day as a matter of routine. The case of the family computer room was similar - whoever needed to use it at any particular time could be there on his/her own or, as in the case with some of the children - with friends.

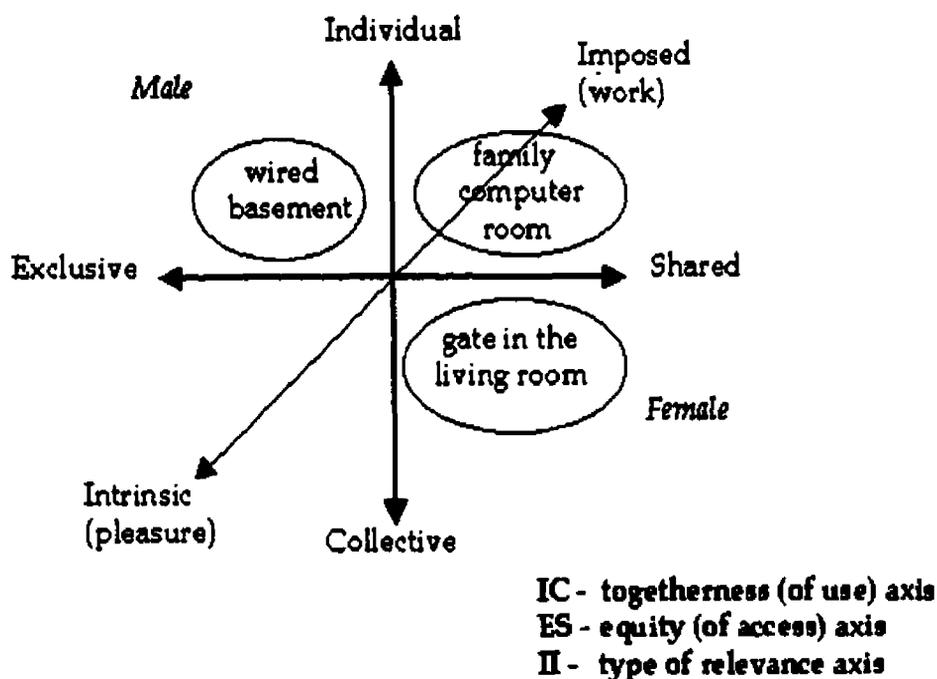
Another dimension of interpretation and microregulation of the Internet had to do with the equality/inequality of access (see Fig.1, equity axis). What was decided along this

continuum was the question of symbolic ownership: who the privileged user of the medium in the home was, or who had the most legitimate access to the connection and the space and time allocated to it. As I have shown, what I have called the wired basement was an example of exclusive access, most typically granted to the man in the family. Other members of the family, most typically the wife, were not necessarily denied the opportunity to use the Internet. In the cases I examined, these wives chose to exclude themselves from the space and time of the new medium due to interiorized cultural attitudes regarding the role of the woman in the home and the relationship between women and technology.⁴⁹

A third dimension of spatial arrangement concerned the type of relevance of the Internet activity: imposed (work) or intrinsic (pleasure, freedom, curiosity). (See Fig. 1, type of relevance axis.) In some cases, as for example Sandy and Vera, there was a clearly drawn demarcation line between the workspace and the pleasure/freedom space. Vera had assigned different computers to each of these spaces while Sandy had definitively placed her Internet-connected computer in her pleasure/freedom zone, as if in an effort to claim that technology back for herself in contrast to being its slave at work. In other homes, work and pleasure, imposed and intrinsic relevance of the computer and the Internet were intertwined and hard to distinguish. Characteristically, as in the cases of Alex, Sophie and Theodore, the Internet at home was being employed to introduce a pleasurable, exploratory, creative, even playful dimension into education and work.

⁴⁹What Turkle (1988) has labeled "computational reticence" (p. 41) seemed to be played out in these cases in a specific way.

Figure 1. Inscribing of the Internet connection in the domestic space.



In the choices made along these dimensions we find an expression of and negotiation between the diverse values underlying the culture of the particular household. Thus, in the pattern of the wired basement we find a culture organized around rigid gender division of roles in the family which appropriates the Internet according to this pattern. The men in the family have exclusive access to the computer, the Internet connection and the space where they are located for the purposes of work or pleasure whatever the case might be. Female identity is constructed in relation to different central objects, activities and spaces - the kitchen, the garden, the television room. In these homes domestic space is the proverbial leisure realm for men and working place for women described in numerous studies by feminist and media researchers (see Drucker et al., 1997 for an overview of feminist writing; Gray, 1992; Morley, 1986; Weisman, 1992;). The practices of technology use supported by spatial arrangements are constitutive of this gendered geography of the home.

In the family computer room arrangement, a more flexible definition of roles of family members can be discerned. Both the man and the woman in the couple are seen as capable of making a legitimate claim on the computer and the Internet connection for imposed or intrinsic purposes. The individuality of their access is also confirmed by the separation of the computer from other objects and activities within a designated room where whoever is using it can be on one's own and concentrate on his/her interaction with the outside world. The family computer room can be defined and experienced either as an office, that is, with an emphasis on the work being done there, or as a leisure room. More often than not however, it is both. An elaborate time-zoning scheme is usually put in place to ensure that the needs of individuals in the family are fairly met. Conflicts can occur in the process of negotiation of an acceptable time-zoning pattern. Power differentials in the family or values associated with different kinds of activity affect the division of space and time between different members.

In both the wired basement and the family computer room, the demarcation line between the domestic or private space of the family and the public space with which the Internet helps members interact is clearly drawn. To invoke the metaphor of my naval-radio-operator respondent, these two placement patterns resembled the radio room which is the point of connection between a ship at sea and the rest of the world. Individual family members withdrew from collective and strictly private domestic life into these spaces so that they could communicate with the public world. I would refrain from characterizing this practice as "double privatization" (Morley, 1992, p. 120) as critics of the "home based society" such as Kumar (1995, p. 59) have done. What I see in this practice is a dialectical paradox: the individual withdraws in the private realm of the home thus negating the public world at one level, and yet at another level, she/he withdraws from the private publicness of collective family life in order to return to the public world outside the home in a different way, from his/her own basis. The

repercussions this practice entails for public life and its various forms will be discussed at more length in the next chapter.

In the gate in the living room arrangement, the spatial boundaries between private domestic space and the public world are blurred. Home-based activities are enmeshed with activities drawing on and addressing the public world. Less individual privacy of use and more private publicness within the family are characteristic of this pattern. In this pattern I see an attempt for double socialization - typically private practices within the home are articulated to the public world and individual Internet use is exposed to the glances of the family public. But with that said, what happens to the long-standing dichotomies between the public and the private, between individual and community? The following chapter will take up this theme with a view to the various forms of actual and virtual togetherness in which the Internet is implicated.

As a new technology and new medium of communication the Internet has stirred the existing spatial arrangements and significations inside the home as well as induced a process of re-negotiation and re-definition of the boundaries between the (private) home and the public world. The penetration of the new technology into the home does not simply represent an instance of further encroachment of System onto the lifeworld. Individuals located in their homes are not simply drawn into a new technological and ideological structure of domination. They are involved in decision-making regarding the space, time and meaning that the new technology deserves from the perspective of their existing values and patterns of everyday life. They are engaged in active work aimed at erecting the selective and protective mechanisms that would allow them to remain in control of their personal and family space while at the same time relate more actively and freely to their social environment. In the cases cited in this chapter one can see a clear illustration of the strategies people invent in order to put such mechanisms in place. Zoning of space and time, sets of rules for access and appropriate use, articulation and re-

configuration of values, re-definition of roles and tasks emerge as the means through which people resist technological dictate and strive at mastering the novel possibilities for action and living the Internet creates. Some solutions follow the trajectory of old ideologies, including gender divisions and oppressions. Others become materializations of new, more equitable, imaginative and collaborative relations between partners and family members in general,⁵⁰ and importantly, between the household and its social exterior.

⁵⁰Interestingly and unexpectedly, for example, the Internet competence becomes a part of the job characteristic of the Internet mom and a tool in her hands for creating a new partnership with her son. Unfortunately, my data do not allow me to say anything about parent-daughter relationships involving the Internet as only four of my respondents had daughters, mostly quite young. Also, the relationship between parent and daughter was not thematized in respondents' accounts.

Chapter 7

Virtual Togetherness

Introduction

Two distinct models have emerged in the last decade as the main contestants for defining the social character of the Internet. I will label them “the consumption model” and the “community model.” The germs of the consumption model can be found in the early visions and subsequent efforts to put research centres, libraries and other information-generating and storing institutions online so that initially professionals, and later - the wired public, can tap into an unlimited stock of data. This model further took shape in conjunction with the growing adoption rate of the new medium. As more and more comfortable middle-class users hooked up to the Internet, it dawned on businesses that a new promising virtual market was opening up. The conceptual step from information retrieval to retrieval of goods and services was easy to make. Technical solutions ensuring higher speed and capacity of transmission lines and graphical point-and-click interfaces are further furnishing the Internet as a global electronic mall. The characters populating this space are free, active consumers, viewing, picking, clicking and getting what various industries have to offer, not only never talking to each other (as in the traditional brick-and-mortar commercial sites), but also never seeing or sensing each other’s presence. Privacy, anonymity, reliability, speed and visual appeal are desired properties of this virtual space, mobilizing armies of designers in search of adequate technical solutions.

The community model originated in the side-track inventions of ARPANET,⁵¹ and later Internet, builders who were simultaneously users of these networks in need of communicating and collaborating with distant colleagues. The remarkable popularity of bulletin-boards, e-mail and in the later years Usenet, Internet Relay Chat, mailing lists and similar applications came as a surprise to those who originally planned the networks with resource sharing and file-exchange as priority functions in mind (see Abbate, 1994). The discovery of human communication on computer networks provided grounds for the enthusiasm of early visionaries who conceived of the Internet as a community technology with the potential to provide spaces for people to come together as equals, as colleagues and generators of ideas, to deliberate and act collectively, that is to form communities.

Predictably, the promises that a new technology would enhance community and extend it globally have called forth withering criticism. Skeptics (Borgmann, 1992; Postman, 1992; Kumar, 1995; Slouka, 1995) have contended that nothing is more destructive of real community than its virtual counterfeit. The “virtual community” debate continues unabated to this day for a good reason. Community is the scene on which a large share of human development occurs. As such it is a fundamental human value mobilizing diverse ideologies and sensitivities. The possibility of realizing this value in a new domain and by new means is naturally stirring up optimistic excitement in many circles. At the same time, the eagerness to repose hopes for community in a technical system flies in the face of an influential intellectual tradition of technological criticism. This eagerness seems even more naive in the light of the latest developments of the Internet driven by powerful players indicating the triumph of the commercial model.

⁵¹ARPANET was the predecessor of the Internet, the network created by the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in the late 1960s to be a testing ground for innovative concepts such as packet-switching, distributed topology and routing and the connection of heterogeneous computer systems (see Abbate, 1994: iv)

The objective of this chapter is to explore some dimensions of the virtual community concept that relate to questions of user agency and empowering possibilities in the appropriation of the Internet by domestic users. I contend that users' participation in what has been called "virtual communities" (Rheingold, 1993) over the Internet constitutes a cultural trend of "immobile socialization," or in other words, socialization of private experience through the invention of new forms of intersubjectivity and social organization online. When I suggested the term immobile socialization in Chapter 5, I intentionally reversed Williams' (1974) concept of mobile privatization. Unlike broadcast technology and the automobile that, according to Williams, precipitated a withdrawal of middle-class families from public spaces of association and sociability into private suburban homes, the Internet is being mobilized in a process of collective deliberation and action in which people engage from amidst the private realm. Whether an analyst would decide to call the electronic forums in which this is happening communities or not depends on the notion of community she is operating with. What has to be noted however is that by engaging in different forms of collective practice online users transcend the sphere of the narrowly private interest and experience. Why do they do that? What does it mean to them? How does it reflect on the public understanding of the Internet? The concept of "virtual community" has been only of limited help to the understanding of this practice and I will try to explain why in what follows.

Few studies of virtual communities (an exception is Turkle, 1995) have attempted to relate online community engagement with users' everyday life situations, relevances and goals. Most of the existing research (see Jones, 1995, 1997) has concentrated on the group cultures originating from the interactions of online participants thus treating online group phenomena in isolation from the actual daily life experiences of the subjects involved. My attempt in this chapter is to initiate an exploration into the experiences and motivations that lead Internet users

to get involved or the opposite, to stay away from forms of virtual togetherness. I believe it is important to understand what kinds of needs and values and under what circumstances virtual communities serve. This will open a realistic perspective on the significance of this use genre to the shaping of the Internet.

I will start this inquiry with a brief excursion into the “virtual community” debate. Then, I will offer a typology of different forms of online involvement with others demonstrating that virtual community is not always the most accurate notion for describing people’s actual social activities online. In fact, virtual togetherness has many variations not all of which live up to the value-laden name of community. This fact however does not undermine the idea of collective life in cyberspace. On the contrary, I will call for appreciation of the different forms of engagement with other people online (virtual togetherness) that exist and the different situated needs they serve. In these multifarious practices I recognize new vehicles that allow users to traverse the social world and penetrate previously unattainable regions of anonymity,⁵² as well as to expand their restorable social reach. In light of this formulation of the meaning of virtual togetherness I will question the dichotomy between the private and the public that is at the root of both virtual utopia and dystopia.

The Virtual Community Debate

Some of the earliest writing about computer networking promised universal interconnectedness in electronically generated communities, a “network nation” (Licklider and Taylor, 1968; Hiltz and Turoff, 1978). The implicit assumption behind these predictions was the view that the structure of a technology determines its social impact. The early writers emphasized the positive consequences of opening a new communication channel, comparable to

the telephone in the scope of its expected impact. They were enthusiasts and believed that the technical possibility of mediated group interaction would enhance and improve the quality of life, favoring revived public discourse, class, race and gender equality, and participatory forms of social organization. These ideas represented the optimism of an early generation of engineers heavily involved in the building of the Internet.⁵³

The community vision of early enthusiasts was taken up by public discourse and, for good or ill, gave birth to a persisting metaphor - the Internet as a community technology. This vision was subsequently challenged by critiques that serve as a necessary antidote to the optimistic accounts of the technology. The persisting question posed by critics is whether and how community is possible in the virtual world.

Critics of computer networking see this nascent social space as inherently adverse to community. Cyberspace, they argue is morally inert (Borgmann, 1992) and socially disruptive by virtue of the very technological devices and arrangements that constitute it. This is Borgmann's view of what he calls "hyperintelligent" (p. 105) computer networks. "More deeply considered, however, the nervous system of hyperintelligence will disconnect us one from the other. If everyone is indifferently present regardless of where one is located on the globe, no one is commandingly present" (p 105). What bothers Borgmann is that we can easily make people on a computer network vanish when we need them no more. We can use screening devices to

⁵² Recall Schutz's model of the social world presented in Chapter I.

⁵³For example Vinton Cerf, one of the two men who created the TCP/IP protocol also wrote the following poem:

Like distant islands sundered by the sea,
we had no sense of one community.
We lived and worked apart and rarely knew
that others searched with us for knowledge, too...
But, could these new resources not be shared?
Let links be built; machines and men be paired!
Let distance be no barrier! They set
that goal: design and build the ARPANET!

("Requiem for the ARPANET", quoted in Abatte, 1994, p. 56)

protect ourselves from unwanted communication partners. Not only is communication more superficial, the network also reduces our chances of meeting people face-to-face. In this way “the immobile attachment to the web of communication works a twofold deprivation of our lives. It cuts us off from the pleasure of seeing people in the round and from the instruction of being seen and judged by them” (p 106).

Dreyfus (1998), in a recent paper, models his critique of the Internet after Kierkegaard's comment about the press: “Here men are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price” (quoted in Dreyfus, 1998, section I). Dreyfus argues that given the way in which information is organized on the World Wide Web - universal interconnectedness and leveling of differences - the Internet will “ultimately lead to the inevitable breakdown of serious choice and so of the ethical sphere” (section III). In Kierkegaard's terms the ethical sphere is the form of life in which one has a stable identity and is committed to involved action. Finally, according to Dreyfus, the Internet will undermine the “religious sphere,” or the making of unconditional commitments which creates strong identities and strong motivations: “The temptation is to live in a world of stimulating images and simulated commitments and thus to lead a simulated life devoid of practical knowledge and skill. Far from encouraging unconditional commitments, the Net tends to turn all life into a risk free game. So, in the end, although information technology does not prohibit unconditional commitments, it does inhibit them” (section IV).

Commitment as a *conditio sine qua non* of community is at issue also in the critique of online or virtual communities advanced by Postman (1992). Postman argues that the very concept of community implies being together (from the Latin root *cum*) in combination with *munis*, meaning obligation. Network communities, insists Postman, lack this essential feature of common obligation along with the consequences of not meeting it. He goes on to point out that

applying the community metaphor to groups of people associating over computer networks compromises the genuine notion of community.

In an eloquent account of his experience in cyberspace, Slouka (1995) discovers that within the network, people inhabit worlds cut loose from their moorings in reality. He sees a substantial risk involved in setting up residence in these metaphorical communities, the risk of devaluing the significance of physical reality. Turning their backs to the real world, cyberists enter a hybrid world in which:

every potential virtue became its own dark double; in which freedom became the freedom to abuse and torment; anonymity, the anonymity of the obscene phone call; and the liberation from the physical body, just an invitation to torture someone's virtual one. With the checks and balances of the real world barred at the door, all the worst in human nature quickly set shop (Slouka, 1995, p. 54).

These observations lead Slouka to the conclusion that community morality matters only within the bounds of the physical world. There could be no morality in heaven, hell or cyberspace.

Strangely, many of these apparently negative traits of online communication are evaluated positively by postmodern visionaries who see in the Internet a paradigm of desirable social transformations. The liberation from the body and the bounds of physical and social reality that the critics fault appears as a positive characteristic of the medium to these theorists. They see a new culture emerging in the practices of multiple identity made possible by the users' disembodiment. Invisible, the user can encounter others on his or her own (psychologically individual) terms, practice virtual "cross-dressing," adopt fantasy personas, and unleash repressed dimensions of the self. As Sherry Turkle puts it, online interaction "brings postmodernism down to earth....Multiple viewpoints call forth a new moral discourse....The culture of simulation may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves" (1995, p. 268).

Although critics and post modern theorists follow different lines of argumentation and reach contrasting conclusions, they seem to share the assumption that the technical structure of computer networks will largely determine the character and the quality of the human communication that will take place over them. Three attributes of the network seem particularly important in this respect.

First, due to the narrow band of the communication channel, one characteristic feature of interactions over the Internet is considered to be their discontinuity with the real world. According to this view, the connection between what happens in cyberspace and the social contexts within which the acting subjects are situated is as thin and ephemeral as the flow of electronic signals set into motion by the fingers hitting the keyboard. Thus, a rift emerges between the virtual and the real. The critics see in this a diminishing of experience itself, the postmoderns, an opportunity to unleash fantasy.

Secondly, because of the universal interconnectedness of the nodes of the network, human values and choices are blurred into a universal relativism. Every piece of information is equally valuable and every communication partner is equally present. The critics conclude that nothing is really valuable and no one really present (Borgmann, 1992; Dreyfus, 1998). Commitment and responsibility become unsustainable. The postmoderns seize on the liberation promised in a relativistic universe. Postmodern multiple selves can thrive in the new virtual environment where mobility between communities is easy to achieve (Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1995).

Thirdly, because of the anonymity of computer interaction, every act vis-à-vis other participants is equally permissible. The critics charge that under these conditions community is impossible, while the postmoderns find in anonymity the opportunity for creating a new, more tolerant, and more self-conscious community.

An observation to be made on the basis of the three views of network technology briefly reviewed here is that early enthusiasts, critics and postmodern theorists all flock around a few general features of this technology vis-à-vis an unspecified, broadly conceived user population that in most cases is tantamount to humanity as such.

Yet a forth trend to be distinguished in the virtual community literature is represented by the work of virtual anthropologists and sociologists who have offered a range of empirical studies of groups of people meeting and interacting through the Internet. Unlike naive advocates of online community, critics and postmoderns all of whom remain preoccupied with deriving the possible benefits and dangers to community from the features, or biases, of network technology, sociologists and cultural analysis of cyberspace have provided a qualitative account of what is actually going on in online social groups. Coming from a ritualistic rather than “transmission of information” perspective on communication and community (see Carey, 1989, Jones, 1995), these social researchers have argued that the online social space is not governed by the technical characteristics of the network but is socially constructed in a process of human interaction. People engaged in online communication create dynamic and rich communities by inventing new forms of expression and through interactive negotiation of meanings, norms and values (Baym, 1995; Dutton, 1996; Reid, 1991, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; Watson, 1997). Virtual anthropologists, as Watson (1997) has suggested, follow the lead of Anderson (1983) in basing the judgment of community on the subjective experiences and imagination of its participants rather than on the definitions and values of their detached observers. The important lesson learnt from these sociological and cultural studies of online community is that the online environment is not inimical to community. But it is not necessarily conducive to it either. The case seems to be that certain groups of people manage to add new “sociotechnical layers” (see Feenberg, 1999,

p. 160) to the computer network in order to engage online in communicative and constructive actions nurturing the sense of community.

In a recent paper, Wellman and Gulia (1999) have pointed out a common weakness of all these approaches to online community, including the empirically grounded anthropological studies. All these analyses are premised on a “false comparison,” (p. 348) according to Wellman and Gulia, or I would say, a false dichotomy between virtual communities and real life communities. This split is unjustifiable. Both Wellman’s (1979, 1988) community studies carried out through the methods of network analysis and Anderson’s (1983) anthropological studies have demonstrated in their specific ways that the majority of the so called “real life” communities are in fact virtual in the sense that they are mediated and imagined. “In fact most contemporary communities in the developed world do not resemble rural or urban villages where all know all and have frequent face-to-face contact. Rather, most kith and kin live farther away than a walk (or short drive) so that telephone contact sustains ties as much as face-to-face get-togethers” Wellman and Gulia (1999, p. 348) argue. “All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined,” Anderson (1983, p. 18) insists in a curious concord between the two quite distinct schools of thought.

Furthermore, Wellman and Gulia (1999) charge, all these accounts of virtual community have treated the Internet as an isolated phenomenon without taking into account how interactions on the Net fit with other aspects of people’s lives: “The Net is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact. It is not a separate reality,” Wellman and Gulia observe (p. 334).

These missing other aspects of people’s lives are the actualities (Smith, 1987) in which virtual community members are situated. I believe this to be the crucial background against which questions regarding the social and individual significance of online communities can be

raised and answered. Thus virtual communities cannot be declared inconsequential by default simply because they lack face-to-face materiality. They cannot be celebrated as liberating by default as people bring to them stocks of knowledge and systems of relevance generated throughout their *unalterable* personal histories. They cannot be studied and characterized exclusively by what is produced online as the cultures enacted online have their roots in forms of life existing in the “real” world.

Finally, and this is the central thesis that I propose here, the concept of (virtual) community with all the normative load⁵⁴ it carries, has led analysis into a not particularly productive ideological exchange disputing the possibility for genuine community to be sustained through computer networks.⁵⁵ This has deflected attention from the fact that a continuum of forms of being and acting together is growing from the technology of the Internet. I will refer to that emerging range of new social forms as “virtual togetherness” in order to avoid the normative overtones present in the concept of community. Community, whatever definition one may choose to give it, would then be one possible form of virtual togetherness among many. Thus, I see virtual togetherness, not genuine community, as the core of the community model of the Internet outlined in the beginning of this chapter.

The opposite of virtual togetherness is the isolated consumption of digitized goods and services within the realm of particularistic existence. The issue then is not which (and whether

⁵⁴Raymond Williams (1985), tracing the etymology of the word community, notes that it is “the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships; or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships” that “seems never to be used unfavorably and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (p. 76). The heavy normative load of the concept of community explains why the early enthusiasts have wanted to appropriate it for the legitimation of their project, for stressing its significance and nobility, while the critics have zealously defended an idealized notion signifying a higher state of human relationships that resists technological mediation. Williams’ account of the historical development of the usage of the word reveals the interpretative flexibility of the term itself and hence its socially constructed character. There is no “genuine” fact of nature or social history that the word community denotes. There is no consensually accepted definition of its meaning. Different social actors have appropriated the word at different points in history with different concrete contexts, goals and oppositions in mind.

⁵⁵Ironically, in this debate virtual community non-believers (most of them moral philosophers and critical theorists) have passionately undermined the strongest alternative of the narrowly consumptive model of Internet development.

any) form of togetherness online deserves the “warmly persuasive” (Williams, 1985, p. 76) label of community. The challenge to analysts is to understand and appreciate the significance of these various forms of transcending the private and navigating the social world for individual participants, for society at large and for the shaping of the Internet.

The Infosumer: The Rationalistic Ideal of Internet Use

Accounts of participation in virtual groups came up in the stories of some of the people I interviewed without specific questioning. Invited to explain how they used the Internet, they started with their online groups. With others, no mention of any social life online was ever made. My pointed question about whether they took part in virtual groups or forums received sometimes very skeptical and even derogatory/nihilistic responses:

I am reading a few groups, not much. But again, nothing intrigues me to participate. So I don't know how widespread is that communal thing. I have no idea. I haven't participated. Chats, I find, are a horrible waste of time! I tried it once or twice and said, forget it! [What is so disappointing about it?] Oh, the subjects, the way they talked about it...(Reiner)

I am aware, like you say, of newsgroups or usegroups, whatever they are called, I tried, two or three years ago, some and I just didn't care. The crap that came back and the depth of the level of knowledge didn't really strike me, it wasn't worth going through these hundreds of notes - somebody asking this or that to find... But I couldn't find any substantive issues and I did not care, I did not want to use it to advertise my own knowledge, so I just left them alone. (Don)

Garry, the naval radio operator, summed up this particular position regarding Internet group discussions in a useful model. According to Garry, a good radio operator sends as little as possible, but receives maximum:

Because the radio operator is there just to get all the information he can about the weather, the time signal, about what's happening in different countries and orders from different places. And if he can get that efficiently without going on the air too much, then it is to the benefit of everybody. If everybody is on the air asking questions, then you cannot hear really anything but miles and miles of questions being asked. That's why the etiquette of the professional radio operator was to say as little as possible. Like telegrams used to be... To me, it is a matter of getting information across. (Garry)

Coming from this perspective, Garry, similarly to the other respondents quoted previously, scorned the “noisy people out there on the Internet,” “the empty heads” who were out there first: “There are always people out there who just have their mouth hanging out and they are just talking, and talking, and talking, and just creating a lot of babble.” (Garry)

This kind of empty-heads produced “garbage upon garbage” on the Internet, a low level content that Garry did not want to engage with. He believed that his contributions, had he made any, would have not been appreciated. To post in newsgroups, for him, would have been like “casting pearls before swine - that means it is pretty pointless to be intellectual when you are dealing with people who just want to talk about garbage.”

A closer look at the “radio operator” perspective reveals its underlying communicative values to be “substantive issues,” “information,” “efficiency.” The respondents in this category upheld a rationalistic ideal of information production and exchange and judged the content of the discussions they found on the Internet according to it. The specific expectations they had to the quality of communication prevented them from contributing themselves because of an “expert knowledge or nothing” attitude. From the perspective of this rationalistic ideal these respondents repudiated sociability understood as the pursuit of human contact, acquaintance, friendship, solidarity and intimacy, as legitimate motives for using the Internet. The users in this category were going to the Internet for timely, accurate, reliable information and, quite naturally, were finding it in the online offerings of traditional information institutions such as news agencies, radio stations, newspapers, government sites.

Instrumental Relations: Rational Interaction

In Martha’s narrative, one could notice the persisting authority of the rationalistic ideal with information as its central value, although acceptance of other people on the Internet, not

necessarily experts and expert organizations, as sources of information and ideas was also showing through. Information remained the leading motive stated for going on the Internet, however “talking to people online” was not perceived as its antithesis:

My son has an attention deficit disorder... and it was really interesting to get online and to talk to people from all over the world about this issue. It was called the ADD forum - a really good way for providing information. (Martha)

At one turn of the conversation when Martha admitted that she missed the ADD forum that was available only through CompuServe, she made haste to emphasize: “It wasn’t chatting to meet people and get to know people. It was chatting about ideas and exchanging information,” thus paying tribute to the rationalistic ideal.

Similarly, John perceived his participation in the SkyTraveler’s Digest,⁵⁶ a mailing list for motor-glider hobbyists, as a valuable resource in problematic situations when decisions regarding new equipment had to be made or technical problems to be solved. He had approached newsgroups in the same way - in cases when he needed a question answered, a problem solved, a new experience illuminated: his wife’s diabetes, a new type of apple tree he wanted to plant, his new communication software, etc. He enjoyed the helpfulness and solidarity demonstrated by the people who took the time to answer his queries in their specifically human and social aspects, but admitted that once the problem was solved, the interpersonal communication would fade away:

We don't normally communicate socially - how are you, what's the weather... It's usually when a technical question comes up. After that question is solved, we may talk a little bit about how old we are, what we did. But once the problem is solved this fades away. But yet, those people are still in the background. And when I am looking at postings and see their name, a bell rings. (John)

He, himself would only respond to questions others had asked on the mailing list when he had “something positive” to say and believed that this reserved culture of “positive,” substantive

contributions made his mailing list work well.

Merlin too was quite scrupulous as far as the quality of information exchange in his virtual group was concerned. He insisted he was on this mailing list in order “to learn,” “to expand my understanding of the electrical components used in the electric car.” He saw the list as a “semi-professional community” and only felt the right to contribute when “somebody says something wrong or asks a question, especially connected to hybrids, because I have thought about it, I haven't done any real calculations, [only] very simple calculations which answered some questions that were asked.” Despite the preponderance of strictly technical content on the list, the personalities of participants had come through and Merlin had developed curiosity as to what kind of people some of the discussant were. When he had happened to be in the locations of some of the guys on the list, he had driven by their houses or shops and had met some of them. Putting a face to an e-mail address or alias, a living image and context to stories told on the list, seemed to have been a transforming experience in terms of how Merlin felt about his list:

Now, I have met these people, so it actually means a lot more to me, now that I have met [emphasizes]... I thought Jerry was a wealthy guy, in fact, you have to categorize him as poor, he is a postman and he hasn't worked for over a year, he is obviously not rich. And I have seen him, and I have seen his wife Shauna, I actually saw his two daughters in passing. I have seen the truck, the car, that had this plasma fireball incinerated inside of the car, I saw the battery - there were three batteries welded together in a T-junction, I mean really, to do that damage, it really had to have a lot of energy... (Merlin).

Thus, unexpectedly, the rationalistic model of Internet use (Merlin insisted on his loyalty to it) was showing cracks where it would have seemed most unlikely - on a technical discussion list.

⁵⁶The name of the mailing list has been changed to avoid subject's identification.

People and Ideas in Virtual Public Spheres

For Patrick and Myra "chatting about ideas" was one of the main attractions of newsgroups. In this communication model, the high standing of information, ideas and knowledge was preserved, however it was inextricably linked to interest in people as knowers, interpreters, discussion partners and opponents. The contact between the two of them (Patrick and Myra) was actually established when Myra found in the Albanian newsgroup a posting from a guy who wanted to "ask some questions about Albania to an Albanian, to a guy or girl who knew about the country." Reflecting over a gratifying exchange they had had in an Internet newsgroup, they described it like this:

We started talking about serious politics... Albanian, Eastern European. We were talking - long, long, long messages - political analysis, how this or that could be. No jokes, no stupidities like oh, I find you attractive, nothing like that.

In her description of another newsgroup exchange with a previously unknown contributor, Myra stressed both the quality of the ideas that were articulated in the posting and the relationship established between its author and herself as a reader:

There is a guy in the Russian group - and I saw a couple of postings of his and, of course, I sent him a message, a personal one and I said well, I am delighted, I like them and he replied - oh, I am delighted that you appreciate them. So you kind of establish a closer contact. We don't write to each other or anything but when I see a posting by him, I will go and read it. (Myra)

Myra used to write a lot in Albanian newsgroups and mailing lists (trying to express her opinion regarding various, mostly political, issues) but the highly controversial nature of the political topics she was addressing drew to her flaming and later, after she responded in a way she found due, intolerable disciplinary measures. Patrick, for his part, admitted that he was visiting newsgroups to some extent also for the controversy: "But I like provocative topics and if someone starts flaming me, fine, I get what I deserve... I have been flamed and certainly will be flamed. I don't avoid that."

Both Patrick and Myra thought of newsgroups not simply as an information resource, but also as a space for intellectual sociability and political debate, a “public forum” in Patrick’s own words, where diverse opinions could meet and clash as a matter of course. The point of being there was to get exposed to others’ perspectives and to argue for your own, to build alliances with like-minded people and to enjoy intellectually stimulating encounters.

An online political discussion that had gone the extra mile to involve subsequent organization and collective action of participants was represented by the mailing list Theodore belonged to. The participants in that discussion had gone beyond the process of collective sense-making of events and issues. An agreement over needs and directions of political organizing had grown out of their exchange and debate. The grass root Ethiopian National Congress had brought together face-to-face Ethiopian refugees scattered all over the world who had reached agreement over their common cause and course of action in their virtual togetherness:

Individuals on the list started talking about this thing and said we should do something about it and so it started as a virtual organization and it transformed itself, there was a meeting in July of last year in LA - the initial meeting for individuals to get together and discuss this thing and then there was another meeting in 1997 October where the actual organization was proclaimed and established in Atlanta. (Theodore)

The Chatter: Sociability Unbound

The cases discussed so far derived in a significant way from the rationalistic model of Internet communication, albeit implanting in it interpersonal interaction and sociability in different degrees and variations. When one turns to listen to Sandy, one realizes that a qualitative break with the rationalistic model has taken place. Sandy spoke for a markedly different model of Internet communication, one that had sociability as its central value. Ironically, as I explained in Chapter 4, Sandy was introduced to the Internet in relation to a university course she was taking. That means finding information had been the foremost

function of the medium her attention was drawn to. However, it didn't take long before Sandy discovered the chat lines and got fascinated by what they had to offer. In her open and emotional statement Sandy showed no signs of guilt or remorse for abandoning the rationalistic model of Internet use. In fact, she did not seem to notice the major subversion to which she was subjecting the medium as perceived from the "radio operator" perspective. She was happy to be one of those noisy people who were out there "talking, and talking, and talking" (see Garry's quote earlier in this chapter). Her main reason for being on the Net was "meeting people in there and having a great time talking to them" (see Martha's statement in the opposite sense above).

I was drawn to the rooms that were like the parent zone, health zone and things like that, just general interest... I would talk to people in there and then I met this guy who lives in Ontario and his wife and they had a room called the Fun Factory. It was about 10 of us. We just hung out there, we went in there and just chatted about life. All kind of fun things - we goofed around, told jokes, stories, whatever. The same ten people. Oh, I still talk to them all. In fact we've flown and we have met each other and some of us ... Lots of times other people came in, but this was the core. (Sandy)

Paradoxically, what started as "goofing around" ended up having dramatic consequences for Sandy's "real" life. In Sandy's own reflection, as a direct result of her hanging out in chat lines, her marriage fell apart completely. That was because online she met "really good people" who helped her to regain her self-confidence: "then all of a sudden I was reminded that I was a real person [emotional tone] with real emotions, and real feelings and I was likable by people." Furthermore, one of her new online friends was the first person to whom she revealed that her husband was beating her:

And he just said - get out! You have to get out, Sandy, you cannot stay there! And he and I became really close good friends and he convinced me that life could go on and even that I would lose a lot of materialism, I would gain so much more if I could fight this fight and get out. And I did. I left. (Sandy)

Another person who became a close friend and shared a lot in Sandy's marital problems, was also instrumental in helping her with the technological challenges of the Internet. He was

the computer professional (see Chapter 4) who taught Sandy the technical knowledge and skills that she needed to move and act freely online. Thus, one can notice how, starting from a close personal relationship established online, Sandy had occasionally gone the full circle back to hard information and proficiency in one particular area:

And he made it easy. I would say “I don’t think I can do that,” and he would say – “I remember you saying that about such and such, but if you just think about how it works.” And he would explain to me how it worked. And then I would go and do it myself. (Sandy)

The chat room Sandy was describing could hardly meet the high standards of community raised by the critics of the idea of virtual community. The interactions in that room had been vibrant, and yet superficial, intense, and fleeting at the same time:

In the room it was mostly goofing around, telling cracking jokes. And also there was always stuff going on in the background in private conversations and then you’d have the public room. And often you would have three or four private conversations going at the same time as the room. (Sandy)

What actually was happening in this environment was people meeting strangers and treating them not simply with civility, but as someone “like myself,” someone who could laugh at the same jokes, talk about the same topics of interest and then walk away and go on with his/her own life. That is, what the room was providing for its visitors was an environment for “fluid sociability among strangers and near-strangers” understood in a sense close to that suggested by Philippe Ariès (cited in Winetraub, 1997, p. 25). Speaking about the sociability of the pre-modern cities Ariès writes: “This is a space of heterogeneous coexistence, not of inclusive solidarity or of conscious collective action; a space of symbolic display, of the complex blending of practical motives with interaction ritual and personal ties....” (quoted in Winetraub, 1997, p. 25).

The chat room described by Sandy displayed also social proximity found across physical distance. Sandy’s account indicated that the people she was meeting in her chat room were

socially and culturally close to her: they liked rock and roll, Star Trek and kayaking. They had computers of the same make and similar kinds of marital problems. The spirit of sociability sustained in the chat room was a product of the shared desire of these people to overcome the privateness of their existence, to go out and socialize some of their most personal experiences, anxieties and troubles. The merry superficiality of the chat-room was only the first level of contact where, through the display of one's personality in public, interpersonal affinities were sought and negotiated. The deeper effects of this activity were realizing themselves at the level of the private conversations breaking off from the party and even further, into participants' actions in the offline world. These were effects concerning again the private spheres of the individuals involved. However, the return to the private to deal with its challenges was performed at a different level, bringing in a re-affirmed self,⁵⁷ reflexivity, new interpretative frameworks for addressing vital problems of everyday life acquired in the social online relationships.

At the moment I spoke with Sandy, the Fun Factory chat room had died out - its participants had left. Sandy emphasized that she did not want to chat online that much any more, "at least for now:"

I think I want to establish social relationships in the real world instead of in the virtual world right now. That's important for me where I am right now. I still want to keep in contact with the friends that I have met online and I do that by e-mail now instead of chat rooms. (Sandy)

In Sandy's case, the involvement in a form of virtual togetherness had clearly been a situational phenomenon. The problems and relevance systems of a particular situation in her life had led Sandy to seek sociability, recognition, social support, intimacy in the more or less anonymous virtual association of people she could meet through the Internet chat programs. The

⁵⁷Quite contrary to the floating multiple selves postmodern theorists anticipated.

specific characteristics of her situation were already discussed in Chapter 5. The most prominent of them were social isolation and dysfunctional abusive marriage. In her virtual togetherness with the other members of the chat room, Sandy had found the means to deal with the problems she was facing there and then. In a changed situation, she was consciously choosing a different route and different means for building togetherness with people. Yet, as one can notice in her statement, she cherished the relationships she had created online and worked to translate them into a different format. Her “virtual” friendships were in the process of becoming “real,” and as such, notably, sustained through other communication technologies - e-mail and telephone. A transformation that once again exposes the fragility of the constructed boundary between real and virtual togetherness.

Community as in Commitment

With Ellen, the concept of community dominated the conversation from the first question on. Ellen had hooked up to the Internet from home after she became house bound and diagnosed with a rare but crippling chronic illness. Her explicit motivation for becoming an Internet user was to be able to connect to a support group. She simply felt “very desperate for information and help.” “Getting information” and “getting support” were two inseparable reasons for her to go online. Thus, Ellen joined an invisible dispersed group of people who were logging on everyday to get the “gift of making this connection” with each other:

... to discover that thousands of people are going through exactly the same incredible experience and nobody in their family understands, their husbands and wives don't understand, the doctor doesn't believe them and they have this terrible difficulty of functioning. And yet, there is this tremendously strong community of people who have never met and probably will never meet but who are so loyal to each other and have such a strong support because it is a lifeline for all of us. (Ellen)

The list was experienced as a safe environment by these people, a place where they felt comfortable saying:

I've had a really bad day, I had to go see a specialist and I had such a difficulty and couldn't breathe and it was such a challenge to get there and then the doctor was awful to me. And then I got home and my husband was complaining because the house wasn't clean... (Ellen)

And immediately after a complaint like that would pop up in members' mail boxes, there would be a "flurry" of supportive responses. Loyalty, high tolerance for "dumping," safety, family-like atmosphere, compassion - these were all attributes Ellen used to describe the quality of interaction in her "wonderful group."

The real-life effects consisted in "a lot of confidence," "getting my life in proportion again," "getting a sense of myself" (compare with an almost identical formulation by Sandy) "feeling much less a failure." Learning a lot about the disease was among the benefits of list membership, however Ellen took care to distinguish the particular kind of learning that was taking place there:

I learnt so much from these people who had had the disease for years. I had tried to get hold of some medical information. But getting online is different because there for the first time you get information from people who have trodden this path already! (Ellen)

For good or ill as the case may be, the victims of the disease Ellen had were short-circuiting the medical establishment and the expert knowledge produced by it and were learning from each other. More accurately, they were collectively appropriating and using expert knowledge in ways they had found relevant and productive in their own unique situations of sufferers and victims. On the list they were creating this culture of appropriation and solidarity.

A similar sense of gain from online support group discussions came through clearly in Mathew's comment. According to him, people with similar medical problems learnt from each other about the existence of a variety of treatment options, which, consequently, empowered

them vis-à-vis the medical profession. Matthew challenged the very notion of a patient. In his understanding, people with health problems were clients, customers and in the best case, collaborators with doctors, nurses, prosthetists, etc. To be able to act in this capacity however, they needed to be informed and acculturated in their disability. This is, Matthew believed, what online support groups, such as the list he himself had initiated, were instrumental in. "I learnt more about being an amputee in the one year of being on the mailing list than throughout the 20 years I had had the problem," Matthew insisted passionately.

What distinguished Ellen's experience from other, more detached, forms of learning like those described by previous respondents was the fact that the people she was interacting with over time had come to constitute a collective entity with its own distinctive culture. Her online group had a relatively stable membership communicating on a daily basis and feeling responsible for each other's well-being. Both commonality of interest and diversity could be found in that group. Most of its participants were people seeking alternative approaches for dealing with the chronic devastating disease they had. In Ellen's estimate, most of them were highly educated and articulate. Women were the prevailing number. At the same time, members of the group came from different religious backgrounds and life experiences in terms of profession, family, etc. Yet, characteristically, they were entering their shared space ready and eager to listen to interpretations coming from viewpoints different from one's own:

Like this woman in Israel, a Hebrew scholar, a convert to Judaism, she has the most fascinating perspective on things. There are amazing things coming from her... But nobody has ever tried to push one point of view above another. There has been very much a sense of sharing. (Ellen)

Ellen's account describes, I would argue, an almost perfect form of online community that could meet the highest standards. Yet, as we have seen from the cases cited earlier, not all home users of the Internet recognized or were eager to grab this opportunity offered by the technology. It took a particular configuration of situational factors: a rare disease, physical and

social isolation, a vital need to come to terms with a radically new experience and mastery of language and expression (recall that Ellen was a philologist, editor and writer) for this, rather extreme form of online community involvement to take place. And it should be noted that even in this case online community was not displacing face-to-face community where the latter did or could have existed. It was rather filling the gap left by the impossibility of face-to-face community or the inability of existing face-to-face communities to satisfy important needs of the subject. Furthermore, online community was helping the individual member, at least in the evidence presented by Ellen's case, to re-gain confidence and motivation for re-building and opening new dimensions in face-to-face relationships.

I would like now to go back and revise the theoretical debate about virtual community in the context of the various experiences with it my respondents had or lacked. Let me start the interpretation of the emergent continuum between what I called "the rationalistic model of Internet communication" and the "community as in commitment" experience with the observation that in all of the cases discussed above the respondents had access to principally the same technology with some variations in computing power, speed and access time which, I found, were not related to the prevalent type of use.

The users who denied the communal aspects of the Internet (most of them men) came from a strictly utilitarian and/or rationalistic value orientation. They were using the Internet to find positive, reliable, scientific, professionally presented information and were more often finding it in the virtual projections of institutions such as online magazines and newspapers (Reiner), radio and television stations' sites, government sites (Garry), news agencies (Norris) and scientific publications online (Sophie). To most of these users, newsgroups and mailing lists had little to offer and respectively, communal forms were put under question in principle. The everyday practice of such users, I suggest, is organized by the consumption model of the

Internet, translated at the level of individual motivation into a rationalistic ideal of information production and exchange. The everyday practice of the infosumer, for its part, continuously reproduces the consumption model of the Internet as a social institution.

On the other hand, representatives of disenfranchised groups - in my study these were clearly Ellen and Matthew, both disabled, but also in some sense Sandy (a victim of spousal abuse) and Merlin (unemployed for a long term) - were using the technology as a tool to carve spaces of sociability, solidarity, mutual support and situated, appropriative learning in communion with others. As I tried to show, these two forms of Internet use were not separated by empty space but by a whole range of intermediate modalities. Martha and John appreciated the empowerment stemming from the opportunity to draw on the knowledge, experience and practical help of otherwise anonymous people in the areas of their specific interests and concerns. Myra, Patrick and Theodore were new immigrants struggling to make sense of the dramatic political events that had befallen their native countries, as well as to sustain a meaningful balance between disparate, and even conflicting, sides of their cultural identities.⁵⁸ In this process, they were leaning on both the informational and the communal affordances of the Internet thus forging a medium for political debate and civic involvement.

On the basis of these observations I feel in a position to define more accurately the difference between the consumption model and the community model of the Internet. The qualitative distinction between the two models consists in the absence in the former and respectively the presence in the latter of users' participation and involvement with one another. The degree of immediacy and depth of this involvement may vary in the different versions of

⁵⁸I should admit that this category of respondents was the one to which I could relate most closely because of my own personal social-biographical situation.

the community model. It may or may not meet a normative standard of “genuine community.” But in all the expressions of this model, users *produce* something of value to others - content, space, relationship and/or culture. I believe that the legitimacy and the practical possibility of this kind of user involvement is what needs to be defended against the assault of the consumption model and its related practices, including the attempts to appropriate virtual togetherness for the purposes of consumption (see Werry, 1999).

Between the Public and the Intimate: Gradients of Immediacy

Another continuum of behaviour forms charted by respondents' accounts is that between the public and the private. Its exploration revealed a process of subtle negotiation of the boundaries between the private world – the one that the individual user felt he or she had under control – and the public spaces created on and through the Internet. In fact, I would suggest by the end of my argument here, that it would be more useful to recognize the falseness of the dichotomy between the private and the public (at least in the context of Internet togetherness) and to adopt Schutz's (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973) analog model of “levels of anonymity” (p. 80) as a more accurate representation of the experienced social world.

Most of the people I interviewed, especially the women, spoke about an initial shock and fear for their privacy when using the Internet. As new users, they found it hard to imagine exactly how visible and socially consequential their various actions and interactions were. Sandy recollected her early anxiety with amusement: “I remember when the modem hooked up the first time, I was scared. I thought, oh, no! I thought everyone was gonna know everything about me for some reason.” Jane was still at the stage where making a comment into a newsgroup or participating in a chat line felt “creepy:” “So, I just made a comment. But I didn't

like the idea because I realized later that anybody could read my comment and send me e-mail... I didn't make any other comments.”

With experience, users were developing strategies for careful control of the degree of exposure they allowed for on the Internet in particular action contexts. Martha's approach involved complex manipulation of two e-mail addresses, one “anonymous” and the other indicating her real name:

The address I have at the VCN⁵⁹ forwards mail ... to my home address. When the people I am contacting are a non-profit web site I can contact them either way - from my home address or the VCN one. I like to have that anonymity. Then any mail that goes to the VCN, the people that have sent it don't know where it goes to until I contact them. (Martha)

Similarly, when Myra wanted to respond to a request for information posted in a newsgroup by an unknown person hidden behind a nickname, she reasoned:

Robert Redford [poster's nickname]! ... Let's see what his true name is. (I am a scientist after all.) At the same time I wanted to be safe and because I had several accounts scattered around the world, I wrote to him from an account that I had in Italy. And on the next day when I checked that account, I found a message from that guy that I also thought was a Pole...

The mystery guy and Myra started a “serious” political discussion (referred to earlier in this chapter) which went in concentric circles from public issues to private thoughts and feelings:

And then after months, because he was always asking questions: how are things over there... After months, I started joking and said, well, the next message I expect something like ten questions from you. And here come ten questions: How tall are you? What kind of wine do you like? Do you like sailing? ... things like that. So it got more into [I suggest personal, she doesn't accept it, preferring] ordinary human terms rather than talking about big issues. (Myra)

Myra was drawing the trajectory of a fascinating gradual movement between the public and the private, or as Schutz would put it, between different gradients of immediacy spanning the

⁵⁹Vancouver Community Network

distance between the most anonymous - "an Albanian, a girl or guy who knew about the country," "that guy that I also thought was a Pole" – and the most intimate, as we will see shortly. Communication media varied accordingly. They were used with subtle discretion, like musical instruments by a virtuoso, to gently negotiate transcendence of social and cultural boundaries, one infinitesimal step at a time:

And then it was almost a year after we started talking... I don't know, maybe I was bored again or I had other problems in my life when I decided again, well what's this guy, let's hear his voice. Let's make him a real thing rather just an Internet header. So I asked him may I give you a call and he said yes. I was a little shy, because I knew nothing about his *private* [emphasis mine] life. You don't want to intrude into somebody's life and we were just friends, not even friends, not even close friends. But he said yes and I call him, and I talk to this guy who happens to have an accent, we talked about some rubbish, I guess. I don't even remember, nobody would have guessed then that things would get...
(Myra)

As the story progressed, the phone conversations between the two of them became a regular event, alternated with hours-long Internet chats, e-mails and again hours-long phone conversations. Then, pictures were exchanged, then a marriage proposal from him came by e-mail in the form of a joke: "And it was easier to make that joke on the Internet than on the phone" (Patrick). Then, "things started getting more and more romantic" (Myra). And finally, a visit was arranged:

MYRA: At the beginning of March of 1997 I came to Vancouver. We met at the airport and that was it.

MARIA: How did you find each other after having all the correspondence? Did reality change your image of the other person?

PATRICK AND MYRA: No.

MYRA: I remember that I was very tense, of course.

PATRICK: Me too [unclear].

MYRA: I remember I got out of the gates. The first thing that I saw was him. He was coming towards me. We just hugged and we kept walking. I was talking all the time because otherwise I would explode. It was my usual way of talking - making fun of everything including myself. He was used to that I guess. He wasn't surprised that I was behaving...

MARIA: How long did it take from the first time you exchanged messages to that moment?

MYRA: A year and a half.

As I explained earlier, in Sandy's story the interaction in the semi-public space of the chat room consisted of "mostly goofing around, telling cracking jokes." In the private background however joking was turning into deeply intimate revelations:

Roland's and mine relationship was mostly joking around, but we at some point, got quite deep into his relationship with his wife and my relationship with my husband... He was married and going through really tough times with his wife, so he and I got really good friends and we e-mailed each other back and forth every day and just having that relationship with him made me feel alive! And made me realize how much really I had going for me because after my husband diminished my self worth and self respect so low... (Sandy)

Sandy also walked all the way from "cracking jokes" in public to a romantic relationship with one of her new friends from the chat group. The dynamic of the story of that relationship was similar to Myra and Patrick's - long chats, coming to know each other's life stories in details, exchange of pictures, finally, a face-to-face meeting. The ending of it all however was not quite so happy as in the previous case. Sandy's partner, C.K., had taken advantage of the manipulative powers of the Internet, to lead numerous women into believing that each of them was the only one he was attracted to and exchanged intimate correspondence with. A discovery Sandy made by accident on his computer, opened her eyes to the fact that C.K.'s compassion and caring had been shared with many other women all over North America at exactly the same time when their romance was in full swing. In a theoretically quite interesting move Sandy chose to publicize her deeply private pain. Enraged, she sent a message to these women explaining what C.K. was actually doing thus creating a powerful, even if short-lived, united front against the trickster: "None of them [the women she e-mailed] hated me, they were really angry with him. He took some pretty big flak over."

In the context of a disease-related mailing list having hundreds of readers and dozens of contributors all around the world, Ellen also traversed a spiral of public to private and back to public communications. Initially, she was "intimidated by the very hugeness" of the list and did

not feel confident enough to contribute. However, in the midst of the big group discussion, after a while, Ellen would notice people that she “would resonate with:” “I would find myself looking through the list of messages for their names - just to see whether they have written that day.” And finally one day, she contacted a couple of people through the so called “back channels,” sending private e-mail. This contact coincided with the creation of a new sub-list by one of the women Ellen had gotten in touch with. So, about 17 people, who had found through the big list that they shared similar interests and approaches to healing, formed a “semi-private” group branching off from the open public forum and initially exchanged carbon copied e-mails with each other.

As the interest in that group turned out to be quite high, at one stage, it had to be transformed into a new “official,” as Ellen put it, mailing list based on a server at St. John’s University in Boston. This meant that from a closed “private discussion,” the list was going back into the public realm where everyone could read and join it. Some members feared that this would compromise the quality of the exchange, as well as the openness and the depth of the interpersonal sharing. The group deliberated on the problem and finally decided that it was “the idea of keeping it private versus having new blood, and new information, and new ideas. Also importantly, being able to offer what we had to more people.” They chose publicness and initially Ellen was ambivalent about it:

I felt very uncomfortable with the idea of becoming public. I wasn’t sure I could continue posting because I am a very, very private person. I don’t like the feeling of being on stage. It is a very personal medium - I find that people write very personal messages. They really reveal themselves very deeply. (Ellen)

Eventually, feeling that the characteristic “very nice atmosphere and a sense of camaraderie and common ground” of the list was preserved Ellen overcame her reservations and continued to be an active contributor. Thus, after finding re-affirmation of her interests and values in other individuals and later, in a close in-group, Ellen took her deeply private thoughts

and sensations out of her walk-in closet (where her old Mac was located, if you recall chapter 6) and came out on the stage of the public realm empowered as an actor. After some time on the new list, someone suggested that the members exchanged personal biographies. This made Ellen reflect on the dialectic of public and private, self-presentation and knowledge of the other person in the online environment:

I found it so fascinating to read - first of all, what everyone chooses to say about themselves; and also think about what I want to convey about myself - here I am in this unique online environment where I can't be seen, I can't be heard and yet I want to convey something about myself... I kept them all. So that gave more of a sense of the individual lives and of being a group. (Ellen)

What this public-private-intimate continuum helps us realize is that, analogous to the consumption versus community continuum, there is no critical point where a person's or a group's behaviour can be definitively characterized as private as opposed to public and vice versa. People plan and experience their social action as combining privacy and publicness in different proportions. The task typically assigned to the Internet is to bring the determination of this proportion under the user's control. To whom do I want to listen; whom do I want to talk to; whom do I allow to listen to me? For and with whom do I want to act; who do I allow to act upon me; how big and open a collectivity do I want to act with? The different answers individual users give (more or less consciously) to these questions lead them to choose individual, "private" e-mail or a dozen of "carbon copies," a posting to a closed or to an open mailing list, "lurking" in a newsgroup or contributing to one; joining a mailing list, or, as a matter of fact, creating and moderation one (Matthew in my respondent group).

If we look at Myra's and Ellen's example in detail we will recognize the multidimensionality of the notions of private and public that emanate from them. There are at least three senses in which publicness and privacy are perceived and respectively manipulated online - in terms of the forum, or space of gathering; in terms of the content of the

communication; and in terms of the action taken - does it affect others or is it performed in perfect privacy within the lair of the scull as Anderson (1984) has put it describing the act of reading the newspaper. What emerges is a multidimensional scale on which privacy and publicness of social action can be gauged. At all stations of the processes of encountering others and interacting with them online people are located in their private homes. From this position, they turn themselves, initially as simple consumers/readers, to forums that are public. Later, they reach out to another private individual sending him/her content that can itself be classified as dealing with issues of public concern or on the opposite - with private issues.

Thus all three components in which I have subdivided the process analytically - forum, action and content - can be either public or private and people carefully select the degree of openness of each component they want to permit at any particular moment. Thus, the bulk qualification of Internet use as contributing to the "increased privatization and individualization" of existence and the "evacuation and diminishing of the public sphere of contemporary western societies" (Kumar, 1995, p. 163) misses important aspects of what is actually going on. But neither are the "networked nation" (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978) or the "global village" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 93) metaphors accurately describing the actual practice of users. What I see happening is a careful crafting of boundaries and definitions of relationships between individuals and individuals and groups. These boundaries delineate spaces of social action spanning the public and the private unimaginable without the new communication medium.

Summary

In this chapter I have attempted to display the limitations of a dichotomous understanding of online communication that powerfully shapes the theoretical debate concerning the Internet and simultaneously, the public understanding of the medium. This is

first, the polarity between the Internet as a consumption medium fostering the extreme privatization of society and the Internet as an automatic community-building technology. The second polarity is the one between virtual community and real community.

I have questioned the productivity of the normatively charged and vaguely defined concept of community as the standard against which social practice on the Internet is judged. Users approach the medium, as my data have shown, from a variety of situational motivations, needs and ideologies. In doing that, they generate a rich repertory of use genres each of which needs careful consideration and evaluation on its own merits. The preoccupation with ideologically constructed standards, such as virtual community versus real/genuine community and public participation versus privatization of experience, blinds commentators to the possibility for new, unexpected, unimaginable and yet humanistic and empowering variations of technological practice to emerge.

It is my belief that the careful examination of actual Internet use in its numerous forms should be organized by the task of discerning, recognizing and articulating the empowering aspects of the technology as they emerge out of the everyday lives of real people in particular situations. A struggle to direct resources towards the further development and re-enforcement of these aspects of the Internet as a technology and a social institution can start from there.

A quote I found by mere serendipity in Schutz's (1964) *Collected Papers* helped me summarize what my at times confusing journey through my respondent's social actions on the Internet had in fact helped me discover. In the conclusion of his analysis of Mozart's musical contribution Schutz writes:

I submit that Mozart's main topic is not, as Cohen believed, love. It is the metaphysical mystery of the existence of a human universe of pure sociality, the exploration of the manifold forms in which man meets his fellow-man and acquires knowledge of him. The encounter of man with man within the human world is Mozart's main concern. This explains the perfect humanity of his art. (Schutz, 1964, p. 199)

My study of the communicative and communal use of the Internet has uncovered a fascinating variety of forms in which individuals meet their fellow-men and women and acquire knowledge of them opening up thanks to the new medium. The encounter of the person with the Other, in singular and plural, within the human world; the filling of erstwhile regions of anonymity with detailed knowledge of the fellow-human is one of the most exciting promises of the Internet. Discovering and promoting these manifold forms of human encounter in a new technological environment is, I believe, the central task of a humanistic study and shaping of the Internet.

Conclusion

Starting this inquiry, I took seriously the proposition that users represent an active force in shaping technology alongside with various groups of experts and political players (Feenberg, 1991, 1999; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996; Lie & Sorensen, 1996). I adopted a view of technology that saw its actual reality in the concrete acts of its use and more precisely, in the social event of technologically mediated interaction between the user, or practitioner, and his/her physical and social environment.

My concrete object of interest was the Internet – a global computer network (technology) gradually evolving into a mass communication medium (a social institution). I found one of the most recent and significant developments in the evolution of the Internet to be its penetration into the everyday life of a vast non-professional user population and specifically into one of its core sites – the home. The lack of conventional social knowledge regarding the “appropriate” use of the Internet on the part of people who were not led exclusively by pre-given models, I reasoned, would necessitate heavy involvement of these users in signifying work. That is, these people would need to create themselves meanings and values to be ascribed to the medium in correspondence with specific tasks and problems they faced in their immediate environment. In other words, I expected to find early users actively discovering the relevance of the Internet to their social-biographical situations and initiating Internet-based practices that designers and promoters had not been able to imagine. To me this meant that these users would be further inventing the Internet. Taking the Internet home, early users would not only act *with* it, but also *onto* it.

With my empirical study, then, I set out to understand the process in which users formed their relationship with the Internet that I believed to be mutually transformative. I was curious to

see the concrete mechanisms through which the relevance of the new technology was established by domestic users and how it was further incorporated into the existing systems of activities and relations making up the everyday life of the user's home. What did user agency look like in actual practice? What were the products of users' signifying work, how palpable, stable and portable were they?

Suggestions for Theory: Choices and Mediations in the User-Technology Relation

At the very beginning of the narratives that represented my avenues into users' authentic experiences I discovered the figure of the warm expert. He or she was an expert in the sense of possessing systematic knowledge of the technology that was yet unfamiliar to the novice user. However, he/she was not interacting with the user from a position in some formal set of relationships as it would have been the case for example with the expert from an Internet service provider's help desk or the instructor for a course teaching the technology. The warm expert inhabited the user's everyday life in the most direct sense, as a fellow-man in Schutzian terms, who experienced the user's immediate situation. He or she acted as an interpreter between the technical system and the user's lifeworld speaking the language of both. Notably, he or she was not an unbiased interpreter. He/she was passing to the new user his/her own readings of the technology along with the universal meanings of technical features. He/she was teaching the user tricks for preserving autonomy and shortcuts to content of relevance. Thus while the Internet in itself was infinitely open and diverse, new users did not rush to surf it at random as some surveys of user behaviour would suggest.⁶⁰ Neither did they follow diligently the instructions in their manuals or the bookmarks of their software providers. More often than not

⁶⁰I have come across a number of quantitative surveys asking users to indicate which activities, out of a suggested list, they perform on the Internet. "Surfing" always accounts for a high percentage of the answers. This observation has left me wondering what sense different people put in this word that has come to be associated with Internet use in a trite manner.

they entered the medium through a specific port suggested by the warm expert – an Ethiopian discussion group, an arthritis mailing list, a chat site, etc. In taking clues from their immediate social environment, users' learning of the Internet was no different from established patterns of knowledge acquisition with regard to traditional media, especially print. It was reminiscent of the two-step flow of mass communication discovered by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948; see also Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964). The new user was not facing the technology and the content and activities accessible through it as an isolated individual. Technology, content and related activities were refracted by interpersonal influence and contextual relevance. Thus the interaction with the warm expert represented the first level of translation where the work of making the medium personally meaningful was started off.

I found another expression of users' choice and activity in the variety of relations users formed with the Internet. I used Ihde's (1990) phenomenology of human-technology relations to interpret the different ways in which the Internet mediated between users and their physical and social world. The blanket acceptance as well as the blanket rejection of the medium, I concluded, are crude constructs that do not capture the actual dynamic of the user-Internet relation. In practice, a person encountering a sociotechnical system such as the Internet faces a richer gamut of choices. Engagement with the medium can remain instrumental, or it can grow into a more substantive and absorbing relation. These different relations produce different sets of opportunities and threats for users. I believe that awareness of this fact and, consequently, reflective navigation of the available choices contributes to personal empowerment with regard to the medium.

In the case of the embodiment relation, the Internet is simply a tool for accomplishing clearly defined goals in the surrounding physical or social world. It is mobilized by the acting person as an extension of his or her natural abilities. It can be experienced as an organic part of

oneself, or on the contrary, as a poorly made prosthesis. In both cases, the world is on the other side of the technology and the limitations in seeing or manipulating it imposed by the mediational agent – the Internet – are accessible to reflection and action. In the hermeneutic relation, the attention of the user is focused on the technology as a representation of the world. The world and the medium become conflated. The technical and institutional codes embodied in the medium become codes for understanding the world. The advantage this relation brings to the user is an increased mastery of the technical and institutional code. The threat consists in the fact that the reduction of the world to its technical representation can easily be forgotten. In the alterity relation the world is bracketed out. The technology and/or the content it delivers become a source of emotions normally derived from the contact with another human being. Both technical creativity and technologically furnished escape from the problems of the surrounding world are viable outcomes of this relation.

In all these forms of human-technology relation, I demonstrated, a complex dialectic of amplification and reduction of human powers is involved. In order to be an autonomous agent in a technologically mediated world, the subject has to be able to question and realistically estimate one's own relation with technology. This is a crucial prerequisite for the achievement of emancipation vis-à-vis technology. The capacity for identifying the possibilities of alienation and disalienation represents a condition of competent use. I concluded, on the basis of the experiences shared by my respondents, that the establishment of a critical hermeneutic relation – a pointed interest in the technology as such leading to a critical knowledge of the powers and distortions implicit in its code – represents one possible way of disalienation.

My examination of the home environment into which the Internet was introduced revealed another terrain for hard signifying work and struggle for defining the user-technology relation. Bringing the Internet home people had to deal with the question of where exactly the

technology belonged in terms of location, schedule and interfamily relationships. One aspect of this question referred to the symbolic ownership of the Internet connection: Did it belong equally to all family members or was there a privileged or solely entitled user? A second dimension had to do with privacy of use: Would the person using the Internet at any particular time be allowed (or encouraged) to face the medium one-to-one withdrawing from the ongoing life of the family collectivity, or on the contrary, other family members will be present and allowed to intervene? Finally, the place of the medium was selected with regard to the kind of activity it supported – imposed or intrinsic, work or pleasure.

The specific constellations of choices made along these three lines contributed to the emergence of different use practices and interfamily relations anchored in the medium. The Internet connection was used to demarcate zones of individual privacy within the home as well as to aid the creation of special bonds between family members and new ways of connecting to the broader social world. Gender roles with regard to the medium were re-negotiated with some unexpected outcomes such as for example the mother-son collaboration in mastering the technology and the leadership of women in Internet adoption motivated by perceived motherly responsibilities. Thus the function and the definition of the Internet within the individual home was negotiated with regard to users' position in the family and the set of values established by the family group.

Certainly, these positions and values themselves had to be re-considered in the face of the new possibilities and challenges brought forth by the new medium. New responsibilities had to be added to the job characteristics of different family members. Patterns of time organization in the home had to be modified. The meaning of being at home and being together was changing and people struggled hard to make sense of these changes and reconcile desired new opportunities with valued old ways of life.

Suggestions for Political Practice: Grounded Visions of the Possible

Investigating the stabilized forms of practice involving Internet use in the context of users' social-biographical situations, I discovered a multiplicity of situationally rational conceptions of the medium's usefulness and functionality. I referred to the characteristic sets of Internet-based activities growing out of these conceptions as use genres. Use genres demonstrated a dual character in that they represented reoccurring patterns of local action undertaken by users and at the same time they rendered the medium itself symbolic and substantive qualities that others could encounter and draw upon. Furthermore, these genres were related to conditions of individual existence characteristic of contemporary society and represented responses to widespread needs. I see these genres as a rich resource of ideas that can direct a pursuit for democratic development of the Internet. The point is not to concoct utopian schemes for realizing the visions of theorists, technologists and political leaders but the opposite, to elaborate visions to be asserted in a political process with an eye and ear turned to the unglamorous everyday initiatives of ordinary users.

Various civic and public organizations and interest groups can establish an effective presence on the Internet by providing supportive platforms for the genres invented by users. Some of the cases I studied exemplified models for this: a web site of a local Attention Deficit Disorder parent support group, an organization of political refugees growing out of a mailing list and subsequently utilizing that list for further organizing. The cases of virtual community involvement I came across were particularly illuminating with respect to the kinds of Internet use representatives of disenfranchised groups found empowering. Initiatives for enhancing meaningful access to the Internet can be generated based on the knowledge of the specific relevance of the medium for these people. Disease related associations, home care services, unemployment centers, ethnic organizations, etc. can adopt the role of equipment, Internet

service and content providers, and hubs for client-to-client or member-to-member sharing and organizing.

Notable among the use genres I observed was the practice of talking back to public institutions and mass media. I found a glaring discrepancy between the way these bodies constructed their relationship with the users of their Internet services and the way users wanted to be able to interact with them. Government and media sites were built on a traditional information-producer/provider versus client scheme. Users wished to be involved in a dialogical exchange. Without naïve expectations for a technologically mediated direct democracy, it still can be argued that there is room for more imaginative forms of two-way communication between citizens and institutions. A possible way to start would be for government institutions to acknowledge symbolically the existence of civil society formations by linking citizens' sites to relevant areas of their networked databases. A whole new practice of Internet-based participatory public relations can be imagined if citizens' interests, and not solely institutional agenda, are taken as cues. These possibilities need to be addressed imaginatively and realistically by a grass root movement for a democratic Internet. Among the important tasks of such a movement would be the provision of non-commercial server space accessible to citizens and groups coming up with meaningful projects.

Equally suggestive were the use genres related to knowledge acquisition and application. In most of the cases I studied, users had become lay researchers willing to make informed decisions on matters of daily life and aware, thanks to the Internet, of the wide range of alternatives available. Others were looking for an intellectual challenge and/or exchange with a view to personal development. Universities and similar educational institutions had a limited assortment of offers along these lines. While the users counted on the new medium to bring knowledge spatially and humanly closer to them, the response of universities, the central

knowledge brokers in society, remained quite rigid and circumscribed within the old functional logic. Packaging and selling online formal courses which is now the prevalent direction in universities' utilization of the Internet, I contend, is only one among numerous initiatives that universities can take in the new field of social action opening up for them. A critique of the real with the possible suggests that instead of (or parallel to) adopting market models for knowledge distribution, universities should work to transform themselves into open sources of knowledge modeled on the example of public broadcasting and adding to it a participatory component.

Suggestions for Research: Critical Researchers as a Relevant Social Group

The experience of this study confirmed my belief in the usefulness of a qualitative, ethnographically informed, approach for providing a holistic contextualized understanding of the social construction of the Internet as a technology and a communication medium. The examination of concrete human activities embedded in local situations uncovers important and previously missing aspects of this medium's social shaping. The standpoint of users proves to be a crucial vantage point towards the present and future of the Internet. The images of the medium captured from this perspective provide a healthy mixture of realism and optimism that can inform and direct its development.

Technical and content and service construction performed by experts in specialized spheres is completed and ratified, or on the contrary, undermined and rendered inconsequential in the everyday dealings with the medium of ordinary users. The Internet can evolve into an inclusive and empowering communication medium if technical and content-related problems are defined and their solutions sought with conscious consideration of users' perspective and, ideally, with the direct participation of everyday users. The Internet can stabilize as an oppressive, alienating technology and institution if users' perspectives and situated

rationalizations are systematically ignored or counteracted. The important dilemma still to be tackled is, to paraphrase Lefebvre (1991), whether human beings simply will be made profitable through new high-tech mechanisms, or their everyday lives will be changed for the better leaning on the possibilities brought about by the new powerful technology (see p. 230). Critical communication research looking at the Internet is not simply a meta enterprise having the task of registering the resolution of this dilemma if and when it occurs. It can and should be directly involved in its tackling. Internet researchers of all feathers are, I believe, relevant social groups in the construction of the Internet.

That is why I find it important that a user-centered research practice engaging researchers as user advocates be consciously and persistently brought about. The results of such a research enterprise would be knowledge *for* users, a form of consciousness raising (see Smith's, 1987, discussion of sociology for women) that explicates for users the intertwining of misery and power, of amplification and reduction that their daily dealings with the Internet contain. This research would produce a sociotechnical literacy, a literacy of action and choice.

Concrete projects to undertake within a so perceived research paradigm would include for example the in-depth study of the uses of the Internet performed, attempted and imagined by people finding themselves in particular types of adverse situations: homebound, suffering from isolating illnesses, unemployed, new immigrants, delinquent youth, victims of abuse, etc. Can support for surviving and overcoming such situations be built into the medium? What would be the steps and the initiatives that would need to complement and broaden the base of the already unfolding creativity of such types of users?

Multi-sited ethnographies (see Marcus, 1995) tracking the making of complex sociotechnical phenomena such as Internet use genres are needed so that the diverse agencies involved in the process could be accounted for. A popular web site, a virtual community, an

Internet campaign, etc. represent perfect objects for an ethnography that looks at how such phenomena are constructed, who takes part and why, what role is played by technological design, policy and culture and what the daily practices that ensure the recursive reproduction of these phenomena are. The answers to these questions could broaden the field of awareness and choice open to the human beings evoking and continuously modifying these use genres in their daily practice.

Governments and civic groups can benefit from user-centered research that explicates for them the everyday problems and activities leading users to their web sites or other Internet-based services. The new practice of participatory public relations that I imagined earlier would need a heavy research investment in order to take off and stabilize as a form of democratic communication between organizations and their members and clients.

Insights gained from research are required also for the development of flexible learning forms and forums hosted by universities but driven by the situated agendas of particular communities and categories of learners.

Groupware designs and the experiences with them of people who build and participate in various forms of virtual togetherness presents another set of pressing research issues. Will togetherness on the Internet be as “natural” to achieve as consumption? Can research help online groups with their sometimes painful search for appropriate models of communication online? To contribute to the stabilization of the participatory model of the Internet discussed in Chapter 7, research should look at and beyond the screen and draw on both the systematic knowledge of designers and the situated knowledges of diverse categories of users.

Consumption through the Internet, online buying, was a theme that did not resonate deeply with the experiences of the users I interviewed. Only a few of them had bought a limited number of commercial products online. However, there were clear signs of a desire in users to

lean on the Internet in order to rationalize consumption – to compare prices and to avoid advertisement and in-store manipulation. User-centered research of e-commerce would be interested in the possibilities for empowerment of users in the face of the commercial appeal by means such as consumer-to-consumer communication and organizing.

Final Reflections

In fact, many of the questions that I raised on the basis of my theoretical reflections did not find their answers in my empirical study. Similarly, many of the themes emerging from the study remained unexplored. There are many additional things that I would have liked to be able to do in order to make the research reported here a richer ethnography and a deeper-cutting critique. A longitudinal data collection by visiting the homes of my respondents periodically over a period of time would have shown how conceptions and practices change with experience and may be how initial mobilization tires down and turns into unreflective routine. An examination of household budgets would have given me a better idea of the economic standing of the people I interviewed and whether something had to be sacrificed in exchange for the latest gadgets of technical progress as Lefebvre (1991) had predicted. Interviewing of all family members in all of the participating households would have exposed more of the values, hierarchies and struggles underlying the Internet use arrangements in the home. More thorough digging into the layers of electronic artifacts in the memory of users' computers and more precise documenting of the findings would have uncovered the structures of the interpersonal networks sustained through electronic communication. It would have revealed the nature of the information resources users tapped into and would have opened a perspective on the emerging new sources of authoritative discourse in society. All these additional data would have provided for better substantiated analysis, evaluation and critique of domestic Internet use.

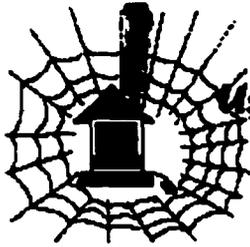
My project, like every research project in the real world, was bound by my own and my respondents' time limitations. Lack of funding translated into an impossibility of offering any incentive to people to participate and lack of help with the tedious transcribing and analyzing of long conversations. There was a bright side to these limitations. Thus I ended up with a group of people who were intrinsically motivated to share their experiences as Internet users. I did all the interviewing, transcription and analysis myself which made me live through the narrative of each respondent, hold it in my head in its entirety and make sense of the different themes with regard to the whole story. Finally, the fact that nobody was financing my research freed me to pursue my own interests and the paths suggested by my respondents. It allowed me also to be open and sincere with the people I interviewed as there were no foreign agendas behind the questions I was asking them. This provided for authentic and enjoyable (at least to me) human communication.

But there is more to my relationship with the people I studied. As I step out of their stories, I find myself immersed in a swarm of voices. The unanswered e-mail messages of my friends and colleagues from overseas ring in my head as loud and clear as the voice of my son over my shoulder demanding computer time so that he can play *The Age of Empire* with a schoolmate over the Internet. The weird music that my husband downloaded from the Web creeps into the room. And in the back of my mind I still feel guilty for not responding to that unknown student from Algeria who asked me for help with his project a few days ago. So I stop to think. Am I empowered or oppressed? Is there a single message in this cacophony and what is its meaning? Where do I stand? What should I do? And as I am asking myself these questions, I know: I am one of the tribe.

Appendix A

Respondent Recruitment

Section 1: Call for Participation in the Study



Exploring the Backstage: Uses of the Internet in Domestic Contexts

Maria Bakardjieva

Call for Participation in a Research Project

Last updated: November 6, 1998

Dear Internet User,

With the growing number of people connecting to the Internet from home “the Net” is becoming a part of our everyday lives. We are changing the Net and the Net is changing us.

- How is this “domestication” of the Internet happening?
- What are its social and cultural implications?

These two questions are the focus of my research project entitled “*Exploring the Backstage: Uses of the Internet in Domestic Contexts.*”

I am asking YOU, as a “domestic” user of the Internet in Vancouver, for assistance in describing and understanding this process. If you decide to participate in this project, you and I will meet and talk about your experience of using the Internet from home:

- How did it change, if at all, your routine ways for doing things such as working, learning, communicating with people, entertaining yourself, etc.?
- How do other members of your household use it?
- How do you feel about it?
- To what degree does the image of the Net

presented by the media correspond to your experiences?

We have heard enough about the Internet from interested commercial players. It is time to hear from everyday users. I believe this is a way to gain a realistic sense of what the Internet can and cannot do for people and what it means to the people who experience it now.

I am asking you to share with me what you think and teach me what you know about the Internet . Hopefully, this will be an interesting and revealing exercise for you, me and the readers of the research report that will come out.

If you are interested in the project and would consider participation in it, please follow the links on this page. There you will find a detailed description of myself, the project and the research procedures.

You can also e-mail me at bakardji@sfu.ca and I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

Maria Bakardjieva
Ph.D. Candidate
School of Communication
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, B.C.
Canada

PS: This project constitutes my dissertation research and is of a purely academic nature. It is not financed by any sponsoring agency.

PS to those whom I have already interviewed: I want to express my immense gratitude to  of you. Your Internet stories have been of great help to my research. Thank you for your time, sincerity and wisdom!

Who I am

What kind of Internet users I would like to talk to

How to contact me

How we are going to arrange the interview

Research procedures involved

Section 2: Self Description

MARIA P. BAKARDJIEVA

Great-granddaughter of a coppersmith (as the family name clearly indicates). Daughter of two hard scientists and gentle parents. Mother of two sweet and stubborn little guys.

Born in a south-eastern corner of Europe. Battling for ground in western North America. Raised under communism. Converted to cosmopolitanism.

Likes to talk with people. Likes to theorize. Loves a good laugh.

Tries to be profound. Tries to be productive. Tries to be popular.

Hopes to finish her second Ph.D. dissertation before old age sets in.

But seriously,...

Institutional Address: School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada V5A 1S6

Place of Birth: Sofia, Bulgaria

Current Home: Vancouver, Canada

Current Status: Ph.D. Student in Communication, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada

Languages: Bulgarian (native), English (very good), Russian (very good), German (good)

Areas of Interest:

- Communication technology, social aspects. Computer-mediated communication.
 - TeleLearning: innovative pedagogies and designs, contexts.
 - Media transformations and policies in post-communist states.
-

EDUCATION AND DEGREES

1992-1997: School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada. Ph.D. Program in Communication. All requirements fulfilled except the dissertation. Area of dissertation work: Internet use in domestic contests.

1989-1992: Institute of Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. **Ph.D. in Sociology (1995)**. Dissertation: "The Social Adoption of New Communication Technologies."

1979-1984: Faculty of Journalism, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ochridsky." **M.A. in Journalism (1984)**.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- **RESEARCH**

1996/97: Research Associate. "Postsecondary Education: Towards the Virtual Campus," a project integrated into TeleLearning Network of Centers of Excellence Research Program, Burnaby, B.C., Canada.

1995/97: Research Fellow. "Appropriate Media Policy for a Small Post-Communist State: Evaluating the Available Models from a Bulgarian Perspective," an independent study supported by a NATO Democratic Institution Fellowship, [Final report \(PDF/139Kb\)](#)

1991: Research Associate. "Transnationalization of Television Flows in Europe" - a comparative study in five countries (including Bulgaria) commissioned by UNESCO.

1991: Researcher. "The Mass Media in the Parliamentary Election Campaign (October, 1991)," coordinated by the Faculty of Journalism, Sofia University, Bulgaria.

1989/90: Researcher. "Early Adopters of Videotex in Bulgaria," commissioned by the Centre for Telematic Services with the Bulgarian Telecommunications Committee and realized by the Department of Sociology of Mass Communication, Institute of Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria.

• **TEACHING**

1998 (Spring and Fall): Sessional Instructor: CMNS 253 Introduction to Communication Technology: The New Media (co-taught with Dr. Richard Smith), School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada. [Course Schedule](#)

1997 (Spring): Teaching Assistant: CMNS 253 Introduction to Communication Technology: The New Media, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada.

1995 (Fall): Tutor Marker: CMNS 261 Documentary Research in Communication, Centre for Distance Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada.

1994 (Fall): Sessional instructor and Teaching Assistant: CMNS 253 Introduction to Communication Technology: The New Media (co-taught with David Smith), School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada.

1992-1994: Teaching Assistant: CMNS 110 Introduction to Communication Theory, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada.

1990-1992: Part-time lecturer: Sociology of Mass Communication, Faculty of Journalism, Sofia University "St.Kliment Ochridsky," Sofia, Bulgaria.

SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS

In English:

Bakardjieva, Maria, "[The New Media Landscape in Bulgaria](#)", *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 20-1 (1995), pp. 67-79

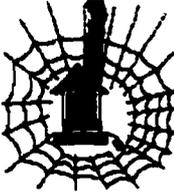
Bakardjieva, Maria, "Home Satellite TV Reception in Bulgaria," *European Journal of Communication* (SAGE: London, Newbury Park and New Delhi), Vol. 7 (1992), pp. 477-489

In Bulgarian:

Bakardjieva, Maria, "The Information Society: A New Paradigm" *Sociological Problems*, (Institute of Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: Sofia) Vol. 2, (1994), pp. 102-111

Bakardjieva, Maria, "The New Communication Technologies and Bulgaria," *Sociological Problems* (Institute of Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: Sofia), Vol. 6, (1991), pp. 94-99

Section 3: Description of the Type of Users Sought

	<p>What Kind of Internet Users I Would Like to</p> <p>Talk to</p>
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All people who have access to the Internet from home and live in metropolitan Vancouver are potential participants in this project.

I am mostly interested in the experiences of non-professional users, that is individuals who DO NOT make a living by developing hardware, software or content for the Internet.

My goal is to study as diverse group of users as possible. So please do not exclude yourself because you do not consider yourself a "typical user," whatever that is.

I would also prefer to interview people who use the Internet more than three times per week.

If you, yourself, do not fall in this user category or do not wish to participate, please redirect my call for participation to your friends and acquaintances who might be interested. Thanks in advance!

Section 4: Contact Information and Instructions

	<h2 style="text-align: center;">How to Contact Me</h2>
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You can contact me by sending me e-mail at bakardji@sfu.ca. Please put "Participation in your project" as a subject of your message.

If you find it more convenient, you can fill out and submit the form below. Feel free to fill as many fields of the form as appropriate.

To
Maria Bakardjieva
Ph.D. Candidate
School of Communication
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, B.C.

YES, I would be interested in taking part in your study

"Exploring the Backstage: Uses of the Internet in Domestic Contexts."

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name:

E-mail address:

Telephone numbers: Home: **Work:**

I prefer to receive e-mail from you.

I prefer to receive a phone call from you.

A good time to call would be:

PERSONAL INFORMATION (OPTIONAL)

Sex: Female Male:

Age:

Approximate frequency of use of the Internet (times per week):

Occupation:

Other members of the household using the Internet:



Area of residence:

Section 5: Interview Arrangements



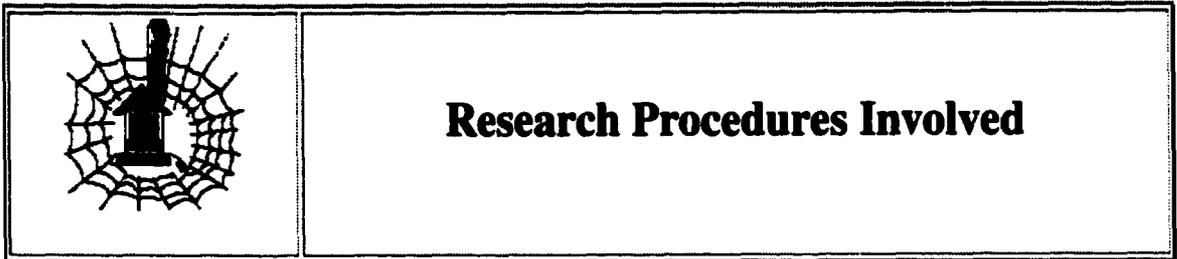
How We Are Going to Arrange the Interview

After I receive your e-mail or form expressing interest in participating, I will e-mail you back or phone you depending on which method of communication you have chosen.

In this conversation, we may decide to meet at some public place (a cafe for example) before the interview in order to come to know each other.

We will fix a day and time (any time convenient for both of us between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m.) when I can come and visit you at your home for the interview. Ideally, other members of your household will be present during this time so that I could carry out a group interview session with their participation. These procedures could take up to three hours. Without the group interview with other members of your household (which is optional), the procedures could take about two hours.

Section 6: Description of the Research Procedures Involved and Informed Consent Requirements



Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. Should you agree to participate, you will be:

- (1) interviewed with respect to the ways you use the Internet in your home;**
- (2) asked to give the researcher a tour of the places in your home where Internet-related devices are located;**
- (3) asked to show the researcher, in your presence and to the degree you are comfortable with, traces of your Internet use saved in the memory of your computer such as bookmarks, e-mail aliases, etc.;**
- (4) asked to allow the researcher to carry out a group-interview session with other members of your household, if applicable.**

Procedure (4) is optional.

Procedures (1) and (4) will be conducted at your home or other location as chosen by you.

Procedures (2) and (3) will be conducted at your home.

The individual interview -procedure (1); and the group interview -procedure (4) - will be tape-recorded with your permission. Alternatively, the researcher will take detailed notes of your and other household members' responses.

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential by the researcher. Any information that is obtained during this study will be coded anonymously. Materials (including tapes and notes) will be held at a secure location and will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

The details of these procedures are negotiable. You are welcome to suggest ways of performing the procedures that will be the most comfortable for you.

Please note that these procedures have been carefully reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Review Committee at Simon Fraser University.

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Section 1: Guide to the Individual Interview

Internet Use Background:

Please tell me the story of how you got connected to the Internet from your home?

1. For how long have you had your Internet connection at home?
2. What were your original motives for hooking up to the Internet?
3. Did you follow someone's advice?
4. Did you already have a computer? Did you need to upgrade it?
5. How did you choose your Internet Service Provider?
6. Did you need to buy and install new programs? Did you need to put effort into learning how to use them? Did you get help with that? From whom?

Physical network:

Note: The domestic "Internet entry point" is not a single technical device as used to be the case with earlier generations of domestic information/ communication technologies. It is rather a combination of technical elements, most typically computer and phone line; and telecommunication software and wire that bring them together. It also depends on technical arrangements extending outside the home: subscription to the services of an Internet provider. Finally, it is reliant on a piece of code (password) that calls all these elements to life as a single system.

1. At what place in your home is the computer hooked up to the Internet located?
2. Does it have a permanent wiring or do you have to plug it into the telephone every time you plan to dial up?
3. Who is your Internet provider?
4. How much is your monthly subscription fee?
5. What type of computer do you use?
6. Does everyone in the family have access to this computer and/or the Internet connection? Does everyone know the password?

7. What furniture/spatial rearrangements (if any) did you need to make when you decided to establish your Internet connection?

Temporal arrangements:

Please tell me the story of how your usage of the Internet took shape. What do you do on the Internet, at what time of the day, how often and with what purpose?

1. Do you have any specific times at which you use the Internet? Do you have a daily pattern? Can you describe it?
2. At what times of the day do the different members of the family (inhabitants of your home) use the Internet. Why is this happening?

Activity network:

1. What do you do on the Internet? Is it related to any of your usual activities such as work, ordering consumer products, keeping in touch with friends, leisure activities, etc.? In what proportion? Please draw a pie.
2. What about the other members of your family? Which of their activities are supported by the Internet?
3. Did the presence of the Internet provide for new activities to be performed in your home? Are there any activities that you (the other family members) engage in now but which were not performed before you connected to the Internet? To what extent do these activities depend on the availability of the Internet connection?
4. Did the presence of the Internet connection change the pattern of your (other family members') daily activities in any significant way? How do you evaluate this?

Information network:

Please tell me whether and how the Internet expanded (improved) your chances to be informed.

1. What kinds of information do you look for on the Internet? Why are you interested in it?
2. What are the sources of information on the Internet that you most often connect to? How important are these sources to you?
3. Did this fill any previously existing information gaps? Did it solve any problems? Did it solve any problems you had in being informed in certain areas?

Social network:

Please tell me whether and how the Internet helps you establish contact or stay in contact with other people and groups. What are the positive and the negative sides of this experience?

- 1. What people and groups do you communicate with using the Internet? Please describe the process and the character of these groups (formal/informal, stable/ephemeral, closed/open). Did these connections exist before the network or emerged after it was brought into your home?**
- 2. What do you share with these people? How important are these relationships for you?**
- 3. Did the Internet connection change the way you communication with these people and groups and in what respect?**
- 4. How important are these relationships to you?**
- 5. Are there any groups that you became a member of only after the Internet connection and thanks to it? Please characterize them. What does the membership in these groups mean to you?**

Semantic network:

What is the importance of having the Internet at home? Did this change your life for the better or worse? Do you think it changed the way you see yourself in the world/ your connection with the world?

- 1. What feelings and values do you associate with the Internet? Did the availability of your home connection change your world view in any significant way?**
- 2. Did the availability of your home connection change the way you feel in your home and the way you think about your home?**
- 3. Did the availability of your home connection change the way you think about yourself? How?**

Background information

- 1. What is your age?**
- 2. What is your highest level of education?**
- 3. What is your occupation?**
- 4. Who are the people with whom you share your home?**
- 5. What is the annual income of your household?**

- lower than 20 000
- between 20 000 and 60 000
- between 60 000 and 100 000
- over 100 000

Section 2: Guided Tour Directions

Please show me **the computer** through which you hook up to the Internet.

Where is the telephone plug? Is the wiring permanent? What room is it located in? What else goes on in this room on daily basis? Why did you choose this place? Who has access to this room? Does the use of the Internet come into conflict with any other activities that are performed on this equipment or in this space? How is this avoided? Can you watch or hear what is going on in your home while you are on the Internet? Do you feel that you “leave” your home when you log on? What are the advantages and the drawbacks?

Please show me **the different programs** that you use when connecting to the Internet? Which of them do you use most often? Why? Are they easy to use? Did you have any difficulty learning how to use them? Did you get help and from whom/what in learning how to use them? Have you customized these programs? How?

Please show me your **Web browser**. Why did you choose this browser? May I see your bookmarks? What sites do they take you to? Which are the ones that you use most often? Why? Do you have a personal home-page? Why did you decide to create it? What importance does it have to you?

Please show me your **e-mail program**. Why did you choose this program? May I see your current in-box? May I see the folder in which you store in-coming messages? Could you explain to me who sent you these messages and what importance they have to you? Alternatively: Please look at your in-coming messages of the last week (while I am sitting at a place from where I cannot see the screen) and tell me whom they were from and what importance they have to you.

Do you belong to **mailing lists**? What? What importance do they have to you? Do you contribute to these lists? How often? Please describe to me your latest contributions.

Please show me your **netnews reader**. What newsgroups do you subscribe to? What newsgroups do you read on regular basis? What importance do they have to you? How often do you post articles in these newsgroups? Please describe to me your latest contributions.

Section 3: Guide to the Family Interview

Internet related roles:

1. Who was the person who initiated the Internet connection?
2. Who is the person who is the main user of the Internet?
3. Who is the person who controls the access to the Internet? Has access been negotiated?
4. If the Internet connection can be seen as a pie, how big would be the piece for each member of the family?

Internet activities (look for age/gender differentials):

1. Please describe how each family member uses the Internet? Are there conflicts of interest, times, applications? How are these resolved?
2. How does each family member feel about the Internet connection in the home on a - like-dislike; - important-unimportant continuum? Please explain why.

Family cohesion and the Internet:

1. Are there any Internet-related activities or interests that some family members share?
2. Has the use of the Internet taken up the time usually spent on other family activities? Has it driven the family members apart; has it brought them together?

Appendix C

Respondents Description

Table 1. Respondents Description

Name	Age	Occupation	Education	Family Members	Originally From	Income	ISP	Computer	Home Internet For # Years
Myra*	28	Doctoral student/physicist	M.A. Ph.D. courses	Fiancé	Albania	20-50K	VCN University.	PC 486	N/A
Vera	34	Free lance writer	B.A.	Daughter 6 Son 4	Los Angeles	35-50K	Compu Serve	Pentium; Power book	5
Sandy	35	Part-time tele-marketer	Undergrad courses	Daughter 5	Canada	20-50K	Major local	Power Mac	1.5
Jane	35	Home-maker	College courses	Husband Son 14 Son 12 Daughter 9	Vancouver	20-50K	VCN	Old Mac	1
Sophie	35	Part-time nutrition consultant	College courses	Husband Son 11 Son 13	Vancouver	35-50K	Small local	PC 486	2
Dana	36	Operations manager	B.A. + Diploma	None	Vancouver	35-50K	Small local	PC 486	

Name	Age	Occupation	Education	Family Members	Originally From	Income	ISP	Computer	Home Internet For # Years
Martha	41	Meat-wrapper On disability	College 4 years Univ. 1 year	Son 16	Canada	20-50K	VCN Small local	Pentium	4
Dorris	46	Nurse	College	None	Canada	35-50K	College	Pentium	4
Carol	47	Marketing director quit job	M.A.	Husband Sons 11, 14	Canada	60- 100K	AOL	Pentium	3
Ellen	49	Editor on disability	M.A.	None	Britain	under 20K	VCN	Old Mac	2
Rita	49	Accountant	University courses	Husband Son 9 Daughter 13	Jamaica	over 100K	ASDL Major local	4 home computers; LAN Pentium	2
Larry	22	Student part-time work	College courses	Mother father 2 sisters	China	20-50K	VCN College	PC	2
Patrick	33	Technician	B.S.	Fiancé	Eastern Europe	20-50K	VCN	PC 486	1.5
Norris	35	Teaching assistant	B.A. Economics	Mother	Tanzania	20-50K	VCN AOL	Pentium	1.5
Alex	36	Jewelry designer	Art college	Wife Son 6	Bulgaria	20-50K	Sprynet	Mac 6200	4
Matthew	37	ISP Customer support person	B.A. Communication	Wife Sons 15, 7 Daughters 13, 4	Britain	20-50K	Small local	Power Mac	5
Radul	40	Auto body technician	Technical college	Wife Son 14	Romania	60-70K	Major local	Pentium	2

Name	Age	Occupation	Education	Family Members	Originally From	Income	ISP	Computer	Home Internet For # Years
Theodore	45	Parking patroller	B.A.	Wife Son 8 mo.	Ethiopia	60-100K	VCN	PC 386	4
Merlin	58	Unemployed mechanical engineer	B.S.	Wife	USA	under 20K	VCN	PC 386	10
Don	60	Self-employed psychologist/counselor	M.A.	Wife Sons 18, 22	Los Angeles	20-50K	Small local	Pentium	3
Reiner	62	Retired Mech.engineering technician	Technical college	Wife	Germany	20-50K	Cable Major local	PC 486	4
Garry	67	Retired naval radio-operator	College equiv.	None	Britain	20-50K	VCN	PC 486	1.5
John	73	Retired mechanical engineer	B.S. equivalent	Wife	Britain	20-50K	VCN	PC 386	4

Legend: The bold font style indicates that the respective family member has been interviewed.

* Myra was an academic, a Ph.D. student in theoretical physics, and in this way did not strictly match the definition of a non-professional user I was working with. Her story however was inextricably intertwined with that of Patrick, her fiancé who in fact responded to my call for participation. She actively participated in the interview along with Patrick. Their home computer on which I performed my tour was used mainly by Patrick.

** Matthew was not a simple customer in the strict sense as he was providing services on the Web. His story was interesting to me because it demonstrated the evolution of a user into active provider of Internet-based content and services. The mailing list that Matthew moderated represented a case of a virtual community initiated by a user.

Appendix D

NUD·IST Analysis List of Themes

Q.S.R. NUD·IST Power version, revision 3.0.5.

Licensee: Maria.

PROJECT: Transcript_Analysis_Copy2 User Maria, 6:44 pm, Feb 8, 2000.

(1) /Situation

(1 1) /Situation/Social-Network-Family

(1 2) /Situation/Internet-and-Job-Profession

**(1 3) /Situation/Social activities-real life
groups-communities-organizations**

(1 4) /Situation/Work

(1 5) /Situation/Equipment

(1 6) /Situation/Background

(2) /Start Computer

(3) /Start Internet

(3 1) /Start Internet/Motivation-Relevance

Definition:

Why did the user find the Internet relevant, interesting. appealing?

Bec

(3 2) /Start Internet/support-Help

Definition:

Who helped/supported the users in their initial learning about and using?

- *****
- (3 3) /Start Internet/Experience before home
- *****
- (3 4) /Start Internet/Cost of connection-choosing service
- Definition:
Discussion of what the internet connection costs and how the ISP was chosen.
- *****
- (3 5) /Start Internet/learning how to use
- Definition:
Discussion of the INITIAL experience and challenge related to Internet use.
- *****
- (4) /Length of use from Home
- *****
- (5) /Initial Internet Experience
- *****
- (5 1) /Initial Internet Experience/Benefits-perceived
- *****
- (6) /Forums-Communities
- Definition:
Descriptions of the online groups/forums/communities to which respondents belong.
- *****
- (6 1) /Forums-Communities/Loyalty
- *****
- (6 2) /Forums-Communities/Responsiveness
- *****
- (6 3) /Forums-Communities/Tolerance-Safe-Family-Respect
- *****
- (6 4) /Forums-Communities/Personal benefits
- *****
- (6 5) /Forums-Communities/Problems-Concerns
- *****
- (6 6) /Forums-Communities/Making personal friends
- *****
- (6 7) /Forums-Communities/Contribution-active
- *****

(6 8) /Forums-Communities/Starting of new forum-branching

(6 9) /Forums-Communities/Private or Public forum

(6 10) /Forums-Communities/Acting together

(6 11) /Forums-Communities/Personal information exchange-
sharing

(6 12) /Forums-Communities/Real life effects

(6 13) /Forums-Communities/Romance

(6 14) /Forums-Communities/Information-learning-knowledge

(6 15) /Forums-Communities/Disappointmen, Disapproval

(6 16) /Forums-Communities/Political

(6 17) /Forums-Communities/Solving problems

(7) /Importance of Internet General

(7 1) /Importance of Internet General/For disabled people

(7 2) /Importance of Internet General/Versus other media

(7 3) /Importance of Internet General/For immigrants

(7 4) /Importance of Internet General/For society

(7 5) /Importance of Internet General/For retired

(8) /Metacomments-Methodological relevance

(8 1) /Metacomments-Methodological relevance/Interview context

(9) /Interpersonal networks

Definition:

Discussion of how the Internet interacts with people's social networks.

(10) /Web searching

(10 1) /Web searching/Research

(10 2) /Web searching/Activities supported by search

(10 3) /Web searching/Products-research-buying

(10 4) /Web searching/Contacts with people

(10 5) /Web searching/Related activities

(10 6) /Web searching/Sources quality, preference

(10 7) /Web searching/Advertising

(10 8) /Web searching/Content

(10 9) /Web searching/Job searching

(10 10) /Web searching/Political

(11) /Spatial arrangements

(12) /Talk at computer

(12 1) /Talk at computer/Bookmarks

(12 2) /Talk at computer/E-mail

(12 3) /Talk at computer/Newsgroups

(13) /Gender

(13 1) /Gender/Female

(13 1 1) /Gender/Female/Specific experience

(13 2) /Gender/Male

(14) /Other family members

How do other family members use the computer and the Internet in the home?

(14 1) /Other family members/Partner-spouse

(14 2) /Other family members/Children

(15) /Relationship with technology in general

(16) /Temporal pattern

(17) /Internet technology skills, etc.

Definition:

Discussion of the devices, programs and skills people need/have for using the Internet.

(18) /Problems-concerns re. Internet

(19) /Changes in daily activities

Definition:

What daily (routine) activities have been changed or added, or eliminated?

(20) /Creating Web sites

(21) /Control

Definition:

Illustrations of the ways in which people struggle to preserve/retain/establish control over their Internet use.

(22) /Income

(23) /Use for work, Professionalization

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