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New Media Society 2007; 9; 625

DOI: 10.1177/1461444807076972

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Interactive online journals and individualization

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Abstract

Suggestions that the internet has facilitated existing trends towards the increasing disconnection of individuals from substantive communities have been balanced by a variety of empirical case studies demonstrating significant communal features on some online discussion forums. While recognizing the role of discussion forums in facilitating community, this article seeks to shift the focus of debate towards the rapidly increasing use of online journal style web logs (“blogs”) as a form of social interaction. Ostensibly centred upon the individual rather than the group, yet increasingly interactive and socially oriented, interactive online journals appear particularly consistent with the notion of individualistic rather than group-centred patterns of sociability. The article explores this possibility in relation to case study research focused on the recent take-up of online journals by a group of individuals who previously participated in discussion forums associated with a music and fashion subculture known as the ‘goth’ scene.

Key words

blogging • goth • identity • individualization • online journals
• virtual community

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been academic interest in the possibility that online communications may have facilitated the disconnection of individuals from the constraints and securities associated with substantive communities.

However, while some have suggested that the apparently boundless and decentred structure of the internet indeed is enhancing societal trends towards individualization, others have presented convincing evidence of the potential for particular forms of online communications to draw like-minded people into cohesive, stable and relatively insular forms of community. Consistent with their significance to online social interactions for more than a decade, collective online forums often have been at the centre of such arguments and this article accepts that such forums sometimes have facilitated the attachment of individuals to substantive groupings. However, in recent times there has been a significant shift among internet users towards the use of individual web logs ('blogs') and, in particular, interactive online journals, as a means of social communication.

Defined by Susan Herring and colleagues as 'frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence' (Herring et al., 2004: 1), the vast majority of blogs are created, maintained and centred upon a single individual rather than a group (see also Blood, 2002). An illustration of the dramatic growth in blog use is provided by the blog search engine, Technorati, which in 2007 claimed to be tracking over 63 million blogs, a figure which had risen from just 100,000 in 2002 (Technorati, 2007). The most high profile blogs have tended to operate in a largely one-to-many fashion, whereby individual bloggers have conveyed information and conjecture related to matters of public interest to large, dispersed audiences. Yet recent research suggests that the majority of blogs on the internet now take the form of personal online journals which tend to reach smaller, more intimate groups of readers (Herring et al., 2004; Vieta, 2004). Furthermore, user-friendly blog platforms such as LiveJournal have enhanced the interactivity of many journal-style blogs dramatically by maximizing the ease with which clusters of bloggers are able to read and to post comments on one another's content (Shirky, 2003).¹ Apparently combining the individual-centredness of the personal homepage with the frequency of update and multi-directional communication previously associated with group discussion forums, interactive journal-style blogs have become particularly popular, with LiveJournal alone reporting more than 7 million users, 2.5 million of whom it currently considers to be active (LiveJournal, accessed January 2007).²

This article investigates some of the implications of the apparent embrace by users of what it terms interactive online journals, for the relationship between individuals and groups on the internet. More specifically, it focuses on the distinction between personal journals and the more established format of group-centred forums. While suggesting that the collective structure of the latter has sometimes been conducive to the development of substantive online groupings, one article asks to what extent increasing use of the person-centred online journal is liable to encourage individualistic

patterns of interaction and identity. This question is explored with reference to case study research focused upon the experiences and perspectives of a group of users of the LiveJournal platform. Crucially, these individuals recently had transferred the majority of their online social communication to individual online journals, having previously been intensive users of specialist group discussion forums oriented to a youth style subculture known as the 'goth' scene (see Hodkinson, 2002, 2003).

While their initial attachment to this subcultural group and their participation in its online forums may render them somewhat unrepresentative, the clear-cut transfer of these individuals from collective forums to personal online journals offered a valuable opportunity to assess the ways in which take-up of the latter may be expected to affect the interactions and identities of users. Meanwhile, the migration of individuals to personal blogs and journals from collective forums is a significant aspect of the growth of the 'blogosphere', which has been somewhat overlooked by existing research. By focusing on such a transition, the research presented here moves beyond a tendency identified by Herring et al. (2004) for analysts to examine blogging somewhat in isolation from its links and connections with previous forms of online communication.

The analysis presented here demonstrates that even for this sample of former discussion group participants, use of Live Journal did encourage individual-centred patterns communication in various respects. Yet, in spite of this, the participants continued to interact within an identifiable network of other goths and retained their overall attachment to this community. On the basis of this, the article suggests that, while somewhat conducive to individualistic patterns of communication, the format of LiveJournal is sufficiently flexible to allow the continuation of existing group attachments under certain circumstances. Before elaborating upon such findings, it is crucial to place the case study in context by outlining and commenting upon debates concerning individual and collective patterns on the net prior to the rise to popularity of online journals.

ONLINE INDIVIDUALIZATION

The premise for use of the notion of individualization in social theory is that individuals have become increasingly detached from traditional structural, institutional and communal sources of collective identity (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Brown, 1995). The rise of marketing and consumer culture is deemed to have offered these 'disembedded' individuals what Bauman (2001) regards as short-lived and superficial affiliations of convenience, in order to feed lingering desires for belonging and security (see also Doheny-Farina, 1996). The ever-expanding range of elective identities on offer, together with the ease with which they may be embraced or rejected,

ensures that each selection is both partial and temporary (Doheny-Farina, 1996). In societies dominated by what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) call the 'do-it-yourself biography', then, the detached, insecure, floating individual is deemed to have become the prime social unit at the centre of a plethora of 'until further notice' forms of interest and attachment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Meanwhile, the collective amalgamations with which such individuals come into contact demand little or no commitment, consisting of little more than 'momentary condensations in the ever flowing stream of seductive choices' (Bauman, 1992: 24).

According to some, online communications have proved to be a significant factor in the development of fragmented, fluid patterns of individual identity. Turkle's poststructuralist analysis of 'life on the screen' presents the internet as a decentred playground of simulacra whose boundlessness has allowed individuals to play out multiple roles simultaneously in different on-screen windows (Turkle, 1995). In a somewhat similar vein, Stone (1996) explores the possibility that, through uprooting identities from the constraints of the physical body, the internet may create the opportunity for 'individuals' to generate, develop and live out separate online personas. For Mark Poster (1995, 2001), the decentred interactivity of the internet, together with the comparative anonymity of its users, has encouraged the adoption by individuals of a range of diverging roles and personalities in different online spaces.

Drawing upon empirical research, Barry Wellman and colleagues have placed emphasis on the compatibility of online communication with the detached, floating individual. According to Wellman and Gulia, the internet has increased the ease with which individuals may operate at the centre of 'multiple memberships in partial communities' (1999: 184). The authors somewhat equivocally acknowledge that, in the course of conversing with a plurality of online groups and persons, some individuals may manage to develop or sustain strong, intimate online relationships with others.³ However, rather than reflecting mutual attachment to any particular substantive collective grouping, such 'strong ties' are deemed increasingly likely to take the form of networks of individual relationships drawn from a variety of different contexts or networks. Furthermore, Wellman and Gulia's analysis suggests that the most notable impact of online communications is the accumulation by individuals of increasing numbers of weaker, more superficial online relationships (also see Wellman, 1997). Centred upon shared interests rather than structural characteristics, the variety of online forums encountered are each deemed liable to facilitate only narrow, specialist elements of commonality and interaction between otherwise disconnected participants. Alongside a lack of significant group boundaries, this internal heterogeneity provides individuals with 'an enhanced ability to move between relationships', enabling them to switch 'rapidly and frequently between groups

of ties' and to broaden their overall range of personal networks (Wellman and Gulia, 1999: 188).

In a similar vein, Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) explicitly propose use of the notion of 'networked individualism' as a means to conceptualize the way in which online communication has enabled individuals to act as social 'switchboards'; centre-points for multiple, changing and overlapping networks of interaction. In many respects, such a perspective builds on an earlier argument from Doheny-Farina (1996) that, through dividing themselves between any number of segmental 'lifestyle enclaves', internet users are seduced by illusions of community while all the time becoming more individualized. Similarly, Castells suggests that all-to-all internet communications facilities are ideally suited to the development by individuals of personalized 'portfolios of sociability', consisting of numerous specialist forums, each characterized by 'low entry barriers and low opportunity costs' (2001: 132). The internet, then, is deemed significantly to have supported 'the diffusion of networked individualism as the dominant form of sociability' (2001: 130–1).

ONLINE GROUP ATTACHMENT

Consistent with their importance to the accounts presented above, online group forums such as Usenet groups, email lists and web boards have formed a central element of online social interactions. Yet, in contrast to the emphasis in such accounts on individual fluidity and multiplicity, a variety of case studies have demonstrated the capacity of such facilities to sustain highly committed and intimate social groups. While detailing a variety of case-specific nuances and complexities, such studies have demonstrated the consistent presence on discussion groups not only of a strong symbolic or 'imagined' sense of group identity, but also of intense and intimate communication among participants and resolute commitment to coherent sets of values and norms (e.g. Baym, 1995, 1997; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Lee and Peterson, 2004; Watson, 1997; Whelan, 2006). The presence of substantive characteristics such as these has prompted convincing justifications for use of the notion of community as a means to describe such groups, something which has served to distinguish them from more sporadic, superficial or individualized forms of online interaction (Baym, 1995, 1997; Fernback, 1997, 1999; Rheingold, 1993; Watson, 1997).⁴

Such have been the levels of group attachment and commitment in many cases that, as well as exercising communal responsibility in the content of their own posting, participants often have involved themselves in the collective maintenance and enforcement of acceptable behaviour from others (Lee and Peterson, 2004; McLaughlin et al., 1995; Smith, 1999; Watson, 1997). For Nessim Watson, the collective delivery of corrective measures such as ignoring

or flaming on discussion groups, both illustrates and reinforces a sense of responsibility on the part of each participant to behave in a communal rather than an individual-centred or purposive manner:

The awareness of behavioural norms and the frequency of conduct-policing by other members of Usenet discussion groups strongly implies that sense of community in which individual actions are always executed within the known constraints of a forum, and where accountability for one's actions is a natural deterrent to fully individualised goal-seeking behaviour. (Watson, 1997: 111)

As well as regulating the behaviour of existing participants, such communal systems of reward and punishment have functioned, sometimes alongside formal sanctions administered by moderators, as a means by which online communities 'vigorously and successfully defend their electronic boundaries' against outsiders (Hill and Hughes, 1998: 69). Indeed, as well as ensuring that they conform to group norms, evidence suggests that often, 'newbies' must earn the personal respect of other members through establishing their presence over a period of time. In a study of peer-to-peer (P2P) music file-sharing chatrooms, Andrew Whelan (2006) illustrates a particular suspicion of new members who sought help from other subscribers without having first 'paid their dues' through demonstrating a commitment to the community. As well as demonstrating clear evidence of substantive collective boundaries, such observations surely suggest that, rather than being dominated by anonymity and fluidity, many discussion groups have consisted of a relatively stable group of active posters who become highly familiar with one another. Indeed, Lee and Peterson (2004), referring to their study of the 'Postcard 2' alternative country music listserv group, argue that stability and longevity of membership was considerably greater than one might expect in the case of a local face-to-face music scene.

In apparent contrast to the logic of Wellman and Gulia's analysis, the specialist norms and values of discussion forums do not necessarily impede the development of stability, cohesiveness and familiarity between group members. During the course of largely specialist discussions, the mutual communication of incidental details about related elements of their lives appears often to have enabled participants to develop strong ties. Thus a study by Laura Vroomen revealed that an email list for Kate Bush fans was dominated by 'long-term contributors who all knew one another well and often shared personal information and long-running jokes' (Vroomen, 2004: 249). Meanwhile, off-list communication – whether online or face to face – may not only strengthen ties between individual members but also their mutual attachment to the group. Thus, in Vroomen's example and also in the 'Postcard 2' list studied by Lee and Peterson (2004), the overall level of group intimacy was strengthened as a result of a mixture of formal and informal face-to-face gatherings. In these examples, then, rather than being

limited to short-lived 'weak ties', the collective structure of discussion forums formed the basis for committed and intimate community involvement.

Consistent with such evidence of group attachment, Lievrouw rightly argues that, by enabling users easily to find and spend time with those who share their existing affiliations, online communications 'may reinforce people's identification with narrow interests, their sense of difference from other groups and indifference towards larger social concerns' (2001: 22). Similarly, a pioneering study of political interactions online found that, rather than leading to greater hybridity or fluidity of individual affiliations, Usenet discussion groups encouraged initially like-minded individuals to gravitate into isolated communities, each of which serving to reinforce the existing beliefs and affiliations of its participants (Hill and Hughes, 1998). To their credit, Wellman and Gulia's careful analysis recognizes a tendency for internet users to be drawn towards those who share their existing interests. However, the potential significance of this seems rather underemphasized in the extent of their overall emphasis upon the facilitation of multiple 'weak ties', and their general insistence that 'the net encourages the expansion of community networks' (Wellman and Gulia, 1999: 184).

FROM DISCUSSION GROUPS TO INDIVIDUAL JOURNALS

Studies of discussion forums such as those cited in the previous section suggest that, rather than encouraging individual-centred patterns of interaction, the ostensibly group-oriented format of such facilities sometimes has enabled the development of highly committed attachments to substantive groupings. Characterized by a shared sense of attachment as well as intensity and intimacy of interaction between members, coherence of norms and strength of external boundaries, this article accepts that such groupings should be regarded as communities and thereby distinguished from the superficial weak ties emphasized in theories of individualization. Yet, to what extent are the possibilities for generating or maintaining such communities on the internet dependent upon the particular group-friendly formats provided by all-to-all shared discussion spaces? If the domination of online interactions by such group forums sometimes may have consolidated the attachment of individuals to particular communities, then might the increasing use of ostensibly individual-centred online journals have the opposite effect?

Initially comprising little more than regularly updated personal webpages oriented towards dispersed audiences, as blogs have become more popular there has been a shift towards more interactive, journal-type blogs, which operate primarily as a means of self-expression and form of small-scale social interaction or conversation for private individuals (cf. Efimova and de Moor, 2005; Lampa, 2004; Shirky, 2002). In part, this shift towards online journals has resulted from the growth and development of user-friendly automated

platforms, which have combined the format of original blogs with interactive features more reminiscent of online discussion forums. Easy to use 'comments' functions, together with increasingly sophisticated 'blogroll' facilities (which allow users to establish permanent links to a customized list of other blogs) have served to maximize the ease with which bloggers can interact regularly with one another's content.

LiveJournal – the platform on which the research for this article is based – had, at the time of my research, probably taken such interactive features further than any other blogging software. Most notably, LiveJournal's version of the blogroll – its 'friends page' facility – enabled all the most recent entries submitted to any journal included on an individual's 'friends list' to be displayed on a single page, allowing individuals to read and comment on other people's journals without 'leaving' the online territory of their own. Additional possibilities for social networking were provided through a searchable 'interests' facility and the option of supplementing interactions on individual journals with membership of all-to-all blog 'communities' based around particular subjects. The sophisticated combination of 'comments', 'friends' and 'interests' facilities on LiveJournal had prompted analysts to refer to it not as a web publishing tool, but as 'social software' – and, as such, a communications platform as comparable with online discussion forums as it is with webpages (Shirky, 2003).⁵ Yet even on LiveJournal, the most important element of the personal webpage remains intact, namely that rather than occurring in the context of shared space in which behaviour and content is governed primarily by group norms, the majority of interactions take place on the personal territory of one individual and are initiated, centred around and regulated by that individual.

The 'migration' to the LiveJournal platform of former contributors to group discussion forums associated with the UK goth subculture provided a valuable opportunity to investigate the ways in which the use of interactive journals might affect patterns of interaction, identity and community. Established during the 1980s, the goth scene became a substantive and distinctive youth subculture whose members identified strongly with its particular range of 'dark' and 'feminine' tastes in style and music (Hodkinson, 2002). Consistent with the studies of online communities outlined in the previous section, the extensive use of Usenet groups and email lists by goths during the late 1990s was characterized by strong levels of group belonging, intense levels of communication and resolute commitment to shared norms and values (Hodkinson, 2002, 2003). The explicit group orientation of the forums, the mutual familiarity between established subscribers and the operation of collectively administered systems of reward and punishment served continually to reinforce the exclusive group orientation of such spaces. Meanwhile, long-term all-to-all communications between a relatively stable membership, often supplemented by off-list interactions, served to create intimate ties between the participants and equally strong levels of group

commitment. Overall, the use of online forums by goths provided the perfect illustration of Lievrouw's (2001) aforementioned suggestion that use of the internet might prompt a deepening of existing community attachments. Rather than prompting a diversification of individual interests and social networks, such clearly defined collective online spaces had prompted goths to increase substantially the amount of time that they spent interacting with one another (see Hodkinson, 2002, 2003).

However, two years after the publication of these findings, participation among goths in such discussion groups largely had been replaced by their communication via individual online journals on the LiveJournal platform. In order to investigate whether this development might prompt patterns of interaction less consistent with studies of virtual community and more consistent with notions of individualization, I set up my own account on LiveJournal and used this as a base for a year-long period of participant observation. I updated my journal regularly throughout the period of research, and established contact with greater and greater numbers of LiveJournal 'friends' whose journals were linked to from my own and with whom I regularly interacted. The vast majority of these LiveJournal 'friends' were involved in the goth scene, something which occurred partly by my own design and partly as a result of my existing connections as a participant and researcher of the subculture. Some users I recognized from their former participation in goth discussion groups, while others initiated contact with me, having noticed my comments on the journals of mutual 'friends'. Overall, I regularly read and observed approximately 50 journals in addition to my own over the course of the year and, in the course of doing so, came into more cursory contact with numerous others. Although I sought to participate in LiveJournal interactions in as natural a manner as possible, I made no attempt to conceal my research interests and from time to time, made specific reference to them.

In addition to participating directly in the use of LiveJournal in this manner, a series of in-depth face-to-face interviews were initiated (lasting between 45 and 180 minutes) by issuing a request for volunteers on my own journal. All those interviewed were white and most were within their twenties, while eight were male and seven female. A standard topic sheet was used for all interviews, but conversations were allowed to proceed in a relatively unstructured manner. The words of these individuals, together with ethnographic observations and experiences, form the basis for a series of findings as to the impact of this new communications format upon the patterns of interaction and identity of goths. All the respondents were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and all are identified through the use of pseudonyms in the discussion that follows. Meanwhile, explicit permission was gained from two individuals for the reproduction of short sections of text from their journals. The latter also have been anonymized. The analysis itself is divided into two main sections. First, it outlines a

number of ways in which the use of LiveJournal by goths did indeed appear significantly more individually-centred than their previous use of discussion groups. Second, it will be demonstrated that in terms of the clusters of individuals with whom they conversed, goths had used the linking facilities of LiveJournal to reproduce a relatively insular subcultural network.

INDIVIDUALISTIC ELEMENTS OF LIVEJOURNAL USE

Individual sovereignty

Dave Winer (2003) has argued that, in contrast to other forms of online communication, blogs consist of 'the unedited voice of a single person'. Similarly, Adam Reed has observed that 'web logs are viewed as a space in which persons can be themselves, free of constraints and able to say what they think and feel about everyone around them' (2005: 230). For the interactive online journal users who took part in the present study, individual sovereignty was a key attraction of LiveJournal as compared with social communication via group discussion groups. Indeed, although there existed LiveJournal 'communities' oriented to the goth scene, which offered an approximation of discussion group communications, these were used sparingly by the respondents. Like goth email lists, Usenet groups and web boards, the subject matter and tone of interactions on such communities required conformity to collective expectations and, in an apparent rejection of this group ethos, the respondents' use of LiveJournal was dominated unequivocally by personal journals, each of which was regarded as the sovereign territory of its owner. In the following extract, Roger contrasts the group constraints of email lists with his sense of individual ownership over his personal LiveJournal:

It's a very different etiquette, because when you're posting to a mailing list you're very much aware that it's like a group sense of what the rules are and what's acceptable and what's not, but with LiveJournal it's your space so you decide what the rules are.

As well as feeling more at liberty to behave as they wished on their own journal, individuals respected the right of others to do likewise. Readers were regarded not as equal participants in a communal forum but as guests or visitors and, as such, were expected to respect the sovereignty of their host. Likening LiveJournal to the physical territory of her bedroom, Jill explained that she expected visitors to behave in a respectful manner:

If someone's coming into your bedroom and they say something horrible about your own bedroom then it's quite bad isn't it – it's your own domain ... it's like someone's just barged into your own little world and it's horrible, you just don't expect it.

Consistent with this notion of respect for individual space, it was clear that at the same time as feeling free to 'speak their mind' on their own

LiveJournal, individuals often restricted their behaviour when conversing on the space of others. The respondent in the extract below explained that sometimes she had held back from expressing her disagreement with views that she had read on other people's journals:

I see LiveJournal as being very personal space for everybody and I don't... as far as I'm concerned people can just put whatever they like on their LiveJournals. There are times when I've had to hold back from what people have put on their LiveJournals because I don't wish to engage in political arguments, for example, or religious arguments with people. (Sue)

As a consequence of this tendency to refrain from direct criticism of one's host, the collective forms of conduct correcting behaviour so important to the maintenance of boundaries in studies of virtual community – and a key feature of goth discussion groups – were relatively uncommon on personal LiveJournals:

Very rarely have I seen any flaming on LiveJournal – you do get it on mailing lists and you do get it on newsgroups – I think a lot of people do realise ... that it's *their* journal – and they respect that. (Seth)

This culture of respect for other people's journal space was linked to a number of more formal means through which individuals could exercise control over their territory. For example, ownership could be established through customizing various elements of the appearance of one's journal, through use of colours, fonts, headers and personal icons. Kate likened the ability to customize her own journal with furnishing and painting a personal physical space, something she contrasted with the collectively pre-selected symbolism she associated with goth mailing lists:

It's like being given a room – and you can furnish it the way you want and paint it the way you want – and you make it your room. As [with] if you're going to a goth pub or a goth club, with a mailing list, the walls are already painted black.

As well as defining the appearance of their own space, LiveJournal owners were able to exercise direct control over access to their territory by others. Most of those whose journals were observed took advantage of the ability to restrict readership of their entries to logged-in LiveJournal users included on their 'friends list', or even to pre-defined subgroups within this list. It was also possible to regulate the posting of comments, either by opting to 'screen' submissions prior to their display or by deleting unwanted comments subsequent to their appearance. Unlike restrictions on readership, such screening controls were rarely utilized on the journals with which I came into contact. Nevertheless, the ability of authors to exercise such controls further established the symbolic principle of individual rather than collective sovereignty.

Individual content

As a result of the sovereignty afforded to individuals on their own journals, goths found themselves released from some of the direct constraints of community and rendered more able to function as distinct individuals with their own floating range of concerns. This was reflected in the subject matter of LiveJournal posts, which was significantly more varied and individually distinct than on goth discussion groups, where posts were expected to be of specific interest to a goth audience. It is important to note that, although devoid of such formal pressures, LiveJournal undoubtedly facilitated certain informal motivations to please one's audience. In particular, the desire to prompt significant numbers of comments from readers acted as something of a shaper of behaviour. In this respect, my own experiences as a LiveJournal user cohered with the following observations:

People reading and commenting is rather like a reward. (Kate)

It's a form of gratification – and if you don't get a reply to your post then you feel really crap! (Pedro)

While it is clear that the behaviour of LiveJournal users was liable to be affected by the desire for such indications of popularity, however, the achievement of the latter tended to have as much to do with having an entertaining or engaging style as it did with focusing on particular topics, as indicated in the following comment from Roger:

There are people who can write about the most trivial things and they'll make it really entertaining and you tend to read everything they've written, whereas other people ... you'll ... skim 90 percent of what they've written.

In particular, LiveJournal popularity for goths was not dependent upon conformity to subcultural subject matter and, as a consequence, the journals written by goths tended to encompass a wide range of issues.

Consistent with Reed's (2005) contention that online journals are dominated by 'I narratives' and with the findings of a recent quantitative survey of blog users (Viegas, 2004), by far the most common form of content on the journals encountered during the present study was the individual-centred diary entry, focused on recounting and reflecting upon a range of everyday events (see also Herring et al., 2004). Rendering the subject matter of LiveJournal communications more reminiscent of everyday face-to-face conversation between friends than of discussion with any particular 'public', the centrality of such trivial personal details was readily acknowledged by the respondents, who contrasted this with the content of their previous communication via goth mailing lists, as here:

Mailing lists are very ... kind of, 'I have something to say of importance', whereas lots of people's LiveJournals are very much simply 'this is me and what

I've done' ... Certainly mine is much more me-centred than any post I've ever made to a mailing list. I would never post to a mailing list and say 'hey look, rest of Birmingham goths, today I had a really dull meeting at work and got really annoyed with my boss' ... whereas on LiveJournal that's perfectly acceptable. ... Often it will be, 'today I got up and I'm really annoyed because of blah' ... or 'this is a chronological catalogue of what I've done over the weekend'. (Stephen)

In addition to such everyday details, most of the journals observed tended to present, from the personal viewpoint of the individual author, a variety of topics of more general interest, only some of which were directly relevant to the goth scene. Demonstrating an emphasis on the expression of personal taste somewhat akin to what some have described as 'egocasting' (Rosen, 2004), often individuals would present and publicize their individual tastes in film, television and music, whether through posting reviews, listing favourites or incorporating popular cultural imagery into user icons.⁶ Yet content also tended to include commentaries on a variety of websites, discussion of forthcoming or recent events, and even occasional political or philosophical polemics. By way of example, Jessica regarded her LiveJournal as divided into a number of different types of entry:

I mean, first of all there's the everyday posts – there's the 'oh yeah, this week I did this, this, this and this'. Secondly, there are the, like, the more philosophical posts, about thoughts or just random ideas or comments on current events and things like that which are related to my life. Third, there's more creative stuff that I post up, like bad goth poetry and short stories and stuff. And then finally, there's the 'is anyone doing this this weekend?' type posts.

There was a sense then in which, while mailing lists encouraged individuals to focus on particular topics consistent with the conventions of a very particular group forum, individual LiveJournals enabled a somewhat more varied exploration of their identities, interests and lifestyles (cf. Reed, 2005). In this respect, goths were comparable to the 'knitting bloggers' recently studied by Carolyn Wei (2004) who, in spite of being formally affiliated to a specialist knitting web ring, tended to produce content which was both varied and personal.

Individual-centred conversation

For those with whom I came into contact, LiveJournal use was first and foremost a social activity. Indeed most of the respondents acknowledged that a prime motivation for posting entries to their journals was the desire to generate conversation with readers. Furthermore, many regarded participation in conversations in the comments sections of other people's journals as every bit as important as updating their own. However, such conversations were distinct from the detailed, all-inclusive interactions typical of discussion-based communities, in that they tended to be short-lived and centred on the

individual author whose journal entry to which they were attached. As well as being led by their host in terms of topic, for the most part the structure of discussions tended to be dominated by short-lived, two-way exchanges between different individual readers and the author of the original entry, as in the illustration below:

- Original journal entry posted by Kevin
 - Comment from Claire
 - Reply from Kevin
 - Comment from Fiona
 - Reply from Kevin
 - Comment from David
 - Reply from Kevin

Fully all-to-all discussions, involving various individuals within the same conversational sub-thread, were relatively unusual. Furthermore, although from time to time single conversations would take place across a range of interlinked individual journals (cf. Efimova and de Moor, 2005), it was more common for each journal entry to provoke its own separate set of interactions.⁷

Because they were embedded within particular dated LiveJournal entries, such conversations also tended to be more superficial than the multi-participant threads of discussion on group forums. The tendency for individual comments to consist of little more (and often less) than a single sentence, prompted one of the respondents to describe LiveJournal interactions somewhat accurately as ‘bullet point conversations’. Meanwhile, consistent with an observation by Herring and colleagues that blog entries ‘are only commented on while they are new’ (2004: 8), the relative superficiality of many conversations observed in the present study also reflected their short overall time-span. Very quickly, the original posts to which threads of comments were attached would become buried beneath more recent entries on the ‘friend’s pages’ of readers (cf. Ó’Baoill, 2004: 3). This meant that if one wished to continue to take part in a conversation any more than 24 hours after it had begun, it was necessary to scroll back proactively through several pages’ worth of entries from various individuals. This contrasted with the in-depth all-to-all discussions which previously had taken place on goth Usenet groups and emailing lists, which often would persist for several days.

Individual friendship networks

If each particular conversation tended to be somewhat individual-centred, then so did the precise network of individuals with whom, over a period of time, each LiveJournal user conversed. Unlike the open communal spaces of discussion groups, in which every member communicates with every other member, the LiveJournal ‘friends list’ facility offered each individual subscriber

the chance to hand-pick a personalized group of acquaintances whose journals they would browse regularly and at which they would leave comments. This prompted the development of social networks rather more independent, sporadic and disorganized than those facilitated by discussion groups. As Jill pointed out, the precise range of people conversed with by each individual was unique to themselves:

It's a community, but a community that you yourself have defined ... So the community of people that I have on my friends list is my own one and it doesn't get shared – because everyone has different friends on their list.

Many of the respondents regarded the ability to select and maintain their own individual friends list as an invaluable feature of LiveJournal because it enabled them to avoid what had become unmanageable amounts of 'traffic' on goth discussion groups:

With a mailing list you have to wade through so much rubbish from people that you really either don't know or don't like or whatever ... whereas with LiveJournal it's much more specific because most of it will be stuff that is of interest to you, because they're all people that you know because you picked them to be on your friends list. (Andy)

While it encouraged the development of intense communication and intimate 'strong ties' between those individuals who had selected one another, the ability to have an individually distinct list of friends meant that, consistent with Wellman and Gulia's analysis, social networks were defined by individual rather than group boundaries. One result of this was that everyday attachment to the goth scene as a whole was more sporadic. For example, while subscription to an all-to-all goth discussion group ensured inclusion within all relevant channels of word of mouth, on LiveJournal, the subcultural gossip, discussion and information that one received was far more dependent on one's personal selection of friends.

At the same time as rendering communication between goths rather more disorganized and less all-inclusive, the customizable LiveJournal friends list also created the possibility for individuals to include people connected with elements of their lives outside this subcultural community. While clearly bounded goth discussion groups, like various other virtual communities, functioned specifically to reinforce community boundaries, on LiveJournal there was little by way of formal impediment to their transgression. As a consequence, one of the respondents felt that communication via his LiveJournal had brought his goth friends into the same sphere of communication as a previously separate group of individuals with whom he shared an interest in role-playing:

I used to keep the goths that I know separate from the role players I know separate from the other people I know. Then through LiveJournal I kind of

relaxed that and also found there were loads of people in common anyway, so it would have been stupid to try it. I've always been very, very separate about things and now I'm not ... And now they kind of see each other and they kind of make the associations themselves. (Stephen)

Although we shall see later that such experiences of inter-group communication on LiveJournal were not excessively common among goths, the example clearly demonstrates the possibility for individuals to use their 'friends lists' as a means to bring the different spheres of their social lives into a single online space.

Individualized features of LiveJournal use: summary

If the use of online discussion forums sometimes has facilitated strong attachments to substantive communities, then the findings presented so far suggest that increasing use of interactive online journals may result in patterns of everyday interaction that are increasingly individual-centred. Among a group of individuals whose previous use of group discussion forums had cemented community attachment, social behaviour has been described which seems somewhat consistent with notions of the detached, floating individual as theorized by Bauman, Beck and others. The collectively enforced group norms and the boundaries which characterized goth discussion groups appear partially to have been replaced with individually-centred regulation, content, conversations and social networks. Consistent with the accounts presented by Castells (2001), Wellman and Gulia (1999) and Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002), everyday online interaction appears to have become characterized more by a tendency to switch between a personally distinct range of interests than by uninterrupted commitment to the particular concerns or norms of community. Meanwhile, this varied individually-centred subject matter, together with the ability to interact with a personally customized list of friends, suggests something of a shift away from patterns of interaction dominated by mutual attachment to a particular group towards the development of more independent sets of ties between individual users.

Indeed, it may be argued that the individually-centred form of social interaction enabled by online journals creates the possibility for a level of personal control which exceeds that allowed for in the accounts of Castells, Wellman and others. While the latter tend to emphasize that the sets of interactions engaged in by floating individuals take place in separate collective virtual spaces, the use of online journals raises the possibility of bringing such different interests and social networks together into a single, individually-controlled, online space. Rather than being lived out in a multitude of separate online windows, as famously envisaged by Turkle (1995), it is conceivable that the 'parallel lives' of the self may fuse and merge within a single individually-centred portal. In this respect, interactive journals may extend to a far greater range of online social interactions, the kind of

individual centredness offered by personal email address files which, according to Wellman and Gulia, enable individuals to operate at the centre of fluid personal networks which ‘cut across’ different specialized interactions and ‘link otherwise disconnected social groups’ (1999: 187).

That online journals may come to take on such a role for some individuals does indeed seem plausible on the basis of the evidence presented up to this point. Nevertheless, the final section of this article offers a cautionary reminder that the pattern taken by online communications can have as much to do with pre-existing lifestyles, affiliations and contexts as with the communicative facilities themselves (Jones, 1997). This clearly manifested itself in the case of goths who – in spite of unequivocally having adopted more individually-centred forms of everyday interaction in the respects previously outlined – for the most part did not appear significantly to have broadened the spheres from which they drew their social contacts, or reduced their overall level of social attachment to the goth scene. Rather than using LiveJournal as a means to diversify their social networks, they had utilized the platform primarily as an alternative (and preferable) means to consolidate and customize their interactions with other goths.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A SUB-NETWORK

Carolyn Wei’s (2004) study of knitting blogs has demonstrated that, through joining specialist web rings, some bloggers have formed identifiable groupings characterized by shared interests. However, it recently has been found that the use of web rings is relatively uncommon among bloggers (Herring et al., 2004) and consistent with this, the goths in the present study made no use of such a mechanism. Nevertheless, their individual journals had become extensively linked together in a manner which vindicates Blanchard’s suggestion that ‘interactive blog-rolls connecting blogs with highly active comments sections may create communities of blogs’ (2004: 10). Although it was rare for the LiveJournal ‘friends lists’ of any two individuals to be exactly the same, in the course of surfing between goth LiveJournals, it was possible to discern clusters of users fairly quickly, most of whom were listed on one another’s ‘friends lists’ and commenting on one another’s journal entries. Furthermore, in spite of the potential on LiveJournal to bring together friends from different social spheres, in practice, the ‘friends lists’ of goths were dominated by other goths. Evident enough from the personal photographs and lists of interests displayed on individual journals, this was also confirmed by interview respondents who, with one exception, estimated that the vast majority of those with whom they conversed on LiveJournal were goths, as here:

Interviewer: How many of the people on your friends lists you think that you would say ... they’re ... associated with the goth scene?

Claire: I would say all but one.

Liz: I’d say a majority – maybe three-quarters.

Andy: I'm trying to think of someone who's not – and no one springs to mind.
It's a majority – a severe majority, if not all.

Furthermore, there were extensive individual links between different clusters of goths, to the extent that most UK goths were within one or two individual 'friends lists' of one another. In spite of having individually customized lists of friends, then, goths had linked their individual blogs together into a clearly identifiable sub-network within LiveJournal. Although his estimated figures were incorrect, the way in which Gareth summarized this was consistent with my own observations:

Say there's 30,000 [sic] people on LiveJournal and say there's 1000 goths on there – most of the goths will be connected to the other goths rather than the other 50,000 [sic] people outside – so it's all very much inside its own subsection world.

To a significant degree, this clustering together of goths reflected the way in which they had discovered and adopted LiveJournal collectively as a means of interaction. All the respondents reported that they had learned about the platform through existing friends or acquaintances within the goth scene. Information and enthusiasm for online journals had travelled through established channels of word of mouth within the subculture. Alongside informal communication among individuals and small groups, ironically, discussion groups had played a significant role in their own demise, having enabled goths to keep track of the setting up of LiveJournals by others. As Sean explains, this helped to encourage greater numbers of people to follow suit:

[It's] just a case of as soon as you get a core on one system then everybody else is on it, so you're more likely to go for that. And it just goes from that ... so it's probably just that the core on upg [uk.people.gothic – national goth Usenet group] went to LiveJournal first and then everyone else followed.

As soon as new users set up their LiveJournal accounts, they tended to establish communication immediately with existing subcultural friends. Indeed, established LiveJournal users often would 'welcome' to the platform any newcomers with whom they were acquainted, thereby immediately including them within existing networks:

6/11/04 04:22 pm

Please Welcome To LJ [LiveJournal]...

The one, the only, the marvellous [sic], DJ formally
known as Mr ***** ***** ...
*****!!!:oP

Because they had begun to reproduce existing social networks from the moment that they set up their LiveJournal accounts, many regarded use of the

platform as a continuation rather than a dilution of their social involvement with other goths:

I guess all the people I knew from the net to start with were really either goths or punks really, I guess ... but predominantly more goths. And so that's been carried over to LiveJournal for me personally. I'd say probably easily three-quarters of the people on my friends list are goths. (Scott)

Partly as a consequence of this, another respondent rejected the suggestion that the individualistic features of LiveJournal use might weaken people's attachment to the goth scene:

Jessica: Essentially, you're still communicating within the same subset – it's just a different medium.

Interviewer: But aren't there less boundaries?

Jessica: Possibly ... I think naturally it forms that the people you've had relationships with in the past, you stay in those relationships ... and if you look at the friends lists of goths who are on LiveJournal, most of their friends are goths – it's really quite insular.

Interviewer: Will that sustain itself?

Jessica: I think it probably will sustain itself – because I think it's the nature of who you know in the first place and also, I mean, I think identity is still important in goth – you do prefer to socialize either on or offline with other goths.

In spite of the clear elements of individualism which pervaded the subject matter of their posts, the style of their conversations and the precise make-up of their friends lists, an analysis of the accumulation of LiveJournal 'friends' by goths during the research offered support for Jessica's appraisal. Stephen's suggestion that his journal had brought together friends from different social spheres (see p. 93–4), appeared to be somewhat exceptional. Rather than broadening their range of social networks, most goths used LiveJournal to expand (albeit in an individually customized manner) their range of intra-subcultural interactions. In part, this was because LiveJournal tended to be used primarily to consolidate relationships established elsewhere rather than to discover new individuals with whom to interact. Typically, users would seek to establish LiveJournal contact with individuals that they knew from goth discussion forums, goth gigs or nightclubs. In a manner not dissimilar to the exchange of mobile phone numbers among clubbers (Moore, 2004) it had become commonplace at goth events for individuals to swap LiveJournal usernames and, through doing so, to turn passing contact into long-term communication:

Sue: The amount of times I've gone into a pub and I've been introduced to somebody by their LiveJournal name and it's like 'Well, I'll add you on Monday' ...

Interviewer: So you don't meet them on LiveJournal but you meet them somewhere else?

Sue: It tends to be that I meet them somewhere else and then you exchange and then you get introduced under your LiveJournal names.

The social importance of previous involvement in goth discussion groups and of ongoing participation in face to face goth events, then, played a significant role in ensuring that LiveJournal networks were largely intra-subcultural.

Once established, the overall sub-network of goth LiveJournals was somewhat self-perpetuating. This was true even in the case of first-time meetings between individuals on LiveJournal. Although the various search facilities on the platform (including various options to list other users at random) offered plenty of opportunity to meet with an extensive variety of individuals, those involved in the present study tended only to meet new people as a result of mutual participation in comments conversations on the journals of existing friends, or through browsing through the friends lists of mutual acquaintances. The initial domination of 'friends lists' and comments conversations by goths made it highly likely that such 'friend of a friend' encounters would further intensify contacts within the goth scene rather than enabling the diversification of social networks. In this respect, the network of goth journals illustrated Lievrouw's general observation that hyperlinks 'tend to lead further into a topic rather than across topics' (2001: 19).

As a result of the ways in which individuals gained new LiveJournal contacts, then, the initial reproduction of existing subcultural patterns which had occurred when goths first migrated to LiveJournal, appeared set to go on replicating itself. Content may have been significantly more individualized and conversations may have been both more individually-centred and less all-inclusive than on discussion groups, but the networks of individuals with whom goths were communicating retained a significant subcultural character. Meanwhile, there were extensive links between this insular LiveJournal sub-network and a larger, but equally specialist, network of goth-related material and interactive facilities elsewhere on the internet. In spite of the wide range of topics about which individuals posted, links to websites or discussion groups relevant to the goth scene tended to appear at fairly regular intervals:

The goth LiveJournals are ... a separate little goth LiveJournal community thing – which is interconnected into the wider goth internet, you could say. So, for instance, you might frequently get people saying on their LiveJournals, 'Look, there's some really cool goth stuff on eBay, click here!' or somebody saying ... 'Go to the Sisters of Mercy website here!' (Gareth)

As was observed previously in the case of discussion group communities, the strength of the relationships between clusters of goths on LiveJournal was also enhanced by the links between their online journal interactions and an ongoing mixture of informal gatherings and organized goth events. Often, the multiplex form taken by relationships was emphasized explicitly in journal content. Among the variety of subjects about which individuals posted, it was not uncommon to read retrospective accounts of nights out or thoughts

about forthcoming events. In the example below, a user enthuses to her readers about attending a live gig by a goth band, inviting readers to help her decide what to wear:

[Jul. 29th, 2004 | 05:16 pm]

Everyone is hideously excited about Cruxshadows tonight, but not that many went when they played Cov. You have all got me stressed you know, all this talk of what to wear ... I wasn't that bothered until that. So shiny clothes then? Well come on, that does constitute 90% of my going out wardrobe.

Although these kinds of posts tended only to account for a relatively small proportion of the overall content of journals, their regular appearance had the effect of informing a relatively specialist audience of already 'educated' readers about recent or forthcoming happenings and, more generally, of invigorating enthusiasm about the goth scene among its existing participants. Diversity of content and customized networks of 'friends' suggested that LiveJournal was unlikely to intensify subcultural participation in the concentrated, formal and organized fashion achieved on discussion groups. However, it was clear that, as a result of the establishment of a relatively insular subcultural network in which subcultural information and discussion appeared from time to time, the use of LiveJournal was liable to do more to enhance subcultural involvement than to inhibit it.

CONCLUSION

Manuel Castells has argued that 'the internet has been appropriated by social practice ... although this appropriation does have specific effects on social practice itself' (2001: 118). To put this another way, rather than being passively affected by technology, individuals and groups often have utilized online communicative facilities as a means to pursue existing relationships and priorities, but that in the process, the patterns of interaction of these individuals and groups have shifted. In many respects, this is a lesson illustrated effectively by the take-up of online journals by goths. Rather than fundamentally undermining their previous group attachment or significantly broadening their networks of sociability, communication via LiveJournal appears to have been utilized by goths as a means to continue to communicate with one another. Yet at the same time, their collective migration to individual online journals has led to some significant changes in the manner and structure of this communication. Namely, the significance of individual distinctiveness within everyday communications has been increased, whether in the form of ownership of space, diversity of content, format of conversations or networks of 'friends'.

Susan Herring and colleagues (2004) have argued that, as a result of their unique combination of social interaction and individual control, the dramatic rise in the popularity of blogs is set to continue and that they are liable to

have a significant impact on the development of patterns of internet communication in the coming years. It is equally clear that, as the popularity of blogging has risen, an increasing proportion of blogs have taken the form of online journals centred on the everyday lives and interests of users, and they are often highly interactive. The case study presented here ought not to be taken as a representative one, not least because of the unusually strong community attachment of the respondents prior to their use of LiveJournal, but also because of the specificity of some of LiveJournal's interactive features. Yet the analysis presented here does suggest two cautious conclusions regarding the implications of increasing use of interactive online journals for patterns of online identity and interaction.

First, the clear elements of individualism in the everyday communicative practices engaged in by the established affiliates of an existing community suggests that the use of interactive online journals can be expected to encourage patterns of interaction that are significantly more individually-centred than has been observed in the case of many discussion forums. In particular, the subject matter of communication and precise network of individuals with whom users interact are liable to be customized according to shifting personal priorities rather than fixed group structures. It can be suggested cautiously, then, that for the majority of users – many of whom will not have an initial community attachment as strong as the goths in this study – the interactive online journal is liable to prove rather more suited to the facilitation of detached, fluid and individualized patterns of identity and interaction than of committed attachment to clearly-bounded virtual communities. Needless to say, verification and exploration of such a suggestion through research focused on users of more varied initial affiliations would be a valuable focus for future studies.

Second, in spite of being liable to prompt some level of increase in the levels of individual distinctiveness in everyday interactions, interactive online journals consist of a communications format sufficiently flexible to allow the participants of existing groupings to maintain, and even enhance, the intensity of their communication with one another. For all the individual diversity in the subject matter of their LiveJournal interactions and their precise group of 'friends' on the platform, goths had managed to use the linking and comments facilities to cluster themselves into an interactive network whose level of insularity facilitated their continued participation in a relatively cohesive subcultural community. That they were able to do this via such an ostensibly individualistic form of communication suggests support for Herring et al.'s emphasis on the increasingly 'flexible, hybrid nature' of the interactive individual blogs. Perhaps it also offers a helpful reminder (if it were needed) of the general embeddedness of new technologies within existing structures of identity, community and communication and of the tendency, at least to some extent, of users 'to put new technologies to old uses' (Schaap, 2004: 11).

Notes

- 1 It is worthy of note that, among some groups of bloggers, interactive user-friendly platforms such as LiveJournal and Xanga have been associated with a superficial and self-indulgent personal diary form of blogging which is regarded as distinct from, and inferior to, 'serious' blogs.
- 2 Exact figures reported by LiveJournal's homepage on 29 January 2007 were 12,139,319 users, 1,843,299 of whom were considered active. Readers should note that the massive rise in the popularity and profile of social networking sites such as MySpace (www.myspace.com), Bebo (www.bebo.com) and Facebook (www.facebook.com) occurred largely after the completion of this article. Importantly, keeping a blog or journal tends not to be central to the use of such platforms, but nevertheless they have some similarities to LiveJournal in respect of elements of functionality and in their general emphasis on individual-centred online communication. Therefore, it is hoped that the discussion here will contribute to the understanding of such platforms as well as to the study of blogs and online journals more specifically.
- 3 Wellman and Gulia suggest that 'strong ties' are liable to involve long-term, frequent, non-specialist communication characterized by intimacy and mutual support. This is distinguished from 'weak ties', which tend to be narrow, superficial and confined to infrequent and/or specialist communication.
- 4 Attempts to utilize the notion of community as a descriptor for online groupings characterized by substantive collective features such as those described, of course, can be distinguished from a less helpful tendency to use the term as a somewhat meaningless 'catch-all' concept, applicable to virtually any set of online interactions (see Blanchard, 2004).
- 5 Subsequent to the completion of this paper, the descriptions, 'social software' and 'social networking software' entered popular usage as descriptor for the likes of MySpace and Bebo. See Note 2.
- 6 The rarity of multi-blog conversations on LiveJournal may partially reflect the fact that, unlike some other blog tools, LiveJournal does not have a trackback facility to enable bloggers easily to follow individual conversations from one journal to another.
- 7 Arguing that media technologies have become increasingly attuned to the satisfaction and expression of individual choice, Christine Rosen (2004: 52) describes 'egocasting' as 'the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one's personal taste'.

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