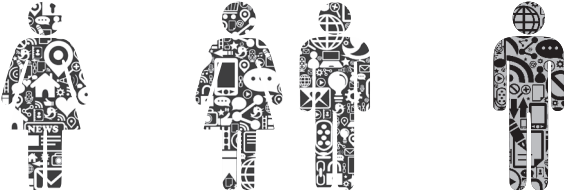


# NETNOGRAPHY: REDEFINED



2nd Edition

Robert V Kozinets



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## INTRODUCTION

The world with all its riches, life with its astounding achievements, man with the constant prodigy of his inventive powers, all are organically integrated in one single growth and one historical process, and all share the same upward progress towards an era of fulfillment - Tielhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (1957: 15)

Billions of individuals joined into networks partake in a complex world that not only reflects and reveals their lived experiences but is also, itself, a unique social phenomenon. Netnography can help you to understand that world. It can help you understand the various contexts that make it possible, the new social forms it advances, and the old forms it replaces. There are many challenges you will encounter when undertaking to research the world of online social interaction. This book offers solutions.

*Netnography: Redefined* uses social science methods to present a new approach to conducting ethical and thorough ethnographic research that combines archival and online communications work, participation and observation, with new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis and research representation. With this edition, I continue my focus on the practical workbench level, focusing on how netnography comes together as specific sets of research practices, but I amplify, specify and extend the overall approaches in light of the rise of social media, critiques of community and culture, the various tensions between the networked individuals, the proliferation of online ethnographic methods, and the maturation and spread of netnography. *Netnography: Redefined* is a discontinuous





break from the past, a second edition that develops a radical new stance in the service of clearly differentiating the approach. In order to accomplish this, an introductory overview chapter is required. First it overviews the changing and always contested terrain of ethnographic inquiry. Secondly, it surveys the nature of online social experience and interaction: the phenomenon we wish to study.

- How can we understand human to human and human to machine interactions and experiences? What is the cultural and social phenomenon manifesting as social media, and how does it relate to concepts we already know such as networks, communities and culture?
- What are the research practices that guide, inform and structure netnography? How do historical precedent, extant theory and adaptive reasoning support them? How do the applications of these practices lead to cultural understanding?

As we outline and examine notions of online sociality and grapple with some of its vexing and important issues, it becomes apparent that simply opening a mobile phone and typing in some search terms is not, in itself, netnography. Netnography is, instead, specific sets of research positions and accompanying practices embedded in historical trajectories, webs of theoretical constructs, and networks of scholarship and citation; it is a particular performance of cultural research followed by specific kinds of representation of understanding. Thus, as a methodological primer, and not simply a book on method, this book must traverse and map some craggily shifting terrain, namely, the evolving, novel and challenging developments surrounding ethnography, technology research and social media.

In the former edition of the book, social media and online communities were still a bit of a novelty. Currently, with Facebook's active monthly users numbering over 1.3 billion, and social media and the Internet already widely recognized for changing politics, business and social life, there is little to be gained in belabouring the point that the study of social media is widespread, important and worthy of research attention.<sup>1</sup> However, because of its timing, the former book misses much that is currently of operational interest to ethnographic Internet researchers, such as direct applications of netnography to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, and examples of successful tactics for doing so.

Applications and publications that use netnography are burgeoning across fields as diverse as Geography, Sociology, Media Studies, Travel and Tourism, Sexuality and Gender Research, Nursing, Addiction Research, Game Studies and Education. In the field of library and information studies, for example, Sally Burford and Sora Park used netnography to study how mobile tablet devices and their apps change young adults' access to information (Burford and Park, 2014). In the field of food sociology, Cronin and colleagues (2014) used netnography to examine discussions of overconsumption of food and alcohol and to then illustrate and develop a theory of their 'carnavalesque' qualities. Contributing to the language studies field, Sultana and colleagues (2014) used a netnography of Facebook groups to study



the use of the 'linguistic, social and cultural practices' of young Bangladeshi and Mongolian adults. In economic geography, Grabher and Ibert (2014) used their netnographic study of online hybrid professional-hobbyist communities to conclude that the physical 'distance' in these communities should not be considered a deficiency, but rather an asset that helped them to collaboratively learn in ways different from face-to-face learning.

Across academic fields, netnography has been found immensely useful to reveal interaction styles, personal narratives, communal exchanges, online rules, practices, and rituals, discursive styles, innovative forms of collaboration and organization, and manifestations of creativity. This book captures the waves of exciting new social media research appearing across almost every academic field since the publication of that first edition. At the time of the last book, most of which was written in early 2009, there were few examples of the diverse forms that netnography was beginning to take, and the book contained very little systematic discussion of the various methodological and operational choices made by ethnographers seeking to use online archives and Internet communications as their main field site. This is remedied by the book's current edition.

University of Amsterdam professor Richard Rogers (2009) traces the trajectory of Internet research and attempts to distinguish between digital and virtual methods, largely concluding that appropriate or superior digital methods should be native to the digital environment, and use such affordances as crowdsourcing and social network analysis, rather than trying to adapt extant 'offline' techniques to the digital environment 'online' (see also Caliandro, 2014; Marres, 2012; Wesch, 2009). The idea that blind application of extant techniques to online social interactions will not work has been a founding principle of netnography, which explicitly seeks intelligent adaptation. However, intelligent adaptation means considering all options and not simply throwing out past approaches because they have already been done. Even in revolutionary times, and perhaps especially in revolutionary times, history and continuity are important to the making of wise decisions. In this edition, netnography remains rooted to core ethnographic principles of participant-observations while also seeking to selectively and systematically incorporate digital approaches such as social network analysis, data science and analytics, visualization methods, social media research presence and videography.

The current edition of this book seeks to provide a text that:

- Engages with, describes and illustrates netnography that uses the different social media sites and forms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and others
- Offers various up-to-date examples of successfully conducted and published netnographies across a variety of academic fields, including Library and Information Studies, Education, Nursing, Media and Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Game Studies, Tourism and Travel, Urban Studies and Geography
- Grapples with sophisticated anthropological critiques of ethnography and provides suggestions for an evolution of its approach



- Develops and promotes a nuanced view of the online social interaction that is aligned with current cultural and social theory
- Gives particulars regarding the different choices of netnographic form and focus, including other forms of online ethnography, that are available to researchers

## WHY NETNOGRAPHY IS NEEDED

Research is, at root, a set of practices. Boil a flask over a burner. Inject a substance into a vein. Write up a study with many impressive equations, tables and statistical analyses. Read a paper at a conference. Each recognized, legitimate particular form of research has clear affiliations, roots and sets of practices. If we do not know the affiliations, roots and sets of practices that govern a significantly different research approach, then we leave it up to individual authors to, so to speak, ‘reinvent the method’ every time they use it, and to claim (or have claimed for them) a uniqueness of their findings making them difficult to generalize because of their lack of specification. Uniform adherence to a standard set of practices simplifies communications, or at least helps to aggregate common knowledge so that the wheel of method turns smoothly even as it is – inevitably – being reinvented.

A set of postings on my blog debated the necessity of a separate term for ethnography conducted online. The debate benefitted from the insights of a number of commenters, especially those of Jerry Lombardi, an applied anthropologist with considerable marketing research experience. Although Jerry initially questioned the need for yet another neologism, eventually he wrote that:



the worlds of research and intellectual innovation are strewn with neologisms that might’ve sounded odd or wrong when brand-new: cybernetics, psycholinguistics, software. So yes, new mappings of reality sometimes call for new names, and sometimes the names take a while to settle in.

We must consider, then, whether online sociality is different enough from its embodied variants to warrant a ‘new mapping of reality’. Is online ethnography – whether we call it by this more generic term or by more specific terms such as virtual ethnography, digital ethnography, web ethnography, mobile ethnography, smartphone ethnography, or ICT ethnography – actually, significantly, different from other methods or from anthropology conducted face-to-face? In practice, the proliferating set of terms and practices is itself evidence that new adaptations are needed to differentiate online ethnography from its face-to-face predecessor.


In fact, online access to vast amounts of archived social interactions alongside live access to the human beings posting it entirely changes the practice of ethnography and, in fact, all of the social sciences. Into this vast and evolving ecosystem of social and individual data and captured and emergent communications, netnography is positioned somewhere between the vast searchlights of big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis. At times, it is more like



a treasure hunt for rare marine species than a standard fishing trip or an activity like trawling the sea. Actual netnographic data itself can be rich or very thin, protected or given freely. It can be produced by a person or by a group, or co-produced with machines, software agents and bots. It can be generated through interactions between a real person and a researcher, or be sitting in digital archives. It can be highly interactive, like a conversation. Or it can be more like reading the diary of an individual. It can be polished like a corporately created production, or raw and crude, full of obscenities and spelling errors.

In addition, netnographic researchers are not dealing merely with words, but with images, drawings, photography, sound files, edited audiovisual presentations, website creations and other digital artifacts. Netnography provides participative guidelines, including an advocacy of the research web-page, the inclusion of Skype interviews, and in-person participative fieldwork, in order to migrate the refined perceptivity of ethnography to online media. With methodological rigour, care and humility, netnography becomes a dance of possibilities for human understanding  social technological interaction.  requires interpretation of human communications under realistic contexts, in situ, in native conditions of interaction, when those human communications are shaped by new technologies.

When an approach is significantly different from existing approaches, it gains a new name and becomes, in effect, a discipline, field or school in itself. There are very few, if any, specific, procedural guidelines to take a researcher through the steps necessary to conduct and present an ethnography using social media data, attending to the scrupulous preservation of a humanist perspective on online interaction.<sup>2</sup> With its first presentation in 1996, netnography is certainly one of the first. With this book, I aim to make it the most lucid, defensible, differentiated and supportable.

Consider the system of academic research and publication. When undertaking a research project in an academic setting, such as research funded with grants, or  masters or PhD dissertations, it is customary for the researcher to provide proposals for the research that reference commonly accepted procedures and standards. Further, institutional review board or human subjects research review committees must be informed of research approaches and their utilization of reputedly ethical methods. On the publication side, which is what makes the academic world go round, it greatly helps to have clear standards and statements so that editors and reviewers will know what to look for in the evaluation of such research. If the method is reputable, then the reviewers and editors can concentrate on the utility and novelty of the theoretical findings.

These are the multiple roles played by methodological standards in the conduct of normal science: they assist with evaluation at the proposal, ethics review and publication evaluation stages. Standards and procedures are set and, as terms regarding them fall into common usage, these standards make evaluation and understanding clearer. Social scientists build an approach that, while maintaining the inherent flexibility and adaptability of ethnography, also has a similar sense





of procedural tradition and standards of quality. Although experimentation and critique is welcome and useful, the consistency of ‘methodological rigour’ benefits scholarship, providing clarity, better theory-construction, minimizing heedless replication and, in the end, generating greater recognition and increased opportunities for all scholars working in the area.<sup>3</sup>

For an interesting overview and assessment of netnography and its adoption as a methodological innovation in the social science, I recommend Bengry-Howell et al.’s (2011) NCRM Hub research report (see also Xenotidou and Gilbert, 2009; Wiles et al., 2013). In particular, I draw on one poignant critique of netnography contained in Wiles et al. (2013: 27; see also, among others, related critiques by Caliandro, 2014; Rokka, 2010; Weijs et al., 2014): ‘What I can’t see from where I’m standing is a very distinctive perspective that makes netnography different from Hine’s virtual ethnography or different from the kind of work that lots of people are doing ...’ This is an important critique, and I believe that it emanates from two aspects of my past writing. First, the fact that the social media field has grown, and online or digital ethnography methods have proliferated, including virtual ethnography. Second, that netnography has been cast more at a ‘workbench’ and ‘how-to’ level which insufficiently discussed and developed its epistemology. With the next section of this chapter, I seek to begin to ameliorate this deficiency by discussing recent discussion and developments in anthropology and considering how they must impact and alter the conception and practice of netnography.

## REFORMULATING ETHNOGRAPHIC FOCUS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA STUDIES

What exactly does netnography study? Traditionally, anthropologists and sociologists studied culture and community. Thus, these constructs would seem the most worthwhile foci for netnographic investigations. Indeed, my writing on netnography has consistently focused on constructs of online community and online culture, or ‘cyberculture’ (e.g., Kozinets, 1997, 1998, 2002a, 2010). However, with this edition that focus changes. Culture and community have become increasingly unstable concepts in anthropology. They are particularly unstable, as we shall see in this chapter, when used to reference online social phenomena. To develop a more subtle sophisticated foundation to guide netnographic practice, we begin with the nuances of destabilized (online) culture and community. Summarizing historical notions of online culture and community, this section problematizes these two concepts prior to a more in-depth examination of the core concepts of culture and community in the section following.

How did notions of community and culture appear historically in relation to computer and networked computing? In the 1950s, when the main image of a computer was a centralized corporate or government mainframe, many descriptions of computers compared them to giant brains. Later, as computers became smaller



and more ‘personal’, entered people’s homes, and were connected together into networks, the guiding metaphor for this construction was ‘the information superhighway’. The term dates to at least 1988 and, if former American Vice-President Al Gore is to be believed, to 1979. In an intriguing book on the archetypes, myths and metaphors of the early Internet, Mark Stefik (1996) presents four then-prevalent metaphors of the information superhighway:

1. *Online Library*: a repository for publishing and storing collective knowledge, a form of communal or collective memory
2. *Digital Communications Medium*: a place for email and, eventually, many other forms of communication
3. *Electronic Marketplace*: a location for transactions of goods and services, including digital commerce, digital money and digital property
4. *Digital World*: a gateway to new experiences, including new social settings, virtual and augmented reality, telepresence and ubiquitous computing

Even in this early work, positioned in the same year I introduced netnography to the scientific community, we can clearly distinguish the different communicative modalities and possibilities offered by the Internet. There is a discernible ‘Tale of the Internet’ that proceeds through the four stages as follows. Early in its development, during the ‘Dark Age’ of computing, the creaky early computer peer network period that has sometimes been called ‘Web 1.0’ was born. With Web 1.0, the online experience was often (but not always) more like the reading of a book than the sharing of a conversation. Hence, the online library metaphor is still a powerful one. With major web-pages, online archives, and a vast majority of social media ‘participants’ simply reading or ‘lurking’ we could argue that the Internet retains much of this ‘read-only’ quality. Indeed, much of the big data stream now is rather unintentional: the never-really-random clicks and searches of everyone’s everyday life. To be human today is to make approximately one hundred and seventeen discrete choices on our devices every day – more or less.

The plot thickens as we are slyly told that the Internet has evolved somehow. It has become much more than this. Some time around 2004 or maybe 2003 the so-called ‘Web 2.0’ revolution began to occur. The Internet forever after became based upon a backbone of software that increasingly enabled and empowered people to use the technology to interconnect in seemingly grassroots ways. This enabled a type of online consumer choice, one that was driven in a person-to-person manner. All sorts of new styles and modes of interconnection blossomed as a result, including ones which facilitated new relationships (think eHarmony and online dating, TripAdvisor and hotel recommendations) as well as ones which helped manage existing and older relationships (think social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn for existing personal and business contacts).

Of course, relationship-management notions have been a part of Internet and World Wide Web lore almost since its inception. Interconnection between people



in a decentralized manner was the idea of Arpanet in the first place, and certainly a part of the Web that had long been emphasized by Tim Berners-Lee (the Web's creator), David Weinberger (co-author of the *Cluetrain Manifesto*), John Perry Barlow, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and other thoughtful Internet influentials and organizations. In fact, I used the CompuServe and Prodigy networks in the late 1980s and self-organizing groups such as fan and creative writing communities were easy to find. These networks allowed you to make contact with new people who shared your interests, and to start new groups at will. Even at that time, one did not need to know computer programming to join a group or start one. All one needed was to learn a few easy commands.

Whether we call the resulting sites social media, communications forums, marketplaces or virtual worlds, the guiding metaphor and concept for quite some time has been the community. The use of the term seems likely to have originated in 1978, when a husband and wife team, computer scientist and programmer Murray Turoff and sociologist Roxanne Starr Hiltz, wrote one of the earliest books about how people were beginning to use computer networks (or 'computer conferencing') to socialize, congregate and organize. Published 12 years before both the invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee, *The Network Nation* (Hiltz and Turoff 1978) clearly predicted a world where social media were commonplace, and even ubiquitous. Clearly, the web was social from its beginnings.

As the Internet grew through the 1980s and early 1990s, a prevalent form of communication was the so-called 'community' forum, usually manifest as an interest or location-based bulletin board that assembled multiple attributed textual posts, and contained different, but centrally related, topical threads and active discussions. It was in this era of the community forum that Internet pioneer Howard Rheingold (1993: 5) continued the work of Hiltz and Turoff (1978), defining virtual communities as 'social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on ... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'. Based on his observations of online interest-based forums, support groups and role-playing games, Rheingold noted that people in online communities 'exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk' (1993: 3). And Rheingold was right. People in those forums did indeed seem to be enjoying the support and camaraderie we usually associate with in-the-flesh communities like neighbourhoods and religious groupings. However, the types of emotional depth and interconnection were not evenly distributed. His book depicts a range of forms and depths of human social interconnection. The use of the word community is highly significant. For as soon as we use this word, we find its critiques. Some of those critiques are now so substantial that they force a significant redefinition and reconfiguration of netnography.



## Culture, Community and its Critics

### Contested and Shifting Notions

How are we to understand notions of community and culture in the context of ethnographic research practice? In the field of anthropology, the questioning of the underlying notions of stable community and culture which began strongly and in earnest in the crisis of representation in the 1980s (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986), continues. Vered Amit and Nigel Rapport's (2002) *The Trouble with Community* interrogates 'the ethnographic enterprise and its ethnographic subjects' when they are 'no longer fixed conveniently in singular places' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 1). As they explain, the notion of collectivity or community has long served as an anchor for sociological and anthropological research. Where location is unspecific, as in transnational or multi-sited cultures, then collective identities, including nation, ethnicity, occupation or political movement have been conveniently invoked.

Poet, novelist and anthropologist Michael Jackson (1998: 166) relates his encounter with self-styled Australian historian Frank Ropert whose dismissive and ridiculous accounts of Aborigine history were intended to demonstrate how they had 'lost their tradition culture'. However, Jackson (ibid.,) uses the incident to demonstrate how the notion of culture is 'frequently invoked as an essentialized and divisive notion ... [which] militates against the recognition of the humanity we share, and the human rights to which we have a common entitlement.' The meaning of aboriginal culture and aboriginal identity is no more uniform, monolithic, fixed or stable in time than that of, say, British identity. It would be absurd to say that British people had 'lost their traditional culture' because they did not speak, believe and behave the same as British people did 400 years ago on that same territory. The salience, for example, of my status as a Canadian, a professor, a *Game of Thrones* fan is not a constant, permanent, nor a central aspect of many of my social dealings in person, but one which shifts and is fluid. This is even less the case when I am projecting my identity through the misty, ever-shifting image-ethers of the Internet. Yet, like Frank Ropert, some scholars still seek cultural and communal constancy even as many of the processes they study – of dislocation, displacement, alienation, plurality, hybridization, disjunction, compartmentalization, escape and transgression – continually toss its possibility into doubt. We must be cautious not to assume as fixed and permanent those identities and interconnections we observe in temporary, perhaps even transitional, form.

Similar critiques can and should be levelled at 'mechanistic, social-structural notions of culture and society as organically functioning and evolving wholes' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 108). Michael Jackson (1998: 16) reminds us

That which we designate 'culture' ... is simply the repertoire of psychic patterns and possibilities that generally have been implemented, foregrounded, or given legitimacy in a particular place at a particular point in time. But human culture, like consciousness



itself, rests on a shadowy and dissolving floe of blue ice, and this subliminal, habitual, repressed, unexpressed, and silent mass shapes and reshapes, stabilizes and destabilized the visible surface forms.

We should not underestimate the fluidity and instability of the human social realm. Culture adapts quickly to technologies and becomes technoculture perhaps because it is always in liquid motion, transforming and transformative. When studying online interaction, we surely wish to identify clear cultural categories such as nationalities, ethnicities, localisms, religiosities and occupational identities. However, we must strive to view them less as solid states of being than as liquid interactional elements that individual members bring to life as mental meanings. Rather than manifesting steadfast conditions of constancy, stability, functionality, reliability, timelessness, emergence and boundary, the processes at work in this post-structural and post-functionalist conception of culture are more about multiplicity, contradiction, randomness and unpredictability. Such a conception reminds us that there are degrees to which individuals choose their cultural identifications and opt to act as its standard-bearers and members. Cultures, on the other hand, do not own or have rights over their individuals or members.

Joonas Rokka (2010), building on his work with Johanna Moisander (Rokka and Moisander, 2009), conceptualizes online communities as new 'translocal sites of the social ... i.e. not global or local but as contexts which are both transnational and local' (Rokka, 2010: 382) and calls for more analytic attention from netnographies, particularly by paying close attention to 'cultural practices'. With radical, but translocally resonant, implications for Durkheimian sociology and our understanding and use of the concept, practice-based analyses such as the one Rokka (2010) recommends can help us to move further in the direction of realizing the extents and ways in which culture is adopted rather than ascribed.

Society and culture can no longer be conceptualized in fundamentalist fashion. The realist tellings of ethnographic tales are outdated (Van Maanen, 1988). No longer can cultures be represented as reified, holistic, discrete, internally integrated and ontologically secure things-in-themselves. Instead, they must be portrayed fluid processes, liquid Baumanite identities (Bauman, 2003), Appadurian transnational flows of complex translocal scapes (Appadurai, 1990). They are animated, borne, maintained, mutated, dispersed and transformed by individual consciousnesses. Although cultures and communities may be represented by members as homogenous, monolithic, and thus *a priori* this is, as Benedict Anderson (1983) reminds us, only an 'imagining'. It is idiom.

Interacting human beings are neither gigantic social machines nor vast evolving organisms, but symbolic constructions that assume different patterned forms depending upon which method we choose to use to study them. Cultures and communities are 'worlds of meaning' that exist purely because of their continued adoption and use 'in the minds of their members' (Cohen, 1985: 82). Individuals, with all their multiplicity, heterogeneity and unpredictability, come before cultures and communities,



ontologically and morally. The traditions, customs, rituals, values and institutions of cultural communities all depend upon ‘the contractual adherence of interacting individuals’ for their continuation, meaningfulness, maintenance and value. Adopting this perspective, we might see that any given cultural community exists as an ‘assemblage of individual life-projects and trajectories in momentary construction of common ground’ (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 111). This more fluid perspective on online culture and community leads almost effortlessly to the notion of consocial identity and interaction.

### Consocial Identities and Interactions

Rather than the tight bonds of community, an important form of **contact** guiding human relations in contemporary society seems to be **consociation**. We can think of **consociation as a commonplace, largely instrumental, and often incidental form of association, one that we often take for granted because it has become so natural.** It revolves around incidents, events, activities, places, rituals, acts, circumstances and people. **For example, we might socialize with the people we are sitting next to at a play or a concert, because the context creates conditions for this type of temporary, bounded, yet affable relationship.** We are consocial with most of the people we work with, with other students, with other conference or trade show or festival goers, with many of our neighbours, with our parent’s friends and their kids, with the parents of children at our children’s schools, and so on (see Dyck, 2002). Some may become close friends, of course. Some may join with us in groups of lasting relations. These close relationships and lasting relationships are not consocial, but social. But in many cases, as with neighbours and workmates, we see these people repeatedly but are unlikely to feel that they are close or important to us in a way that extends very far beyond the place- or event-based and ephemeral relationship. **Although these relationships can be important and meaningful in the moment, they are entirely contingent upon our continued involvement in a particular association or activity.** When we get up from our seats at the play, we may say goodbye, but we do not exchange phone numbers. When we change jobs or move, the friendly relationship with the co-worker or neighbour dissolves. Perhaps it only appears through Facebook. It remains dormant until an occasion occurs when we again need the person for one reason or another.

The ties that bind consociality are thus friendly, but not particularly strong. **Consociality is conceptualized ‘first and foremost by reference to what is held in common by members rather than in oppositional categories between insiders and outsiders’ (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 59).** Consociality is about ‘what we share’, a contextual fellowship, rather than ‘who we are’, an ascribed identity boundary such as race, religion, ethnicity or gender. The two forms are distinct and, even though one can shade or lead into the other, we should be careful not to systematically confound them. Applied to online social spaces, we might use this notion



of consociality to wonder if the widely used terms ‘online community’ and ‘virtual community’ are, indeed, strong examples of this conflation of ascribed and achieved communal identity. Simply because one registers as a ‘member’ and then posts to an online group, seeking a particular kind of interaction, does this then mean that one becomes a ‘member’ of that ‘community’ online? Not, it seems, in any way similar to that of communities such as those based upon race, religion, ethnicity or gender.

### A Netnographic View of Ascribed Culture and Community

In summary, this critique of culture and community suggests that collective entities such as community and culture are considerably less stable than some prior theory makes them out to be. Instead of more fixed and permanent communal identifications, more consocial forms of contact may occur, perhaps prevalently. Consociality eschews notions of inside-outside boundaries in favour of an emphasis on what is shared between people. Similarly, in a world of flowing cultural scapes transfigured by translocal qualities (Appadurai, 1990), cultural categories such as religion and ethnicity must be considered to be more fluid, multiple and unpredictable than ever before. In fact, this liquidity of culture and interaction may be one of the most defining elements of our time. Hastened by technology and the exigencies of capitalism, dividing and connecting people from each other, people are liberated from ascribed culture and community. As Sasha Baron Cohen’s ridiculous comic figure of Ali G suggests, being black is now a matter of individual choice. It appears that this freedom to choose even such hardwired identities as race and gender is even more flexible on the Internet.

Relatedly, and drawing on Paul Ricoeur (1996), Amit and Rapport (2002: 116) suggest that we reconceptualize ethnography as a setting for responsibly reconstructing, representing and recounting entangled individual stories. We would do this by a ‘respectful exchange of life narratives’, a ‘genuine labour of “narrative hospitality”’ in which we write ‘existential narratives – rich in subjectivities and interpersonal relations’ (Amit and Rapport. 2002: 116). The outcome would be ethnography – and netnography – that portrays individuals who are free to choose a range of identities and subject positions doing just that. Emphasizing agentic identity over social structure, Amit and Rapport (2002: 117) counsel us to write about these individuals as free to believe in, adopt, evangelize, disbelieve in, function ironically within, and drop all sorts of communal, cultural and consocial identities and relationships.

What are the research implications of this view of culture and community as achieved, rather than ascribed? In the first place, it becomes incumbent upon netnographers and all other cultural researchers to analyse attachment to a community or adherence to cultural norms as, at least to some extent, a matter of individual choice rather than necessity or duty. The existence of communities, online or otherwise, should be treated analytically as an expression of an ongoing



negotiation between individuals. Online cultural and community identities are adopted by people, sometimes temporarily, and often to varying extents. Can it be entirely acceptable to assume that someone who posts on YouTube is also partaking in YouTube 'culture' or is a member of the YouTube 'community' and shares some sense of common 'identity'? To do so stretches the limits not only of the terms, but also strains the credibility of the netnographer. We can see the practice of YouTube posting as significant, surely. We can analyse the content of the posting, its relation with other posts, attendant 'minding' behaviour such as tagging, offering keywords, linking and replying to others' YouTube comments and posts. But it would be questionable to assume that this set of behaviours says anything more about the poster's lasting identity or loyalties unless we found further evidence of this in connected research.

Relatedly, anthropologist Roy Wagner (2001) charts an 'anthropology of the subject' that uses the holographic worldview and perspectives of Melanesians to explore the relationship between the part and whole, intersubjective relationships in general and the anthropological and ethnographic endeavour as a whole. Among his core ideas are that anthropologists do not learn from culture members, but teach themselves to these members, that meaning is 'an insidious mental contagion' and that 'artificial reality is nearer to life than life itself' (Wagner, 2001: xiii–xiv). We will pick up a number of these important themes as we traverse the methodological development and upgrading of netnography in Chapters 2 and 3.

In a relevant article, Henri Weijo and colleagues (2014) note that my methodological development of netnography has had to increasingly acknowledge the fragmentation, proliferation and delocalization of online communities. They find a situated individualism and delocalized performances that benefit from a netnographic attention to introspection and re-emphasize the importance of researcher participation and reflexivity. These comments are astutely on target. With a more firm sense of what we are observing when we observe online social experience, we can then proceed to a more macroscopic view of Internet use and online social behaviour, beginning with global figures.

## Behold the Online Human

Almost 3 billion people around the world currently crank the handle daily on some kind of Internet box in their homes, whether via a laptop, desktop, or mobile device.<sup>4</sup> In 1995, that number was less than 15 million. This is, without a doubt, the single most important, rapid change in communications, learning and interconnection in human history. It is leading to some of the most tribal and primitive acts in our history, alongside some of the most utopian and militarily advanced. The Internet's interpersonal interconnections are an amplification of everything, a self-and-other reflecting reflection that ramifies through the rapid infiltration of the world into boxes in everyone's homes, purses, cases and pockets.





Table 1.1

**INTERNET USAGE STATISTICS**  
**The Internet Big Picture**  
**World Internet Users and Population Stats**

<b>WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS</b>						
<b>December 31, 2013</b>						
<b>World Regions</b>	<b>Population (2014 Est.)</b>	<b>Internet Users Dec. 31, 2000</b>	<b>Internet Users Latest Data</b>	<b>Penetration (% Population)</b>	<b>Growth 2000-2014</b>	<b>Users % of Table</b>
<b>Africa</b>	1,125,721,038	4,514,400	<b>240,146,482</b>	21.3%	5,219.6%	8.6%
<b>Asia</b>	3,996,408,007	114,304,000	<b>1,265,143,702</b>	31.7%	1,006.8%	45.1%
<b>Europe</b>	825,802,657	105,096,093	<b>566,261,317</b>	68.6%	438.8%	20.2%
<b>Middle East</b>	231,062,860	3,284,800	<b>103,829,614</b>	44.9%	3,060.9%	3.7%
<b>North America</b>	353,860,227	108,096,800	<b>300,287,577</b>	84.9%	177.8%	10.7%
<b>Latin America/ Caribbean</b>	612,279,181	18,068,919	<b>302,006,016</b>	49.3%	1,571.4%	10.8%
<b>Oceania/Australia</b>	36,724,649	7,620,480	<b>24,804,226</b>	67.5%	225.5%	0.9%
<b>WORLD TOTAL</b>	<b>7,181,858,619</b>	<b>360,985,492</b>	<b>2,802,478,934</b>	<b>39.0%</b>	<b>676.3%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

NOTES: (1) Internet Usage and World Population Statistics are for December 31, 2013. (2) CLICK on each world region name for detailed regional usage information. (3) Demographic (Population) numbers are based on data from the US Census Bureau and local census agencies. (4) Internet usage information comes from data published by Nielsen Online, by the International Telecommunications Union, by GfK, local ICT Regulators and other reliable sources. (5) For definitions, disclaimers, navigation help and methodology, please refer to the Site Surfing Guide. (6) Information in this site may be cited, giving the due credit to www.internetworldstats.com. Copyright © 2001-2014, Miniwatts Marketing Group. All rights reserved worldwide.

As Table 1.1 shows, as of 2014, over 68% of the population in Europe, over 67% of Oceania, and almost 85% of North Americans are home Internet users. In Asia, there are over 1.2 billion users. Although about 60% of the world's population do not have home Internet access, this number is skewed by the large numbers of people in Africa and Asia without such access, many of whom are likely to not currently have infrastructure that can support such activity. Yet, for much of the world, the Internet and social media have fully arrived. Excluding (for calculation purposes only) the almost five billion people in Africa and Asia, the total number of people in the Middle East, Latin America, North America, Oceania and Europe combined who are not connected to the Internet sinks to only 37%. Yet it is also important to remember that Asian users currently account for almost half of all Internet users worldwide, about 49%. And although the number of non-English websites is spreading rapidly, with Chinese, Spanish and Japanese the three next most commonly used tongues, about 55% of the most visited websites across the entire Internet still use the English language.

The Pew Internet Report, which surveys United States' citizens about their Internet usage, has repeatedly found Internet use to be strongly correlated with age, education attainment and household income. Although only 15% of United States' adults do not use the Internet or email, it is clear that those who use the Internet tend to be younger, more educated, and to have higher household income



than those who do not. These user characteristics seem to be global. Technologies such as laptops are still expensive beyond reach for many worldwide; similarly, computers and their operating systems require literacy and can be found difficult to operate. Hence it is rather unsurprising that countries with lower income levels have less Internet usage. However, this fact is partially offset by the effect of mobile phones with Internet access. Younger people worldwide are turning to the Internet and to social media. Nonetheless, netnographers should be attuned to the contextual clues surrounding technology usage, which help us to more appropriately conceptualize the various uses and users of Internet connection.

The power to connect is an authentic social power. As well as enabling and empowering, it threatens and disrupts. In recent history, we have seen multiple instances of connective technologies fomenting revolutionary ideas that have turned into political action. Consider the Twitter-based organization in Libya and a YouTubed beating to death of its former leader in 2011. These are incredible social media outcomes, regardless of their cause. Breaking news stories around the world have revealed just how extensively all of our social media communications are monitored by intelligence agencies around the world, in particular the National Security Agency in the United States.<sup>5</sup> In terms of state censorship, Saudi Arabia and China still censor Internet content heavily, including social media.<sup>6</sup> Other countries, such as Russia and India censor selectively. The censorship situation is in flux in a number of other countries, including Turkey and Australia. These social situations are particularly sensitive in the Middle East, with its so-called social media led 'Twitter revolutions'. A country such as Turkey provides an excellent example of the simultaneous fragility and political power of open and democratic social media access, with waves of support and suppression of social media Internet tools and platforms and apps constantly ebbing and waxing. Hence, netnographers must also be attuned to the legislative, state surveillance, and regulatory context limiting or facilitating both the use of social media and its users' self-surveillance and self-censorship.

### Social Media as Social Life

Already in 2006 a survey found that 52% of American online community members went on to meet other online community members in the flesh (The Digital Future Report, 2008). In 2008, that number went up to 56% (ibid.). By 2010, the question and its answer had become meaningless because almost everyone on Facebook meets some of their closest Facebook friends every single day. This is the way of social media and the Internet. It has gone from anomaly and nerdy pastimes to mainstream with lightning-like rapidity. Past research must be constantly questioned in the light of the present. Current research must be constantly reviewed in light of the past.

Similarly, the questions asked in 2008 about people's sentiments towards 'their online communities' seem dated already. How should we interpret the figure of 55%



who declare their devotion to online communities, professing that they feel every bit as strongly about their online communities as they do about their real-world communities (ibid.)? In an age of social media, where, for example, I am socially and consocially linked to my children and cousins, workmates and spouse, closest friends and parents on Facebook, does such a comparison have any meaning? Of course, the fact that this was 2008, and these were almost certainly blogs and forums that were being compared to immediate social, religious and neighbourhood-based relationships is rather revealing. Coming from a time before the major social media sites hopelessly conflated physical and virtual social connections, this research finding speaks to the depth of involvement and connection imparted by Internet connection. Although Facebook makes efficient increasingly global relationships, it can often be an intensely local experience.

Now, we move to the effects of Internet communications among existing relationships: a most interesting thing if we consider that most Internet-mediated interactions are conducted with people we know well, good friends, or are related to, or married to, or are otherwise joined into some sort of close relationship. As of 2014, 67% of American Internet users credit their online communication with family and friends with generally strengthening those relationships; only 18% say social media generally weakens those relationships (Fox and Rainie, 2014). That rather overwhelming difference point to how deeply people in America, at least, feel that online communications have strengthened their existing social ties rather than weakened them. Interestingly enough, there are no significant demographic differences tied to users' feelings about the impact of online communication on relationships (ibid). Equal proportions of online men and women, young and old, rich and poor, highly educated and less well educated, veterans and relative newbies say by 3-to-1 or better that online communication is a relationship enhancer, rather than a relationship detractor.

As of 2013, a full 73% of online American adults use a social networking site of some kind, with Facebook clearly dominant at 71%, followed by LinkedIn, Pinterest, and then Twitter (Duggan and Smith, 2013). The site has become a part of many people's daily routines as well, with 63% of Facebook users visiting the site at least once a day, and 40% doing so multiple times throughout the day. Facebook and other major sites have both mainstream and specific element or areas containing particular interest and identity groups. These reports chart the qualitative shift in social media consumption – a term preferable to online community membership in many ways. As more Americans have adopted social media – and Facebook in particular – it has become inevitably more mainstream, more demographically representative.

Although Facebook is a mainstream site, appealing to a wide demographic cross-section, this is not the case with other sites, which are more stratified and either appeal or cater to specific groups' needs. For instance, a Pinterest user is four times more likely to be a woman than a man (ibid.). LinkedIn appeals much more to college graduates and members of higher income households. Twitter and Instagram user bases tend to overlap, and to skew to younger adults, urban



dwellers and non-whites (ibid.). As well, a plethora of other sites cater to all sort of local, identity, activity and interest-based tastes and social configuration. An entire ecosystem of other 'targeted' sites and online meeting places has also developed. Netnographers have unprecedented choice, unprecedented opportunities. In addition to the more professionally oriented LinkedIn, consider the relationship-facilitating Tinder and Couple, and the more urban hipster oriented Foursquare. As well, we still have over 170 million blogs, a vast and literally uncounted space of many hundred of thousand or even millions of forums, wikis and blogs.

We must also not forget visual and audiovisual sites such as YouTube, with a billion users per month watching a mind blowing 6 billion hours of video (40% of them accessing the site from mobile devices). Instagram, owned by Facebook, has 200 million active monthly users as of 2014 – as many as Facebook did in 2009 and only about 50 million less than Twitter has in 2014. By the time you read this on paper, or in an ebook, there is little doubt that these numbers will be significantly higher: the growth rates are incredible. What they mean, what we are doing with them, and what we do with them as a civilization – one with challenges running the gamut from ideological and religious wars mutating with Internet interconnection and tribal instincts, to virulent diseases increasingly spreading, to inequality, hardship, poverty, ignorance, climate change and inhumanity – building that understanding is the purpose of netnography.

The social media space is complex and varied, with sites that range from the social to the informational, specific sites for specific purposes and interest, and specific sites targeted to the needs of specific people, and also targeted to specific needs. In netnography, we must be aware of this landscape as we seek to match our research interests to available sites, procedures we will pick up and develop in Chapter 7 on the quest for data. More people are connecting through more sites in more ways for more purposes than ever before. Chatting and checking in with others about one's day or about the news, or before or after a purchase, a doctor's visit, a parenting decision, a political rally, or a television show is becoming second nature. For many people around the world, online sociality is a part of their overall social behaviour, even their everyday social behaviour. It is already familiar, mundane, taken-for-granted. Normal. Natural. The latest technologies, it seems, have become natural, even 'human nature'.

Through social media, we can learn about this phenomenon, of technological adoptions and adaptation. Though their media shall ye know them: from posts and updates, Twitter poetry, YouTubery, and of course blogs, we can learn about real concerns, real meanings, real causes, real feelings. We can learn new words, new terms, new techniques, new products, new answers, new ideas. We will encounter genuine concerns, genuine needs, genuine people. As I wrote in 1998, 'These social groups have a "real" existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour' (Kozinets, 1998: 366). Online social experiences have real consequences for social image, social identity. In fact, they can 'amplify' causation in social connection: they *are* interconnection. Even



before you can have communication in this same point-to-point manner, you have to have that interconnection to make it all possible.

## THE CONSTRUCTS INHABITING THIS BOOK

This book is arranged as a series of logical steps to lead you from a conceptual understanding of netnography and theories about online social interaction and experience to learning the specific research practices, codes of behaviour, epistemological and theoretical orientations, representational styles and different forms of netnography. The book positions netnography within different approaches used by social scientists. It provides tools, framework and many examples. Finally, it explains and illustrates the four essential kinds of netnography: symbolic, digital, auto and humanist. The way that this journey unfolds in chapter structure is detailed in the remainder of this chapter.

The opening chapter of this book will explain the function and need for netnography, for a redefined, fully updated, and upgraded version of netnography, and for the book as a whole. Chapter 1 will begin the reformulation of netnography by incorporating anthropological critiques of culture and communities, and then by exploring notions of networks, socialities and consocialities. An overview will follow of some soon-to-be-outdated statistics that nonetheless provide a current snapshot and benchmark for the future and against the past.

In Chapter 2, we will examine online social interaction and experience that transports us from cultural conceptions to archetypes of network structure, prefiguring the more synthetic and hybridizing forms of the latter part of this book. On the cultural side, Chapter 2 first discusses technoculture, ethnographic approaches, sociality and the cultural-communal debate. It conceptualizes four ideal types of online social experience and relates them to a variety of extant social media sites, which are also contexts for our research. Next, the chapter moves into more social structural types of social media understandings. It offers up some social network analysis and provides six quantitatively generalizable archetypes of network structure: polarized and tight crowds, brand and community clusters, broadcast and support networks. The chapter will then extend this to a full discussion and incorporation of networked individualism that concludes with its 12 principles. As it fades to give way to Chapter 3, Chapter 2 will begin to circle around some preliminary thoughts about the human, the social, the story and the plenitude.

Chapter 3 will delve into different methods considered complementary with netnography. It will begin by taking a big picture look at the choice of method. Netnography is about obtaining cultural understandings of human experience from online social interaction and content, and representing them as a form of research. Complementary methods include survey data and findings, interviews and journal methods, and social network analyses. We will find in this chapter that, compared to traditional ethnography, netnography has six essential differences: alteration,



access, archiving, analysis, ethics and colonization. The chapter explores the implications of these six differences to the research practices of netnography before turning to one of the most key chapters in the book.

Chapter 4 will redefine netnography as a specific set of related data collection and creation, analysis, interpretive, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant-observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet, including the myriad of mobile applications. Its emphasis on significant amounts of Internet data will differentiate netnography from approaches such as digital ethnography or digital anthropology that are more general in orientation and can include more traditional ethnographies. The chapter will then proceed to a discussion of the rich insights of Hine's virtual ethnography, the roles of materiality in digital anthropology, the creeping mundaneness of technologies and storytelling. The chapter then will provide an overview of the state of netnography today, examining the growth and development of netnography as an interdisciplinary research field. From this, a portrait of the spectrum of netnographies resolves. Key elements of this portrait are its voyeurism, quest for intimacy and engagement. The chapter concludes with a new 12-step process for netnography: introspection, investigation, information, interview, inspection, interaction, immersion, indexing, interpretation, iteration, instantiation and integration.

Chapter 5 will begin to get you ready to conduct a netnography. The chapter opens with a reminder that our state of readiness is not always as prepared as it might be and that many types of decision and research practices may be needed before we can initiate our data collection. Researcher introspection begins the netnographic journey, and several exercises lead you to one on social introspection. Next, the axiology of netnography will be explained and detailed as a guiding principle. The heart of the chapter will help you formulate a research focus as well as research questions that can be answered using a netnographic approach. Netnographies of online social interaction and experience tend to focus on sites, topics and people.

In the next chapter, you will be given a general overview and set of specific guidelines for the ethical conduct of netnography. The netnographer has choices when it comes to research practices, and being informed about Internet Research ethics procedures and accepted human subjects research protocols is important to netnographic undertakings in academic settings. This chapter follows a model of territorialism and spatial metaphor in online social relations. Public versus private debates will be reframed in less spatial terms as being about how we treat people's digital doubles in our research. Informed consent will be discussed as well as the general principle of doing no harm with our research. The chapter will then proceed from these ideas and principles to offer guidelines for ethical netnographic practice: stating your name, being honest, using your existing social media profiles, following personal branding principles to represent yourself, asking permission when needed, worrying about terms of service when necessary, gaining clear consent for interviews, citing and giving



credit, and proposed procedures for concealing and fabricating. In summary, Chapter 6 will provide you with the up-to-date foundations and specific guidelines for the ethical conduct of netnography.

Chapter 7 will treat a central practice within netnography, data collection. In netnography, data are found in archives, co-created and produced. This chapter elaborates the various important choices in data 'collection'. What are data? How should we 'collect', co-produce, find and produce them in netnography? This chapter will provide the guidelines for searching for, finding, filtering, selecting and saving data. It will provide the criteria you need to decide which sites to search in depth, and which data to collect and curate. It concludes by providing fundamentals behind the actual workbench level of capturing, collecting and storing data from archives and online social interactions and experiences.

Under the guiding injunction to participate in online social experience, Chapter 8 will continue the discussion about data collection. This chapter will discuss the creation of interactive and produced netnographic data from online social interaction and other participation. It will provide detail and illustrated examples to guide researchers interested in using the recommended netnographic practice of a research web-page. A section will follow this on the use of interviews in netnography. Next, the chapter considers the production of reflective data, often called fieldnotes. Reflective data is reconceptualized as an ethnographic affordance and guidelines given for its conduct. As with the prior chapter, technical advice and examples will be provided throughout.

In the next chapter, we will explore the essence of netnographic data analysis and interpretation through hermeneutics and deep readings. Chapter 9 deploys the word 'interpenetration' and the metaphor of the collage to discuss the ways that analysis and interpretation may cohere and conjoin. It provides and describes seven analytic movements: decoding, remembering, abstracting, competition, iterating, imagining and connecting. Next, the chapter discusses hermeneutic interpretation as well as holons and holarchic systems and relates them to the analytic and interpretive needs of netnographers working in complex social media spaces. A detailed example from Facebook coverage of a new story about an Ebola outbreak follows. Data is displayed and interpreted. The final section provides the nuts and bolts of three types of data analysis and interpretation: manual, semi-automatic and using algorithmic software. The use of CAQDAS in digital netnography is discussed. In closing, the chapter offers some thoughts about the unique elements of netnographic data that might guide its analysis.

Anthropology has been at the centre of issues of scientific representation since the Crisis of Representation in the 1980s. Chapter 10 will open with a history lesson focusing on ethnographic representation. It will then provide the four ideal types of netnographic representation: symbolic, digital, auto and humanist. These forms constitute an approach to the ethnography of online interaction and experience that ranges from the reflective, subjective and personal to the statistical, expansive and descriptive. The choice of final research product form determines



choices about data collection and analysis. Symbolic, digital and auto netnographies are explained in this chapter.

In Chapter 11, we explore the final of the four types of netnography: humanist netnography. Humanist netnography takes netnography's representational challenge to the highest level. Humanist netnographers focus on human interactions and experiences with and through technology in the contemporary, global, corporate-run and government surveilled landscape. They seek resonance, verisimilitude and polyphony in their representations, and embrace multiple methods. Inspired by developments in the digital humanities, netnographers producing a humanist netnography will seek a widening audience to share and collaboratively build ideas that work for positive change in the world. This chapter overviews the vision and standards for humanist netnography and provides one possible example of the kind of work it seeks to inspire.

In the social media era, scientific representation in netnography is a public, deliberate and ethically charged act of self-presentation that is closely related to academic goals of successful scholarship and career advancement. With this introduction to the book now complete, we will turn to an examination of some of the theories and conceptions that guide our understanding of online social interactions and experiences.

## SUMMARY

Technology use becomes more invisible and natural to us with each passing day, the Internet and mobile becoming indispensable. This book considers social and machine interaction from a human perspective, discussing the implications of online social interaction and experience in the context of conducting and representing academic ethnography. In this chapter, we overviewed anthropological critiques of the notions of cultures and communities, and learned about the need for a redefined and updated version of netnography. The reformulation of netnography began through exploration of notions of networks, socialities and consocialities. We also began to examine the field sites of ethnographic interaction, overviewing research and statistics that provide a current snapshot of online social experiences. Finally, we learned about the structure of this book and its approach to netnography.

## KEY READINGS

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## NOTES

1. In the first chapter of the last edition of the book, which I wrote in early 2009, I thought I might be overstating when I wrote there are at least 100 million, and perhaps as many as a billion people around the world who participate in online communities as a regular, ongoing part of their social experience. But now there is no doubt that social media touches numbers far greater than this through ubiquitous mobile technologies. At last count, there were 6.9 billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide, for a world population of 7.1 billion people. These subscriptions potentially connect billions to the Internet, and social media sites. I feel more assured that I am not hyperbolizing this time when I write that, although currently not quite there, social media has the near-term potential to be ubiquitous.
2. I herein ritually bow in respect to important and useful books such as Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*, Boellerstorff et al.'s (2012) *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, Horst and Miller's (2012) *Digital Anthropology* or Underberg and Zorn's (2013) *Digital Ethnography*. In fact, all of these books have usefully influenced and guided my own thinking about netnography. My statement is intended to point out that, although these books may offer theoretical overviews, general advice, examples and case studies, they tend to be focused on particular field sites (e.g., virtual worlds, such as Second Life), or particular approaches (e.g., eliciting and collecting online storytelling narratives). They are examples of different forms or sites of netnography, sometimes, in some ways. With this edition, new practices like introspection and personal academic branding exercises are intended to clearly differentiate the method.

Netnography remains pragmatic and workbench-level explication of an approach, and as it branches out and extends far beyond what physical ethnography could ever do, it also maintains a strong electromagnetic current of connection with the anthropological and sociological ethnographic past. Thus far. With this edition, I also hope that it benefits from increasingly conceptual sophistication and cross-disciplinarity.

3. Some scholars have suggested adaptations, for instance, of netnography's ethical standards. Some other scholars have opted to use those adaptations, and cited the adaptive work. I present as many diverse viewpoints as I can in this book, while still oh-so-gently suggesting particular standards and practices as netnography, or, more accurately, as 'appropriately netnographic.'
4. We have barely begun to count television screen and videogame consoles, although clearly they must at some point be included.
5. NSA surveillance is empowered by the fact that so much data flow through the Internet. Also, because the American intelligence agencies were able to collaborate so closely with so many social media companies, such as Facebook, Apple, Skype, eBay and Google, there should be little doubt that this surveillance by state intelligence agencies is both widespread and global. We can and should get into debates about whether this is a good or a bad thing, as we are a free society and this is a key matter pertaining to both our safety and our freedom. We should always listen to both sides, but proceed as true social scientists with evidence and with viable, peer-reviewed research. The Internet is a far more effective and insidious surveillance tool than even George Orwell's hideous telescreens: we should know as much as we can about this side of it as well as the side that advances our knowledge and reveals our humanity.
6. Yet I find it interesting to note that Saudi Arabia also has the most avid YouTube users, with 90 million views of the online video channel per day.



## NETWORKED SOCIALITY

### TECHNOCULTURE

Almost four decades before Facebook and Twitter, the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan predicted that the 'cool', participative and inclusive 'electric media' would 'retribalize' human society into a collectivist utopia (see, for example, McLuhan, 1970). McLuhan considered individualizing to be a negative societal trend, initiated by the rise of the phonetic alphabet, which we might consider an early social media invention. To McLuhan, privacy, nationalism and individualism were negative outcomes of various technologies that would eventually become things of the past. Electronic retribalization would rectify these problems, as lone and isolated human beings would become part of a vast collectivity that synchronized their minds and nervous systems through integrative interactive technologies.

Throughout history and into the present, many seers and theorists have predicted this technologically mediated 'coming together'. These predictions often have a mystical iridescence to them that connects them to thinkers such as Catholic philosopher-priest Teilhard de Chardin whose quote opens the former chapter. Predictions abound that intermingle utopia, apocalypse and the Godlike achievement of a world consciousness Supermind.<sup>1</sup> 'For Teilhard ... technologies are not simply human tools, but vessels of the expanding noosphere, the body and nervous system of a world consciousness striving to be' (Davis, 1998: 296). Kevin Kelly, Mark Pesce, Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg and Pierre Lévy are but a few of the influential contemporary scholars and writers adopting this notion that





technology will assist human evolution towards some sort of a positively utopian collective mind. Are the dense, in-the-moment interconnections of our mobile phones, Twitter and Facebook mutating our species into a de-individualized collective? Are social media inexorably transmuting us into a hive-species?

Reading the work of these authors, we feel the leaden gravity of their technological determinism, the impression that technology is acting to shape our evolution as a species. However, this is certainly not the only framing we can place on the rise of Internet technology to its near-ubiquitous current status. Other scholars have assumed a technocultural view. At an early stage of the Internet's development, cultural theorists Constance Penley and Andrew Ross described technocultural views as follows:

Technologies are not repressively foisted upon passive populations, any more than the power to realize their repressive potential is in the hands of a conspiring few. They are developed at any one time and place in accord with a complex set of existing rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, and, last, but not least, popular desires. (Penley and Ross, 1991: xiv)

The insight that technology does not determine human social behaviours, but that technologies and human beings are co-determining, co-constructive agents is a crucially important one to anthropologists who study science and technology. With our ideas and actions, we choose technologies, we adapt them, and we shape them, just as technologies alter our practices, behaviours, lifestyles and ways of being. As E. Gabriella Coleman (2010: 488) writes in her review of digital ethnographies in anthropology, wherever people communicate and deploy these technologies

there will be circulations, reimaginings, magnifications, deletions, translations, revisionings, and remakings of a range of cultural representations, experiences, and identities, but the precise ways that these dynamics unfold can never be fully anticipated in advance.

Our actions cannot ever entirely control the technologies that we use. There are always unintended side effects (such as global warming resulting from mass global industrialization). The way that technology and human cultures interact is a complex dance, an interweaving and intertwining of actants.

Technologies of every type constantly shape and reshape our bodies, our places, our institutions and our social identities. Simultaneously, technologies are endlessly shaped to our needs. Understanding this transformative interconnection makes us accountable for particular and general contexts – specific times and places, distinctive rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, practical and popular uses, as well as fears, hope, ambitions, ideologies and dreams. A thorough understanding of these concepts requires ethnography of both online and technology-enabled physical spaces, such as



homes and workplaces, and even human bodies in interaction and motion. Fields including anthropology, sociology, education, communications, health and addiction, food studies, media studies, management, geography and sexuality research have begun to use netnography to study and unpack the rich significance of new, technologically mediated social behaviours as they are presented through online communication.

For anthropologists, there is a growing corpus of 'ethnographic approaches to digital media' scholarship that Coleman (2010) divides into broad and overlapping categories. Considering ethnographies of 'digital media' to include ethnographies related to 'a wide range of nonanalog technologies, including cell phones, the Internet, and software applications ...', Coleman (2010: 488) surveys the following three areas:

1. Cultural Politics: ethnographies concerning 'how cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries' are 'remade, subverted, communicated and circulated through individual and collective engagement with digital technologies.' Included in this category are 'digital ontologies' that look at a cultural group's digital productions as a map of their 'overall structure of priorities and issues' (Srinivasan, 2006: 510); examinations of how online social experiences relate with topics of identity, ethnicity and race (e.g., Nakamura, 2007); studies of the digital divide (e.g., Ito et al., 2005); and studies about how technologies such as smartphones help to extend sociality and kin networks (Horst and Miller, 2006).
2. Vernacular Cultures: ethnographies examining different phenomena, genres, and groups 'whose logic is organized significantly around, although not necessarily determined by, selected properties of digital media'. Included in this category are ethnographies of software hackers and developers (e.g., Coleman, 2009), digital activism (e.g., Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010), government surveillance (e.g., Morozov, 2009), 'informational capitalism' studies of technology workers (e.g., Biao, 2007) and technology's toxic after-effects (e.g., Maxwell and Miller, 2008), and linkages between digital media and language, ideologies, change, informality, virtuosity, revitalization, play and morality (e.g., Jones and Schieffelin, 2009).
3. Prosaics: ethnographies which look at 'how digital media feed into, reflect, and shape other kinds of social practices' and in so doing illuminate 'how the use and production of digital media have become integrated into everyday cultural, linguistic, and economic life'. This category uncovers people's lived experiences with digital media; the conditions under which they are made, altered and deployed; their genres; and their material and ideological functioning. For example, it includes studies of digital journalists (Boyer, 2010), digital piracy (e.g., Larkin, 2008), digital media influences on perception and awareness (e.g., Wesch, 2009), affect and addiction (e.g., Chan, 2008), how various places and spaces sustain virtual technologies and spaces (e.g., Fuller and Narasimhan, 2007), and how digital technologies magnify the speed, spread and exploitation potential of contemporary capitalism around the world (e.g., Schull, 2010).

Considered as a body of work, these studies cover a wide swath of contemporary human engagement with technology. Although some of this work is recognizably netnographic, such as Daniels' (2009) study of racism online, much of it expands



the scope of investigation to consider the human experiences with technology as broadly as possible. Online and offline engagements with the gamut of digital media have become their focal point. Netnography, as we shall discuss in upcoming chapters, is different from digital anthropology in that it has as its core the analysis of data collected through participant-observation over the Internet, including the use of laptops, tablets, mobiles and their various applications. However, netnographic investigations should engage with the relevant findings of digital anthropology in order to strengthen our comprehension of the larger networks in which all online social experiences are embedded. This chapter seeks to open and broaden netnography's focus, while also overviewing and providing essential theoretical background to serve as its base.

### Media Have Never Not Been Social

Researchers have been curious and interested in the effect of technological mediation on communications since the radically disruptive introduction of the telegraph and, later, the telephone. So, almost from the beginning of the Internet in the early 1970s, scholars had been studying its effects on social relations in various ways. Alongside the important and insightful observational work of Hiltz and Turoff (1978), early work on online social interaction was based on social psychological theory and experimental tests. This was early media theory: it studied the medium and media of communication. Some of this work hypothesized that, considered as media, online media were too 'thin', or social-cue impoverished, to serve as a foundation for meaningful social activity (e.g., Daft and Lengel, 1986). Because online social experiences miss the immediacy of voice inflection, accents, facial expressions, directions of gaze, gaze-meeting, posture, body language and movement, and touching, it was theorized to be reduced, and its relationships shallower and less satisfying (e.g., Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Short et al., 1976; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1992, 1995).

The early Internet environment was mistrusted and viewed as a social environment with leery suspicion and cynicism. It was not a social place, but a context that created task-oriented, 'impersonal', 'inflammatory', 'cold' and 'unsociable' interactions (Kiesler et al., 1984, 1985; Rice and Rogers, 1984; Rice and Love, 1987; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1992: 58–9). When these suppositions were tested in laboratories or in workplaces under highly controlled scientific conditions – contexts that also may have helped spawn a task-oriented and coldly unsociable environment for social interactions – they were borne out to levels of statistical significance.

Related to this was another set of theories that posited a 'status equalization effect'. Hierarchy was the name of this game. How, they asked, could authority be maintained in the anonymous and chaotic social space of online communication? It was hypothesized that if you could not tell who was your boss or your



boss's boss or your underling then this, added to the technologically induced anonymity, would result in a reduction of social differences. Across the barriers of class and gender and age, people would simply communicate in an uninhibited way without the need to dominate. People would also be more individualistic, more self-absorbed and narcissistic – favouring a culture of me, myself and I (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986). Many of these behaviours were already observable in online interactions, such as 'flaming', or insults, little discursive wars, with rude, crude, hostile, aggressive and outright cruel language of the Internet, as well as the use of profanities. WTF? Scientists came to the world of online social interaction with ideas that technology-based interactions undermined, even subverted, the existing social structure.

And this may be where Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* comes in. For Turner believed, in common with many of the other anthropologists we have already discussed in these pages, that there was something to be gained by distancing his terminology from the more popular term 'community'; he expressly rejected its connotation as a geographical proximity 'area of common living' (Turner, 1969: 96). Instead *communitas* is a deeply human connection. *Communitas* is 'an essential and generic human bond, without which there would be no society' (Turner, 1969: 97). *Communitas* is a sense of being equal with your comrades, having kin, being a member of a group, and perhaps into that internalized sense of membership as connection, a way to fulfil needs for belonging, affiliation, acceptance and love. Turner saw *communitas* as linked with liminality, with the grey nether, in-between regions, between social positions in a rite of passage, as a force of anti-structure, disorder, disruption and chaos. These transformative forces become absorbed by, or at least alternate with, forces of social order, of structure, of the 'hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions' (Turner, 1969: 96), worlds of authority, elders, rules, laws, traditions, values, shamings, feeling inferior, status, feeling superior, punishments, conditioning, enforcement and sometimes brutal acts of 'religious' 'education'. This is *communitas* and hierarchy, structure and anti-structure, chaos and order, played out on a human cultural scale.

Keep Turner's ideas in mind. For as soon as work emerged which empirically examined how people were actually using technologies, these early but no less social media (and is there ever a time when media had not been social?), we found that people were able to 'develop an ability to express missing nonverbal cues in written form' (Rice and Love, 1987: 89). Symbols, emoticons, avatars, moving gif files, intentional misspellings, corrections and capitalization – all are examples of the successful human struggle to overcome the limitations of allegedly 'thin' media (Danet, 2001; Sherblom, 1988: 44; Walther, 1992, 1995). So the lived world of people, when we peered into it using data from actual users out there, rather than simulated users in a lab began to demonstrate the emergence of personally enriching social worlds, well before the clever avatars of Second Life, the photo albums of Facebook, and the detailed professional



profile pages of LinkedIn. ‘The characterizations of CMC [computer-mediated communications] born from experiments on groups seem contradictory to the findings of CMC in field studies’ concluded Walther (1992: 53). Social cues and thin media did not hold up outside of the one-off experiments in the lab. The reality of online social experience was not thin, but thick. It was social, long-term, complex, processual and evolving. It showed human beings adopting to technological limitations on their social experience, and developing adaptations that enhanced it, sometimes in novel ways.

Initial concerns that Internet use might corrode groups, families and community life are asserted and contradicted in pendulum fashion, with rather significant minorities holding, in surveys, that this is true for them (Fox and Rainie, 2014). On the other hand, surveys as early as the year 2000 – the Dark Ages before blogging and social media as we know it – revealed that people believed the Internet enabled them to keep in touch more effectively with their friends and family, and even to extend their social networks. The fact that people positively viewed email, bulletin boards, and the few other affordances of the age validates the immense value simply of the power to connect with others and share communications with them, even if it was primarily written text. *Communitas*. We hunger for it. We strive for it. We flock to it.<sup>2</sup>

We value social capital as well. As a result of their study of the impact of online communities on social capital and involvement in local communities, Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001: 507) suggested that ‘the longer people are on the Internet, the more likely they are to use the Internet to engage in social-capital-building activities’. We can see some of these larger social capital building processes highlighted in more focused studies of smaller communities. Park and colleagues (2009) surveyed over 2600 Texan students and found significant, positive, but relatively small relationships between their Facebook use and their life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement and political participation. Mathwick and colleagues (2008) studied a software forum’s peer-to-peer problem-solving community and found norms of voluntarism, reciprocity and social trust underlying the community’s employment of social capital. Working in a German venture capital context, Vasileiadou and Missler-Behr (2011) find different forms of social and relational capital being effectively deployed in a variety of virtual social interactions. Although the findings suggest small positive correlations between social capital and social media use, Park et al. (2009) warn us that social networks are not panaceas for the generational disengagement from civic duty decried by Robert Putnam (2000) among others. Yet, somehow, viewed over time and combined with survey results, the weight of evidence seems to tip us towards the notion that people’s social lives are enhanced by online contact more than they are detracted.

Ethnographic and naturalistic observations of people’s interweaving of Internet communications with their social behaviours have been critically important to our accurate understanding. Examining how people actually deploy communications technologies in their own social worlds over the long term, as they increasingly



use them to spin webs that meaningfully interconnect, turns out to be quite different from what people were doing in short-term situations with the technologies in laboratory situations. Like large stones dropped into lake water, when information and communications technology is cast into the world, it ripples outward, manifests in many ways, begetting different forms of sociality that continue to spread outwards in their influence. There are definite patternings in these forms. Effective netnography contains theory that is aware of these subtle and complex arrangements. We now continue to discuss additional arrangements and configurations in this world of online sociality.

## SOCIAL MEDIA BETWEEN THE COMMUNAL AND THE COMMERCIAL

Burning Man is a countercultural grassroots happening that grew out of the Cacophany Society in San Francis, becoming first an event and then an internationally recognized super-event. In the early days of the Burning Man Project, as it is often called by its organizers, event co-founder Larry Harvey used to compare the event to the Internet. The comparison evokes the social media and pre-corporate colonization-like aspects of the early Internet. Like the Internet, it is built up of many individual, decentralized parties. Like the Internet, Burning Man is uncensored and authentic. Like the Internet, Burning Man is hypertextual and intertextual – it connects to many other things: art, design, science, high technology, spirituality, dance, primitivism, utopianism, polytheism, polyamory, Marxism, the survivalist movement, and almost any other social group of gathering containing a whiff of social movement about it. Like Burning Man, the motivation for participation includes interest in social change, enacted through involvement in these major collective projects. And through this involvement, we also hope to learn from and commune with an interesting diverse group of other people who are currently unknown to us, but who come in a similar spirit of giving. *Communitas*. We hunger for it, online and deep down in our bodies. We go out in the desert looking for it. And because it is so hard to find, it is also so precious.

A great sacred quality somehow seems to descend in the miraculously commonplace selfless acts occurring during Burning Man, such as the first moment someone you have never seen before, someone costumed up like a weird clown just for fun to make you smile, runs up to you while you are parched and dry in the 107 degree Black Rock desert heat and hands you a cool blue popsicle. The process channels ancient and sacred *communitas*, almost as a palpable force. Yet we might wonder if acts of *communitas* may be the hardest to transfer over to Internet exchanges. For being at Burning Man is absolutely not the Internet.

‘Abstractions appear as hostile to live contact’ wrote Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (Turner, 1969: 141). The person who would try to do good to another person ‘must do it in Minute Particulars; General Good is the plea of the Hypocrite and the





Scoundrel' said William Blake (Maclagan and Russell, 1907). It may be that some physical quality inheres in direct, embodied, human contact that we do not want to surrender, for to surrender this 'immediatism', as Sufi philosopher Hakim Bey (1994) calls it, this embodiment of human being as contact between embodied human being, is to surrender something vital and essential about our humanness. Perhaps, also, there is some quality immanent in the gift itself. It may be that *communitas* inheres in the generous and selfless act of sharing, whether online or in person. Perhaps it is the gift which breaks us out of the confining and isolating bonds of individuality and selfishness that we tend to associate with modern society and its capitalist marketplaces. Perhaps the gift frees us to emerge into the wider world of creativity and contribution that we still link with communal and social ideals.

The futurist Marina Gorbis sees exactly the same sort of tension between the social and the commercial enacted in the world of social media. She envisions a future that she calls the 'socialstructured' world 'as a way to build a better future by de-institutionalizing production, infusing social ties and human connectedness into our economic life, [and] in the process redefining established paradigms of work, productivity, and value' (Gorbis, 2013: 208). She draws upon a long tradition of theorists, from Ferdinand Tönnies to Lewis Hyde, who have separated the social logics of belonging, togetherness and sharing from those of marketplaces and transactions.

Although most scholars recognize communities as extremely diverse, a certain type of community has often been held up as an ideal. This communal ideal can be characterized as a group of people living in close proximity with mutual social relations characterized by caring and sharing. Tönnies ([1887] 1957) evoked this ideal in his notion of 'Gemeinschaft,' ... The origin of this caring, sharing communal ideal is in the deep trust and interdependence of family relations. Markets are different. The ideal market is seen as more of what Tönnies (1957) termed a 'Gesellschaft' type of phenomenon; it provides more formal, contractual, socially distanced relations. These relations are transactions-based and occur for the purpose of exchange (Weber [1922] 1978; Williamson 1975). In market transactions, the object is to increase one's advantage, to get more than one gives. To simplify the contrast, ideal communities are about caring about and sharing with insiders while ideal markets are about transacting with outsiders. Although both involve power relations and although they are interrelated or embedded in one another (see, e.g., Biggart 1989; Frenzen and Davis 1990; Granovetter 1985), marketplace exchanges focus more than communal exchanges on monetizing the exchange value of goods and services, and extracting excess value, or profits, from transactions. Throughout human history, markets have generally been constrained to particular places, times, and roles, and largely kept conceptually distinct from other important social institutions, such as home and family. With the rise of industrialization and postindustrialization, however, the influence of the market has increasingly encroached upon times, spaces, and roles previously reserved for communal relations. As the self-interested logics of the market have filtered into communal relations, they have been accused of increasingly undermining the realization of the caring, sharing, communal ideal. (Kozinets, 2002b: 21-22)



Along with a number of other scholars, Gorbis (2013: 3–6) believes that social media are creating a new kind of network or relationship-driven economy, where individuals join forces in order to create and share knowledge, services and even products that existing institutions such as corporations, governments and educational establishments are unable or unwilling to provide. According to Gorbis, these technologies are helping individuals create groupings around interests, identities and shared personal challenges. Social structuring is a process of moving away from the depersonalized world of ‘institutional production’ – Big Business, Big Government, and Big Education – into a new economy of social connection and social rewards (ibid.: 3). She sees the new social media technologies as enabling people to coexist simultaneously in both market and social economies and links this idea to philosopher Lewis Hyde’s notion of ‘the Commerce of the Creative Spirit’ (ibid.: 202–203).

In *The Gift*, Hyde (1979) recounts how the inspiration of the artist is widely perceived to be a gift, and, for this inspiration to be maintained, the artist feel the desire, the need, and even the compulsion to make the work and then offer it to an audience at little or no profit: ‘The gift must stay in motion ... So long as the gift is not withheld, the creative spirit will remain a stranger to the economics of scarcity ... [whether it is] salmon, forest birds, poetry, symphonies, or Kula shells ... to bestow one of our creations is the surest way to invoke the next’. Hyde counsels us to give our gifts away, and perpetuate the magic circle of community. Yet, although all cultures and all artists have felt the tension between the moral economy of gift exchange and the transactional pressures of the marketplace, there have been some unique aspects to modern capitalism. Hyde finds, for instance, the exploitation of the arts in modern capitalism to be ‘without precedent’ and their ‘high finance’ approach to create a commodification that diminishes creativity and turns arts into industry.

Drawing on Hyde’s work, media scholars and theorists Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Josh Green also link their ideas about media creation to British historian E.P. Thompson’s (1971) notion of the ‘moral economy’. Their book, *Spreadable Media* (2013), sensitively and adroitly traces the many complications arising from corporate, group, and individual negotiation of the hybrid gift-commercial space of social media. They chastise those who rhetorically embrace an ‘architecture of participation’ online. This stance can naively gloss over the conflict, choices and compromises that are often required of participants. Zwick et al. (2008), as well as Cova and Dalli (2009) also provide critical views of the social media economy of free and exploited labour, casting them as a political form of Foucauldian governmentality, a self-disciplinarily fueled pathway to creating docile, duped and compliantly creative consumers (see also Andrew Keen’s 2007 *The Cult of the Amateur*). Wise from their long engagement with media fan communities, Jenkins et al. (2013: 55) certainly do not go this far. They do, however, caution that ‘it’s crucial not to diminish the many noncommercial logics governing the engaged participation of audience online’ (Jenkins et al., 2013: 55). Their advice is more



about how not to kill, and how to resist theorizing the premature death of the collective geese that keep laying social media's golden eggs.

In netnographic research my co-authors and I conducted on how word of mouth marketing was spread by bloggers in a mobile phone giveaway campaign, we identified in the patterns of word of mouth marketing-receiving blogger narratives the clear presence of a similar type of communal-commercial tension (Kozinets et al., 2010). In such social media-based marketing 'the consumer is required to be a type of consumer–marketer hybrid [and thus] the traditional social contract that maintains marketplace relationships at a distance from communities is violated, creating great tension' (2010: 83). This tension remains dormant in some contexts, but blooms into explicitness in other. A process of translations occurs as a result of the tension. Marketing messages are altered to become more believable, relevant and palatable to the community. As the marketplace interrupted the social experiences of social media users, participants felt compelled to translate and transform 'persuasion oriented, market-generated, sales objective-oriented "hype" [into] relevant, useful, communally desirable social information that builds individual reputations and group relationships' (ibid.).

A precautionary note is sounded by Campbell (2005) in his examination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) online communities. He depicts gay Internet portals openly courting the gay community online with promises of inclusion and an authentic communal experience. However, they also simultaneously reposition gays and lesbians in a commercial panopticon that places them under corporate surveillance. He wonders if 'all commercial portals purporting to serve politically marginalized groups beg the question of whether there can be a harmonious balance between the interests of community and the drives of commerce' (2005: 678; see also Campbell, 2004; Campbell and Carlson, 2002). These are central themes, of import to our understanding as corporate actors like the publicly traded Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter corporations' attempts to further their own interests by increasingly influencing and monetizing people's online social experiences.

On the other hand, Jenkins et al. (2013) describe the many ways that DIY and fan labour is self aware, taking pleasure, gaining capital and esteem and finding many sources of value from the economic outputs that they are contributing towards in social media. Seeing such labour as 'engaged' and even gift-like rather than exploited recognizes that participants 'are pursuing their own interests, connected to and informed by those decisions made by others within their social networks' (Jenkins et al., 2013: 60). Scholars who continue to see the media participant, including the 'engaged' and creative social media participant, as a passive or exploited dupe must confront the evidence that, at least for some people and in some circumstances, such participation provides a panoply of benefits, although these benefits may not include the strictly economic exchanges of the market economy.

Gorbis sees social media as the antidote, the bridge between the two worlds of the social and the commercial. Indeed, Gorbis' ideas are very closely related



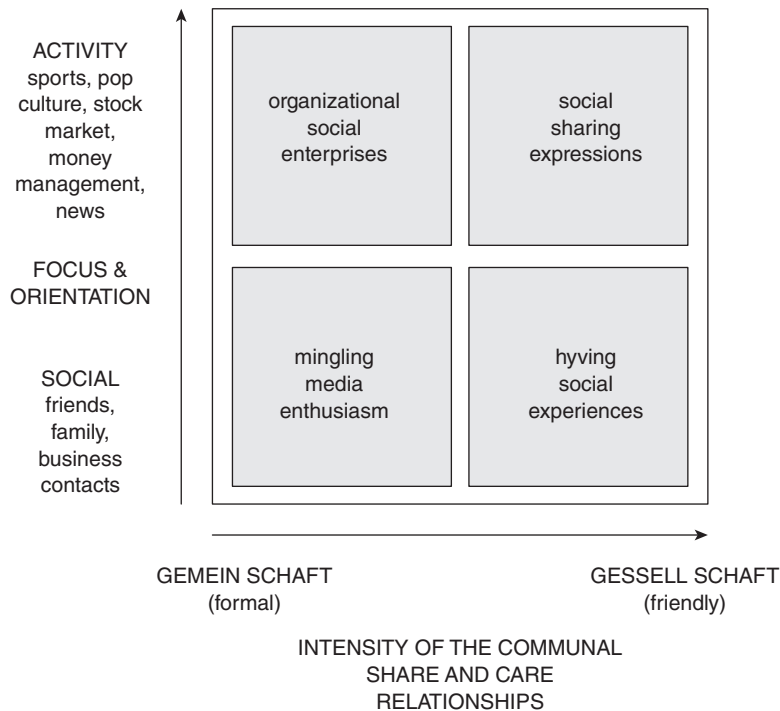
to those of Yochai Benkler, Henry Jenkins and Manuel Castells, although she fails to cite any of them. Yale University law professor Benkler (2006: 117) for instance finds that 'sharing is everywhere in the advanced economies' and that studies on social capital, trust and the social provisioning of public goods 'point to an emerging understanding of social production and exchange as an alternative to markets and firms'. As examples, he gives SETI and Slashdot. Benkler's conclusion is optimistic, arguing that the new network economy of social media provides us with an opportunity to alter the way that 'we create and exchange information, knowledge, a culture. By doing so, we can make the twenty-first century one that offers individuals greater autonomy, political communities greater democracy, and societies greater opportunities for cultural self-reflection and human connection ... [possibly resulting in] a true transformation toward more liberal and egalitarian societies' (Benkler, 2006: 473).

We can postulate a world where the Maker Movement, The Internet of Things and the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence, robots and bots take over much of industrial production and traditional work, and the enormous economies of scope and scale enable massive amounts of things and services to be produced and provisioned by only a few people. The economics of the gathering, the Wikinomics that Don Tapscott and colleagues research and write about (e.g., Moffitt and Dover, 2011; Tapscott and Williams, 2007), also lead to greater and greater efficiencies of scale, and the scope of Chris Anderson's (2008) 'long tail' economies provides more diversity in the marketplace than ever before. Thus, as Gorbis, Hyde, Benkler and these other authors advance, we may increasingly need to turn our collective attention to questions of how the Commerce of creative spirit will play out for us in science, government, media, education, arts, health, tourism, consumption, or any other social domain.

## VARIETIES OF ONLINE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

We can conceptualize different types of online social experience partially by relating them to the type of site in which we find them. For instance, we might expect a social networking site such as Facebook to provide a different type of online social experience than that of a forum like 4Chan, a blog like Mashable, a tagging service like Reddit, or a fan wiki like *The Big Bang Theory*. In the last edition of this book, and based upon earlier work (Kozinets, 1998, 1999), I theorized a more functional 'ideal type' typology of different forms of online sociality, which I now revise and update as represented in Figure 2.1.

This updated typology presumed that the nature of online social relations varies from the intensely personal and deeply meaningful – i.e., *Gemeinschaft*-like caring and sharing communal forms – to those that are quite superficial, short-lasting and relatively insignificant – and more *Gessellschaft*, market-and-transaction oriented exchange. They can also vary from those that are oriented strictly around a



**Figure 2.1** Four ideal types of online social experience in sites

particular activity, such as hydroponic tomato cultivation or discussing *America's Got Talent*, or a location or destination, such as TripAdvisor, to those in which a unifying activity or interest is often completely irrelevant, such as on Facebook.

Although there seems to be a correlation between the type of online site and the type of online social experience (for example, Facebook providing predominantly interpersonal rather than activity-based experiences), there is by no means a perfect correlation. Any site, or type of site, can be used for any purpose. These purposes and exchanges may vary over time even with the same individuals on the same online site. Rather than to suggest any sort of simplistic determinism, when we have found so much evidence to the contrary of such principles already in the lived world of technocultural interaction, the intention of the classification is to draw the netnographer's attention to the type of social experience rather than to propose any technologically overdetermining structural effects of a site, app, or software form on social actors' agency. The four proposed ideal types of online social experience are mingling, bonding, sharing and organizing. I explain each type of experience in turn.

An experience that one has online in interactions or information receptions or exchanges that are socially weaker or only for business or necessity, such as the proverbial person-clerk interaction at a retail checkout counter, might



be known as a *mingling media enthusiasm*. Twitter experiences can often be like this, and Facebook or LinkedIn is like this when we meet new people or have the opportunity to find or otherwise electronically experience other people. Particular virtual worlds, chat-rooms, and certain gamespaces provide this mingling social experience. They tend to satisfy people's relatively superficial, short-lived and weak tie 'relational' and 'recreational' need; they are consocial more than communal experiences.

Online social experiences that can create strong social ties between members, resulting in more meaningful or longer-lasting relationships, but where the participants are not firmly or lastingly focused on a shared or unifying focal activity, purpose, project or interest, might be termed *hyving social experiences*. Social networking sites such as Facebook, dating sites like OKCupid, communications apps like WhatsApp or Tinder, and virtual worlds like Second Life can often provide this type of online social experience and fulfil their members' relational needs.

A third type of online social experience is online interaction for the express purpose of sharing targeted information, news, stories, images, photos, jokes, expertise, information and techniques about some particular activity or interest which is the *raison d'être* of the interaction. These are *sharing social expressions*. Many blogs like TMZ or the Huffington Post, wikis such as Wikia or Wiktionary, newsgroups such as alt.coffee, website forums, social content rating and tagging services like Digg or Reddit, photo and video-sharing communities like Instagram, Vine or YouTube would all be loci of such sharings. They offer participants and readers a bank of shared content, but not necessarily the promise of a deep engagement in social relationships. The modes of interaction on these communities are predominantly consocial and friendly, consisting of broadcast-to-person, shared, rebroadcast or peer-to-peer based exchanges of content and information.

Finally, we have online social experiences that offer a chance to create social ties between people as well as focusing on sharing information and intelligence about some central, unifying interest, project, theme or activity. These experiences I term *organizational social enterprises*. Although blogs, wikis, Social networking sites (SNS) interest groups and other forms of online gatherings certainly can and often are used as *organizational social enterprises*, I have seen many more of these experiences grow from microblogs such as Twitter, meeting sites such as Meetup.com or the group function of sites such as LinkedIn, website forums, evolved zines such as Boing Boing, user-based creative communities such as devoted websites and projects such as *Star Trek Phase II* (see Kozinets, 2007). A good example is provided by open source software experience in all of its various manifestations, such as slashdot (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt, 2006). The mode of interaction in these gatherings is supportive, informational, content-based and also can be relational. Our understanding of these different social types can now be enhanced by a deeper understanding of the types of social structures that pervade the Internet.



## Analysing Social Network Structures

An interesting and useful technique to incorporate into netnography for understanding these types of social relations is social network analysis. It is neither necessary nor would it be desirable for all netnographers to adopt social network analysis techniques in their studies. However, netnographers would be wise to familiarize themselves, at least on a basic level, with social network analysis techniques, procedures and general research findings. This is especially important for the many scholars who are conducting what I will, in later chapters, refer to as conducting Digital Netnographies. Although we will overview the technique in more detail in the next chapter, a fundamental understanding of the technique is useful for understanding some of the concepts and theory that this chapter will proceed to present.<sup>3</sup>

Social network analysis is an analytical method that focuses on the structures and patterns of relationships between and among social actors in a network (Berkowitz, 1982; Wellman, 1988). In social network analysis, there are two main units of analysis. The social actors we are interested in are called the 'nodes' and the relation between them is called the 'tie'. A network is composed of a set of actors connected by a set of relational ties. The actors can be persons, teams, organizations, technologies, non-human actors like bots, ideas, messages, products, cities or other concepts. Examples of ties would include sharing information, an economic transaction, transfer of resources, shared associations or affiliations, sexual relations, physical connections, sharing ideas or values, and so on (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). A group of people who are connected by particular social relationships, such as family kinship, friendship, working together, a shared hobby or common interest, or exchanging any sort of information, can be considered to be a social network.

Social network analysis has its foundations in sociology, sociometrics and graph theory, and in the structural-functionalist line of 'Manchester anthropologists, who built on both of these strands to investigate the structure of "community" relations in tribal and village societies' (Scott, 1991: 7). Social network analysis thus deals in relational data and, although it is possible to quantify and statistically analyse these relations, network analysis also 'consists of a body of qualitative measures of network structure' (Scott, 1991: 3). There is, thus, a very natural relationship between a structural approach to ethnography, or netnography, and the approach of social network analysis.

Over the last 35 years, the social network analysis approach to research has grown rapidly in sociology and communication studies, and has spread to a range of other fields.

Social networking analysts seek to describe networks of relations as fully as possible, tease out the prominent patterns in such networks, trace the flow of information (and other resources) through them, and discover what effects these relations and networks have on people and organizations. (Garton et al., 1999: 75)



Social network analysis is structural. Its unit of analysis is the relationship, and what it finds interesting in relationships are their patterns. There is, therefore, considerable overlap with certain kinds of netnography, which can be focused upon relationships and the structured patterns of exchanges of things like language, symbols, discourse, values, power, and other symbolic and material resources. Social network analysts consider the various resources that are exchanged in communications between people online, and these can include communications which are textual, graphical, animated, audio, photographic or audiovisual, and can include sharing information, discussing work-related rumours, sharing advice, giving emotional support or providing companionship (Haythornthwaite et al., 1995). Netnographers also consider those resources, viewing them in and from various and overlapping contexts, which might include as multiple and shared sources of significance and also as bearers of interpersonal connection.

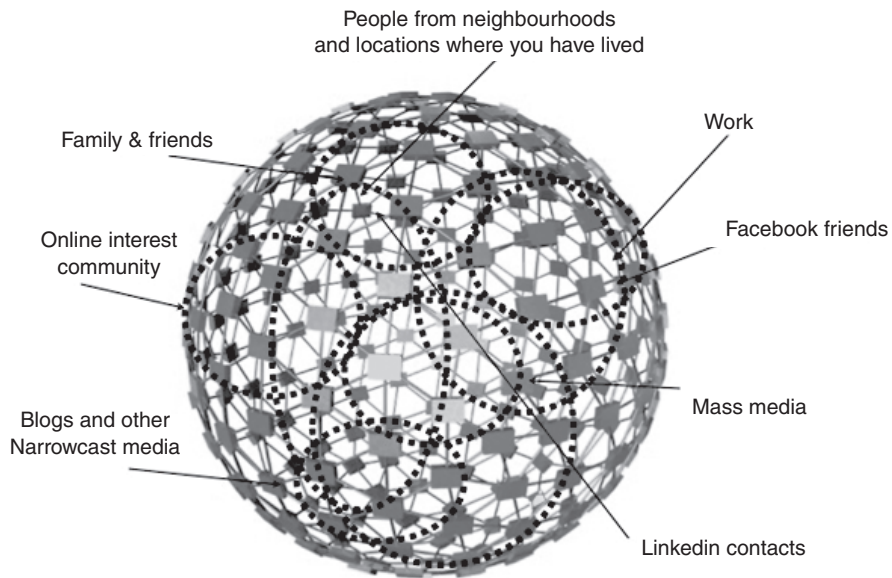
There are many opportunities for synergies between the structural analysis of social networks and the more identity-, story-, discourse- and meaning-centred analyses of netnography. Consider as a nuancing adjunct to the mingling, bonding, sharing and organizing functional types of online social experience, the following ways to think about the social structures present within the social media forms that netnographers aim to understand and explain. We consider several important and influential ideal types of online social experiences in the following section.

## **SOCIAL UNIVERSES AND NETWORK ARCHETYPES**

There are many ways to conceptualize the universe of social media forms in order to gain a basic and simplified view of the many types of connection that people have with one another online. Two essential and interrelated ways that people connect with one another is socially and through topics. In social network-based research that analysed the maps of thousands of different Twitter conversations and their related social exchange patterns, a 2014 Pew Internet report identifies six archetypal forms of network structure that emerged from the way people shared topics and messages with one another: polarized crowds, tight crowds, brand clusters, community clusters, broadcast networks and support networks (Smith et al., 2014). These six distinctive structures are not intended to be exhaustive. However, they inform us about the various forms that online sociality can take, depending upon the topic of the conversation, the type of the connections between individual actors in the network, the information sources and other resources (for communication also leads to access) that are used, the precise kinds of computer, corporate, transactional and social networks that are involved, and the leaders of the conversation, the structure of the conversation as well.

If possible, please change top sign to 'People from neighbourhoods and locations where you have lived'





**Figure 2.2** Your personal social network core

In Figure 2.2, I use these structures to think about the way that individuals can connect with one other. The centre of Figure 2.2 is a particular individual's online social network, which link them socially to friends, family and co-workers, many of whom they already know personally, but also more distantly to organizations and interest groups who they may not know in person. That is the blue central circle, a core.

Relationships in these communities can assume different structures and shapes depending upon the nature of these conversations and their different social experiences. These experiences vary in their social and consocial characteristics. They can be unified, fragmented, divided, polarized or clustered in their dispersion and arrangement, as we visualize them. The network becomes its visualization, and the visualization of networks can quickly be acted out on the human social stage, when that stage is online.

Two are highly centralized, appearing with hub and spoke lines. In the first, the lines go inwards, towards the broadcaster, for this is an audience model. It is the structure that people assume when they are audiencing something. They do it in groups, in couples and individually. Each is qualitatively different, of course, and requires a human interpretation, but they are also all an audience. They are all sharing information they see on the screen, treated with the voyeur's gaze, the screen gaze that my co authors and I (Kozinets et al., 2004) saw in ESPN Zone in retail themed Mag Mile Chicago circa 2002. Online, think of a powerful broadcast network like BBC World News. It is powerful, it has influence because it is being linked



to by many individuals and groups, and then shared among them. They comment on it, of course, in Twitter. Some have a lot of person-to person interaction, and others do not. People can have many types of social connections as well as topical connections, and at many times the two will interact. Twitter tends to simplify so we can see the basic structures. In reality, with other media like Facebook, we will likely see more complex hybrid forms of audience and network structure.

Figure 2.3 is a riff upon Smith et al. (2014), a reconceptualization that alters names, labels and even definitions while seeking to portray some dimensionalization and classification. This Figure offers a typologization on the theoretical ideal level of the complexity and diversity of interaction in the online universe of social experience. We can look to connect to resources like information, service, material connections, cultural resources, styles and identities for our identity projects, props for our life roles, brands to show where we belong. When we look for resources we can either become an audience, or we can ask for help. These two are collectively expressed, for they are common between individuals; they are the Audience and Customer Support Network forms. The following points describe these six forms trapped in two dimensions in Figure 2.3.

### Resource Connections: Audience and Customer Support Networks

*Audience networks* possess a distinctive structure based upon the re-broadcasting of major news and media organizational information. The Twitter network forms into an audience shape when it re-tweets breaking news stories and the output of well-known media outlets and pundits. Most members of the Broadcast Network audience are not really conducting conversations between one another, which is why their level of intercommunication is low. But some are gathering through their audiencing, there is no doubt of this either.

*So they are more than a network, acting, instead, as conduits.* They themselves become like information distributors, intermediaries who bring the fresh news from one high, and then distribute it to their immediate network, socially. Instead of everyone buying a newspaper, or a specialty newsletter, or the various information sources people used to use, or everyone watching television, these people act as conduits and value-adding media re-broadcast channels. They transfer, and probably sometimes translate, news and information from major media outlets to their own more immediate and localized ones. The cynosure of all ears and eyes is the retweeting re-broadcaster. Smaller subgroups of densely connected people – which Pew's people termed 'subject groupies' – hang out repeatedly holding conversations with one another about the news.

*Audiences can be very disconnected from one another.* They link only to the hub news source. Yet there are others, some who form discussion groups based on the news,

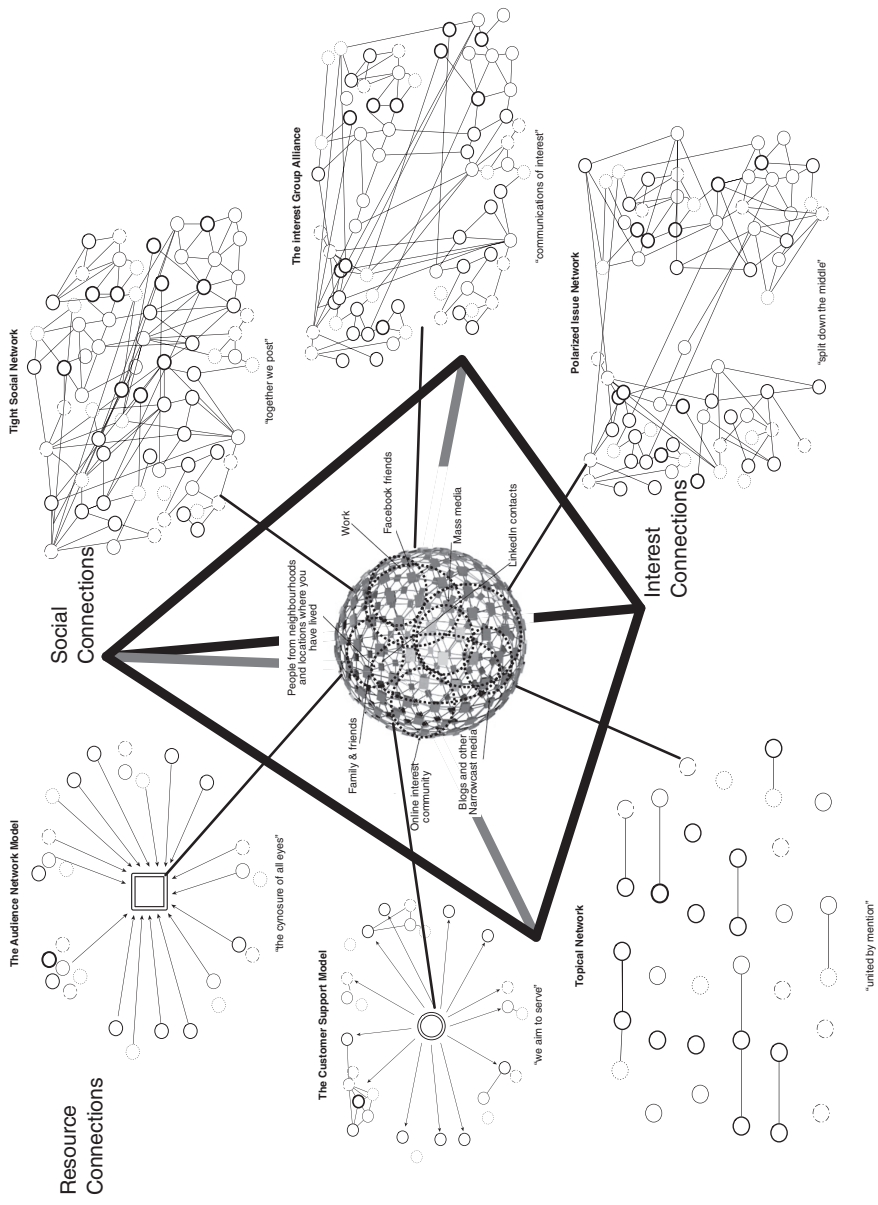


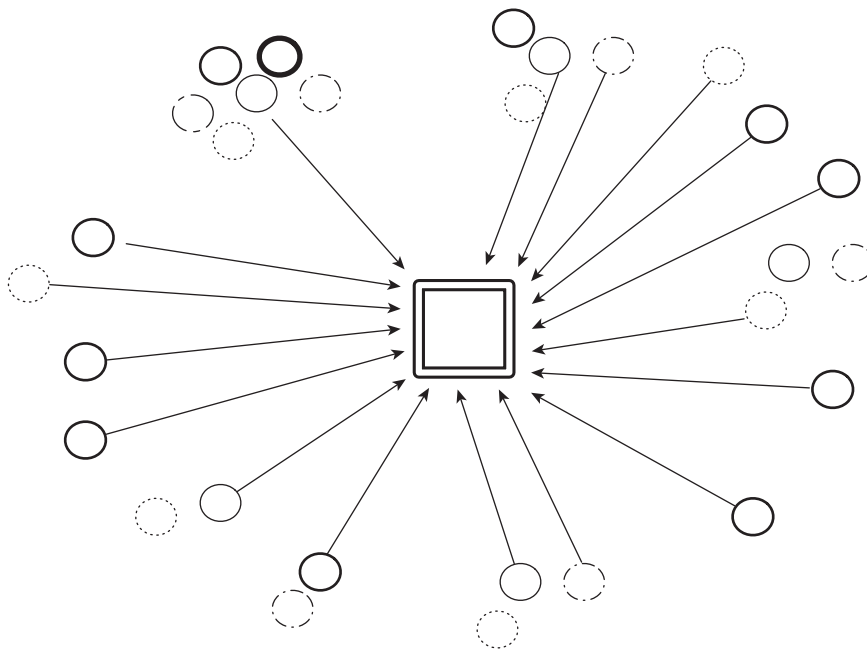
Figure 2.3 Social types of networks



some who do this regularly. So there is no true ideal form, there are only tendencies. And in this underdetermined tendency, the network assumes the shape we see in Figure 2.4. The one central account, the one information resource distributor, which is the agency like the BBC or CNN.com, becomes the hub, and the many spokes are audiences and individual audience members. They are all reaching in to contact CNN or whoever the resource is, and to then share it with their networks.

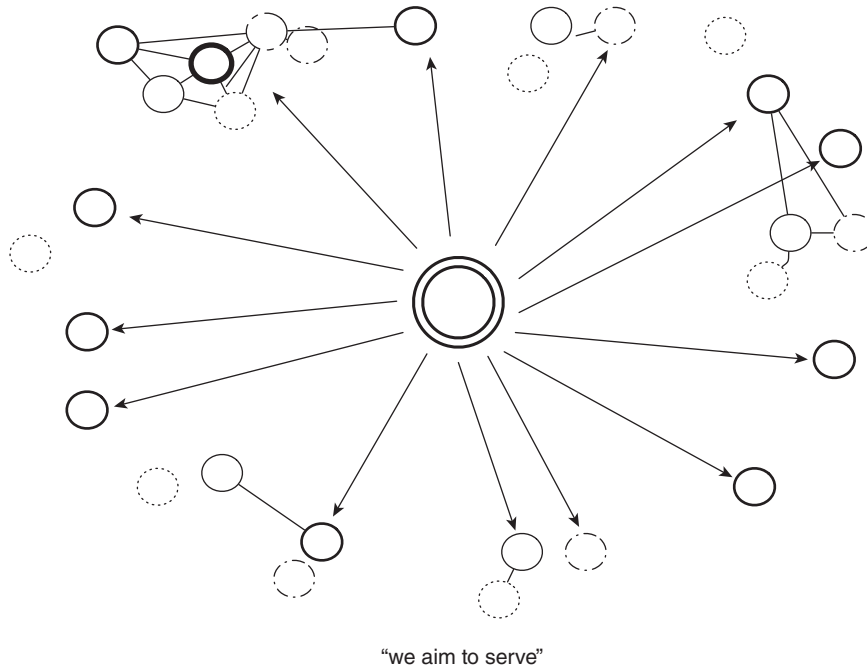
*Customer support networks* are also surveillance networks, where one central agent monitors and responds to the transmissions of network members. Customer support networks are the product of so-called ‘social care’ customer service and support exchanges; Yes, My Name is Robert may I help you? type calls. In this case, it is the company calling the person. Hello, I overheard you complaining about my company. Is there something bothering you about my company that I can help you with? The shape that is assumed as customer complaints lodged against major businesses become handled by corporate customer service representatives is the one we see in Figure 2.5.

The contacts are outbound. The one hub connects outward to the individuals it is monitoring. This form becomes increasingly important as government, businesses, and other groups such as non-profits and NGOs try to provide centralized services and support through social media and also to reach out very close



“the cynosure of all eyes”

**Figure 2.4** The audience network model



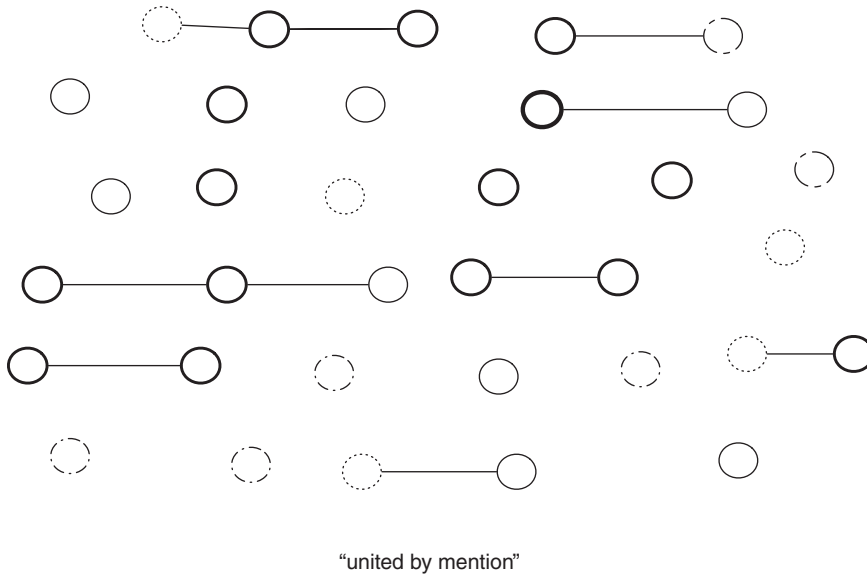
**Figure 2.5** The customer support (and consumer surveillance) network

and learn as much as possible about people, since data is so cheap about people and easy to sort, and acting on it for fundraising, sales and volunteer networks is incredibly important and fairly easy to do now with social media.

### Connections of Interest: Topical and Polarized Issue Networks

Another important source of connection is the sharing of particular interests. If I do not know you, and you do not know me, but we both use the same hashtag #JohnOliverForPresident, then we share something. If we know each other only through some topic, and that topic is very polarized, a type of us-versus-them arrangement exists where your beliefs determine very quickly whether you will feel comfortable on one side of this issue rather than the other. These connections are both full of mutual interest, as we will explore in the following sections.

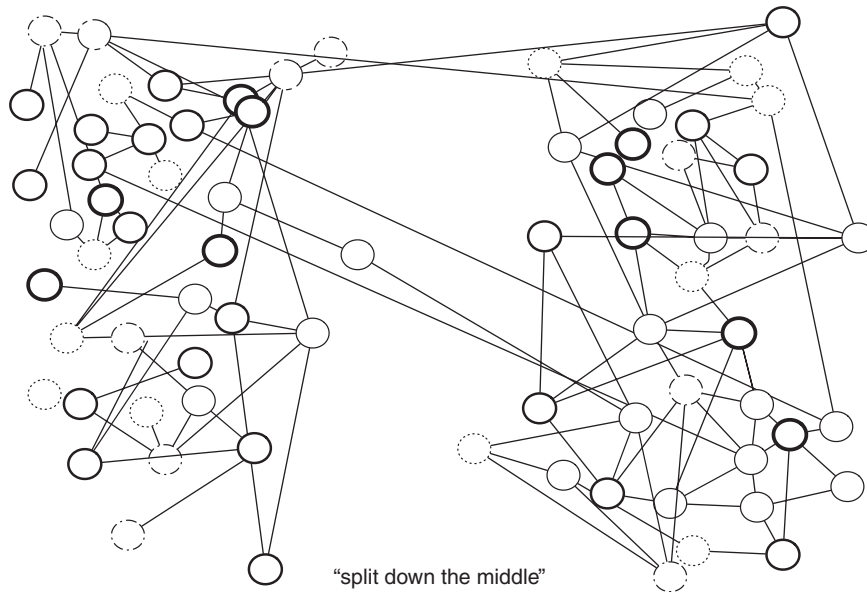
*Topical network clusters* is the shape assumed by a social network when a non-interactive type of conversation occurs about the same topic, conducted by many disconnected participants. This is the form assumed when established products and services, such as Apple technology products, and media and sports celebrities are discussed on Twitter. Examples would include Tweets about things such as a goal in World Cup soccer, or the introduction of a new iPad by Apple. The larger was the population discussing such a topic, the less likely that the participants



**Figure 2.6** Topical cluster network

were connecting to one another. This form stands in stark contrast to Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) theorized notion of the ‘brand community’ that brings people together through shared conversations about a brand. Instead, the participants in brand clusters broadcast information about a topic without really connecting in a communal way with one another. Often, this information is a simple re-broadcast (in this case a retweet) of corporate or institutional information, advertising or publicity. Unlike the participants in the tight or polarized crowd social form, they do not have much in the way of a continuing conversation with one another.

*Polarized issue networks are connected, tight, and unified together*; however, they are divided and partisan with one other large group (see Figure 2.7). They feature two large and densely interconnected groups that have little connection flowing between them. When topics were divisive and related to heated political subjects, such as European EU-led immigration policies, the social network assumed this form. As indicated by the slight interconnection between the groups, these groups do not argue directly with one another. Even though they are talking about the same topic, they ignore each other, like two large and independent continents, or they reference them mockingly, or mock their hashtags. Generally, they point to different web resources and use different hashtags. They build their own separate sets of resources. In the Pew study, liberal groups in the United States tended to link to mainstream media sources, while conservatives linked to a different set of resources. We could think about parallels among Facebook groups, blogs or websites. For example, conversations on the two-climate change websites [ucsusa.com](http://ucsusa.com)



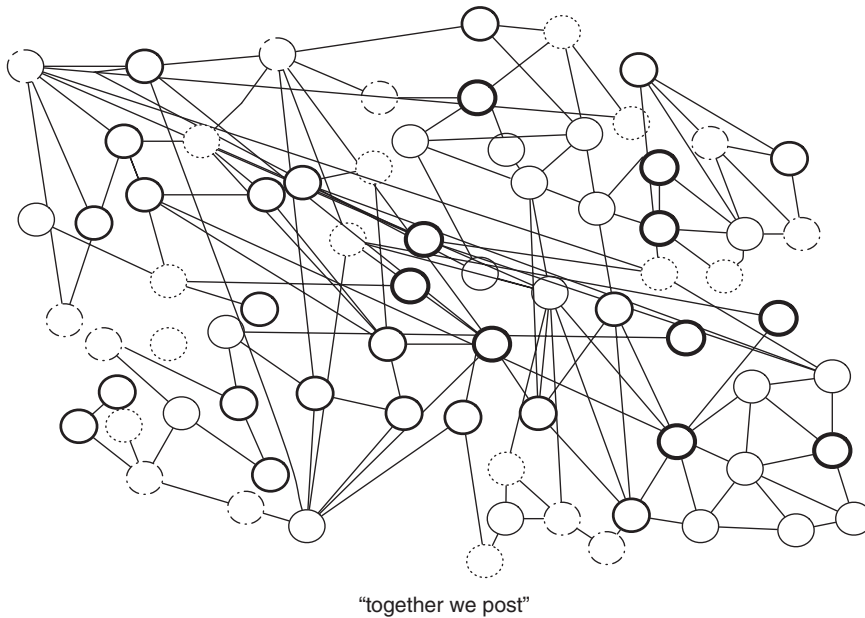
**Figure 2.7** Polarized issue network

(the Union of Concerned Scientists) and [skepticalscience.com](http://skepticalscience.com) also are likely to contain polarized crowds. The form is almost built into the Internet in some cases.

### Social Connections: Tight Social Networks and Interest Group Alliances

Finally, we catch two of the most social of the social forms of online connection, interaction and experience. When people want to interact with one another about something they all feel strongly about, then we can say this is a tight network, with lots of interconnections, almost impossibly close and interlinked. Another way that this can happen, certainly not different or exclusive from tight social networks, but even possibly like a broadening out of that field, is that the group you are in is people you know well, and that group is joined by others you don't know as well, and your group is linked to many other similar groups in many different locations which you do not even know. But you all share resources and you have opportunities to connect. We should be, in such cases, far more interested in the hierarchies and power-interest-resource access related structures of these arrangements. Rarely are they far from political and corporate interests and projects. Yet their emancipatory power, and enablement of activism and alternative ideologies is almost now without its sceptics.

*Tight social networks are composed of the most highly interconnected people with very few isolated participants* (see Figure 2.8). Tight crowds look much more like the traditional

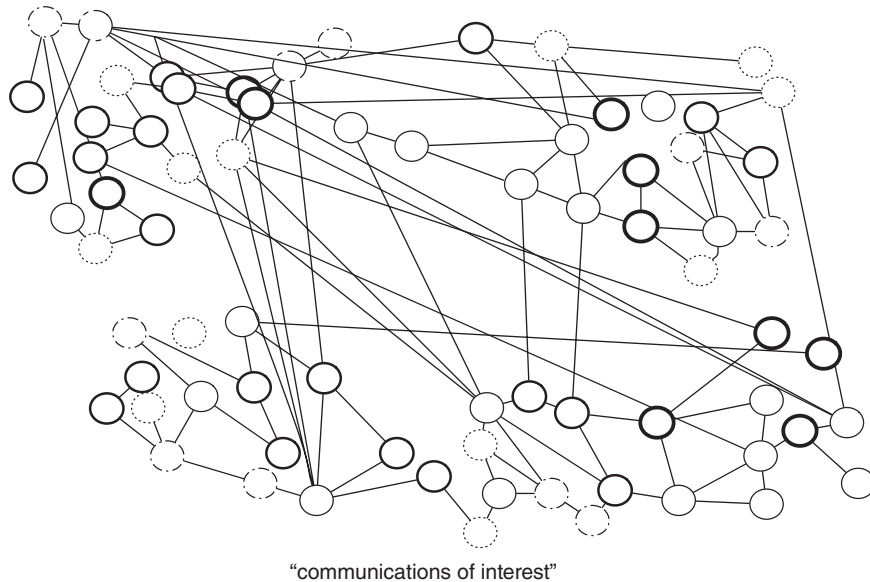


**Figure 2.8** Tight social networks

definition of 'online communities' than many of the other forms. They conduct large and open conversations about similar topics, responding to one another in a form that resembles the coherent threads of a newsgroup or forum. The ties between people indicate mass and widespread practices of sharing and mutual support provision. Online versions of conferences, professional topics, hobbies, interests, media and sports fan groups, and other subjects that attract large amounts of common interest assume the form of the tight social network. It mimics in many ways family, kinship and friend structures. A tight social network could also happen in particular workplaces. Tight networks are tight networks, and it may be that different networks have begun substituting for one another: work for religion, friends for family, hobbies for neighbourhoods, and so on.

*Interest group alliance networks are more complex forms in which popular and widely shared topics unite multiple smaller groups.* Each of these groups forms around a few social hubs. Each of these hubs has its own largely separate audience, set of influencers and sources of information. They generally form for a little while when people have interest in something, then they dissipate. Interest group alliance networks have multiple centres of activity. They are not as unified as the tight social network. However, a relatively small number of people are in those multiple centres, responsible for an inordinately disproportionate amount of social media activity. The conversations surrounding major global news stories, such as the recent coverage of the missing Air Malaysia flight 370 are the sort of interest groups that arise, bubbling up from the underground, to last for a while, their





**Figure 2.9** Interest group alliance network

stories stoked by mainstream news and information outlets, national, local, global and different interested communities, such as travellers, Chinese expatriates, engineers, conspiracy theorists, and so on. Each of these groups has its own following, which is long lasting but shifts from topic to topic. This network is a portrait of that topic. Thus, revealing the multiplicity of conversations and viewpoints on a single topic shared through social media, a collection of medium-sized groups will manifest along with a fair number of isolates.

Several relevant patterns and ideas are present in this research to help us understand our topics. For example, studying a single large online site dedicated to climate change denial, such as Skeptical Science, may be sufficient in order to illuminate the topic of climate change denial sites, their functions, processes, structures and roles. Such a site would likely have much in common with interest groups or tight social networks.

However, to understand the ideological ecosystem in which such a site operates, you would likely need to broaden out to other sites or locations of information. You then might find the site partaking in the polarized issue form. It could be that the audience network model is being formed. Netnographers may need to shift their discernment of online experiences from notions of communities to those of particular network structures which govern repeat interactions that are topically, temporally and locally based. Whether we should be studying one single site, several interconnected site, one person as the centre for many site-lines, or a set of many sites is another important research question. We will consider this question of research questions much further in Chapter 5.



Studying the findings of social network analyses such as this one tells us a lot about the structure we are dealing with. Knowing the structure is very helpful to seeing the bigger picture. We, through these shapes and structures, see the continued, perhaps amplified, influence of major broadcast media. The continuing social media significance of corporate actors such as advertisers, public relations people, celebrity endorsers and customer service personnel is an indication about where the true power centres of the network reside.

The findings underscore hierarchy. Online ‘influentials’ are a powerful force given superpowers by the Internet. Everett Rogers identified the importance of the offline variety of the influential market agent years ago. But now it is virtually unlimited how many people one person can reach out towards.

Caroline Haythornthwaite (2005: 140) notes how technological change is merging with what she calls ‘social mechanisms’. Ongoing online social interactions conducted in forms such as interest group clusters and polarized issue networks can help turn strangers into friends. Trusting relationships, linked to strong social ties, are relevant to understanding and planning the online provision of many types of public information. Other uses include facilitating: peer exchanges such as couchsurfing’s hospitality exchange service; economic exchanges such as eBay’s trust-dependent online marketplace; social activism such as Greenpeace’s campaign against Nestlé; and political campaign management, such as the much-studied 2008 social media for American President Barack Obama. Materializing within all of these forms, and all of the structures we have just examined, is a predominant tendency that our next section treats in some detail.

## THE THEORY OF NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

As we continue considering theory about the Internet’s impact on social groupings, we must consider the research findings of University of Toronto Professor Barry Wellman. Wellman (2001: 2031) convincingly argues that ‘computer networks are inherently social networks’ and that, as computer networks proliferated, we find ourselves in a network society that is ‘loosely bounded and sparsely knit’. Wellman’s influential notions are based in his social network analyses of Internet and computer network data. They parallel, detail, enrich and inform the understanding of core concepts of culture, community, individuals and participation articulated above. Wellman, along with a range of colleagues, has been developing the idea of ‘networked individualism’ since before most scholars had heard about the Internet. His ideas have been adopted by other major Internet scholars such as the influential Internet philosopher, Manuel Castells (1996). Castells articulated further the potential for social media to enable and enhance people’s individualistic tendencies in the new society of technologically mediated networks that he viewed as the new basic unit of human society (Castells, 1996).

According to Wellman’s co-authored book with noted Internet scholar and researcher Lee Rainie (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 11), networked individualism is



a shift in people's social lives 'away from densely knit family, neighbourhood, and group relationships toward more far-flung, less-tight, more diverse personal networks'. Coming as a result of the social network, Internet and mobile 'revolutions', networked individualism means that 'people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members'. Members of a family may now act more like participants of multiple networks – only one of which is the family – than solely or primarily as members of that family. Their home may no longer be mainly a place where they congregate together as a family and pursue common family activities. Instead it becomes more of a base for their individual networking with the outside world, with each family member maintaining their own separate personal computer, mobile phone, set of contacts, and so on. Wellman's results and examples illustrate a shift to the sort of more fluid, open and individual-centred conceptions of culture and community espoused by anthropologists Amit and Rapport (2002) and reviewed in Chapter 1 of this book.

From Rainie and Wellman (2012: 12–18) we can reiterate the following 12 principles regarding networked individualism:

1. Networked individuals increasingly meet social, emotional and economic needs by tapping into dispersed networks of diverse associates instead of relying on more intimate connections with a relatively small number of core associates.
2. Networked individuals maintain partial membership in many networks or social groups and rely less on permanent membership in established groups.
3. Technology is accelerating the trend toward networked individualism by accelerating the growth, accessibility and diversification of these kinds of networks.
4. The Internet is the new neighbourhood, increasingly containing some of the networked individual's most important social contacts.
5. Networked individuals are empowered by the Internet to project their vision and voice to extended audiences, and invite them to become a part of their social world.
6. The lines between communication, information and action have become increasingly blurred as networked individuals use the Internet, mobile phones and social networks to instantly get information and act upon it.
7. Networked individuals move easily between relationships and social settings to construct their own complex identities, depending on their passion, beliefs, lifestyles, professional associations, work interests, hobbies, media habits, subcultural inclinations and other personal characteristics.
8. Less formal, more fluctuating and more specialized peer-to-peer relationships are more easily sustained at work, and the benefits of hierarchical boss-subordinate relationships are less obvious.
9. Home and work are far more intertwined than in the past.
10. The public and private spheres of life are far more intertwined than in the past.
11. New expectations and realities are emerging regarding the transparency, availability and privacy of people.
12. In this new era of less hierarchy, more information and looser relationships, there is greater uncertainty than ever before about which information sources to believe and who to trust.



And yet, as with all matters human social, there is balance. Although extremely helpful to recognize that the rise of the network society is enabling a form of networked individualism, we also must attend to the many ways that people are also using that technology to build new social forms. Our concluding section to this chapter provides a brief overview that reorients us in this connective direction.

## TECHNOGENESIS

Technogenesis is the idea that human beings and our technologies coevolve together. Paleoanthropologists have long accepted that human beings coevolve with their tools, for example, bipedalism and more flexible opposable digitry coevolved along with tool manufacture and transportation (Hayles, 2012: 10). As we change our human, social and physical environment through technology, our technological environment also changes us, selecting people who are more capable of succeeding within it. Netnography is intellectually emplaced within this study of coevolving human-technology transformation and adaptation.

As more researchers conduct ethnographies of online social experiences, we learn just how much – and how little – these phenomena are changing society. Coleman's (2010: 489) comments are pertinent in this regard: 'The presumption that digital technologies are the basis of planetary transformations is widespread, but unfounded'. There is no question that these technologies and their online social experiences have massive scale and global reach, and that global financial capital, national intelligence agencies, and transnational corporations are deeply involved in their production, maintenance and inner workings. Yet it is also easy to overstate technology's impact in, say, 'producing a shared subjectivity or a wholly new sensorium, still less a life world that might characterize a vast population', such as with the use of the term 'digital native' (Coleman, 2010: 490).

Online sociality and consociality reveal both the 'modern' and the 'postmodern' condition: the constant appearance of flux, movement, speed, change and progress. We see this progress as technological change – a constant dynamic in our human world. New hardware, new software, new abilities to communicate, entertain, inform, broadcast, listen and learn. Our world has become one of never-ending adaptation, ever-increasing rates of change. Our netnographic investigations, although clearly cognizant of the reality that digital technologies 'have cultivated new modes of communication and selfhood; reorganized social perceptions and forms of self-awareness; and established collective interests, institutions, and life project' (ibid.), must also be sceptical of claims of widespread change and the autonomous and overdetermining power of technology and digital media. In some cases, as Miller and Slater (2000) discovered, digital technologies facilitate social reproduction, reinforcing a tendency to favour old and the comfortable views of self and culture over novel ones. Sometimes, it may be that the forms of living change, but the ways of life remain the same.

Studies of online social experience reveal how our existing worlds of human relationships, work relationships and structures of power are reinforced, extended,



developed and changed. As technological systems change, human systems adapt, and institutional arrangements shift. Netnography has helped reveal how rating services, such as those of TripAdvisor, create a new accounting system online. Social media networks are assemblages that become plugged into extant social norms and systems that inspire trust and interpersonal connection; they can thus rapidly assume a role in decision-making that was previously accorded to institutional actors (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). Netnographies of social experiences online inform us about alterations in our core notions of self – the heart of the psychological atom. Lysloff (2003) is cautiously optimistic about the online social experience's expressionistic, exhibitionistic and existential impacts on our individual lives as human beings. She relates online experience to the postmodern notion of the fragmented, multiple self as well as to a Situationist sense of voice:

When we go online, the computer extends our identity into a virtual world of disembodied presence, and at the same time, it also incites us to take on other identities. We lurk in, or engage with, on-line lists and usenet groups that enable different versions of ourselves to emerge dialogically. The computer, in this way, allows for a new kind of performativity, an actualization of multiple and perhaps idealized selves through text and image. (Lysloff, 2003: 255)

Online social experiences possess a paradoxical quality that simultaneously liberates and constrains. They reveal tensions between powerful commercial structures and the communal forms that they promote. They tell us about the promotion of cultural transformation and the creation of change agents. Investigations expand into activism, as social media for social change become a matter increasingly on the transnational agenda. In their study of YouTube videos about the Israeli navy interception of the Gaza-bound flotilla, Sumiala and Tikka (2013) find that:

YouTube served as a platform where various operators had the opportunity to construct their meanings of reality and where the emphasis shifted from journalism-centered to user-centered, from monological to plural, from media houses to grassroots-level citizen journalists and/or activist groups, and from journalism of facts to journalism of attachment and events (see also Boczkowski, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2010) ... YouTube also gave ordinary people the opportunity to tell their own story, to raise their own individual voices, and to share their accounts of that reality on the same platform (p. 330).

As the following chapters will explore through multiple examples, the truth of many netnographies lies in this notion of maintaining, even amplifying, the power of the story. The way that stories intertwine with other stories in the process of people interconnecting with one another through online social experiences is a thread that runs through word of mouth to oral history and tradition to the study of folklore. Folklorist Anders Gustavsson (2013) studied memorial sites on the Internet for the deceased in Sweden and in Norway. He performs a culturally comparative netnography that uses a collection of individuals' online social expressions about



life-after-death and any supernatural beliefs surrounding death to comparatively analyse the two national cultures.

The messages posted on the websites are both shorter and less emotional in Norway than in the case of their counterparts in Sweden, who observe more a diffuse, general religiosity that reminds us of New Age modes of thought, in which individuals and the brightness of a coming existence have a prominent position. In Sweden people tend to regard what is new as being positive, to focus on cheerful events. Life's darkest moments can be given a brighter shape. In this respect, Norway can be seen as being more realistic in its preservation of older traditions and in not merely rejecting life's darker sides without further discussion. (Gustavsson, 2013: 113-114)

Because of the interactions of social media and the Internet, so many aspects of our life change – even the social experience of death. Manuel Castells (1996: 31) wrote that the novel form of the technologically mediated network society is 'fundamentally altering the way we are born, we live, we sleep, we produce, we consume, we dream, we fight, or we die'. It is as if the force of evolution itself has turned its full attention to the digital realm, more than happy to use technology to run human social lives in fast forward and thereby reveal to us an endlessly shifting new wardrobe of diverse social experiences. And whether those costumes are comfortable or awkward, the changes to our way of being strong or weak, easily outnumbered by embodied experiences or at times absolutely overpowering and intimidating, they require our careful study and critical attention.

In 1997, Grant McCracken wrote, in a creatively masterful gem called *Plenitude* (1997: 17–18), that 'Our diversity is the plenitude of society. What Plato found astounding was the sheer number of plants and animals in the world. This book is concerned with the sheer number and variety of social species'. McCracken (1997: 18) could have been predicting the future of social media companies, types of social experience, types of online experience, or types of interactions with people mediated by technology, when he wrote:

It overflows even the most agile of our classificatory schemes. We may enjoy a moment's illusion that the world has been restored to order. And then we look around us. Everywhere there is diversity, variety, heterogeneity. And we wonder: what set of categories can comprehend so many species of social life? What typology will embrace them all?

The Internet has increased social diversity, for it makes individualism, particularly patterned individualism, incredibly easy to share, particularly in the current market-driven milieu's bottomless hunger for new styles, trends and change. These changes and styles, and the structures and sites that form them, cry out for taxonomizing. Historical thinking and analysis, comparison of taxonomic forms of human practice and their evolution so vital to ethnography, have also thus far been largely absent from netnographies (including my own), perhaps because the field and what it deals with are still so very new. I would hope that upcoming studies, informed by this book, would rectify this sin of omission.



## SUMMARY

Our discursive dive into extant theory on online sociality has taken us from cultural conceptions to archetypes of network structure. On the cultural side, we have moved from technoculture to technogenesis, through ethnographic approaches, sociality and cultural-communal hybridizations and divides. We conceptualize four ideal types of online social experience and relate them to a variety of extant social media sites, which are also contexts for our research. After this we move into structural types of understandings of online interaction. We outline and overview social network analysis in order to provide the six archetypes of network structure. Finally, we close with a full discussion and incorporation of networked individualism, which plays into our development of more introspective, and even auto-, netnography through this book. Networked individualism's 12 principles follow to introduce the end to a chapter that offers a cultural network theory backbone to the social interactions and structures of online experience.

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- Smith, Marc A., Lee Rainie, Ben Shneiderman and Itai Himelboim (2014) 'Mapping Twitter topic networks: From polarized crowds to community clusters', Pew Internet & American Life Project, 20 February. Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/20/mapping-twitter-topic-networks-from-polarized-crowds-to-community-clusters/> (accessed 15 October 2014).

## NOTES

1. For detail on these many mystically founded technology predictions and the relation between technology and mysticism more generally, I highly recommended Erik Davis' excellent 1998 book *Technosis*.
2. And this might be why we are so quick to call things 'community' that are often little more than a set of temporary, obligatory, opportunistic social practices.
3. Relatedly, we have computationally assisted visualization being used within the field of Digital Humanities, and most certainly just as much within the visual arts. This is the idea of 'digital forensics' from work such as Matthew Kirschenbaum's physical book called *Mechanisms: New Media and Digital Forensics* (2008). As Hayles (2012: 32) notes, 'The idea is to bring to digital methods the same materialist emphasis of bibliographic study, using microscopic (and occasionally even nanoscale) examination of digital objects and codes to understand their histories, contexts, and transmission pathways.'