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## The Virtual Leash

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I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## **PREFACE**

The Lipa (or Linden) tree is considered a sacred tree for the Slavic people with mythological powers to heal and calm all those that stand beneath it. They believe different parts of the tree represent certain aspects of life; the roots buried in the realm of the underworld, the trunk in the mundane of everyday life and the branches reaching out to access the spirits. Many Slavic people grow a Lipa tree near their home to act as a sort of 'telephone' to these other realms.

Like the Lipa tree, social media networks enable the participants to connect, build and share within online communities. In the digital realm, the roots represent the connection to social networks and cyberworld environments. The trunk, the everyday mundane: paying bills, shopping or banking. Whilst the branches reach to future possibilities such as advanced, faster mobile technologies.

When I first proposed this research my interest lay in my personal connection to a minority Slavic group called the Sorbs or Wends (German). The Sorbs, situated in the South-East of Germany are the people of my great, great grandfather who migrated to Adelaide, Australia in 1854. My roots, though distant, gave me a great interest in this often-oppressed community group. Internet sites informed me of their culture, religion and language. I was able to track the Sorbian Diaspora from the mid 1800s to Australia, South Africa and America.

Having Internet access to my historical background meant I was able to contact Sorbian community members in Cottbus, Germany. In 2008 I travelled to meet with these people. From this face-to-face encounter I developed a continuing and expanded connection to the community and I maintained involvement with local discussions and actions on my

return to Australia. Further I found an Australian website [www.wendishheritage.org.au](http://www.wendishheritage.org.au) and made contact with members whom I later met with to discuss the Sorbian Diaspora and history. Through these communications tools, including websites, email, social media networks and mobile phone technologies such as SMS, MMS and video chat, I formed a strong connection to the Sorbian community even though I lived on the other side of the world.

Today, the digital bond, or as I have termed it, the virtual leash, both constrains and controls what we perceive and our experiences online. For example, to what extent I really feel a part of a community without a physical presence relies on the level of trust I feel with those online. What they choose to disclose frames the level at which I can participate and vice versa. Time zones mean I need to be up in the middle of the night to chat online. Language barriers create communication that is not always obvious and cultural differences can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. As much as I want to embed myself in the community and maintain the virtual leash to my ancestral culture I am still an outsider despite using an Internet connection, though less of a stranger than if it didn't exist.

On a recent overseas trip video chats, emails and mobile phone text messaging maintained a constant 'virtual leash' to home. Once I spent an entire day riding buses to different locations, never once asking for directions, instead using bus and map applications on my phone. On reflection, I realised that the only person I had an in-depth conversation with during that day was my partner in Sydney, Australia via free Wi-Fi at a Starbucks café.

In developing this project I began to identify the freedoms and constraints of a life lived within both off and online communities. Access to family, friends and histories globally allow more connection and expanded interactions, such that previously could only be achieved through the post or echoey transoceanic telephone calls. Bridging the cyber/real divide

through social media networks seems to increase the possibility for a larger social well of relationships but this may come at a cost as deeper levels of understanding is constrained by the technology and through physical detachment. As time passes my contact with the Sorbian community has dwindled to a half dozen emails on special occasions like Easter, Christmas and recently International Women's day. I am planning to visit Cottbus again soon so perhaps that face-to-face encounter will revive my online connection for several more years and the mythology of the Lipa tree acting as a 'telephone' to others may continue.

Post note:

In May 2013 I was invited to give a paper on a section of this research, The Virtual Leash, at a conference in Prague for Interdisciplinary, Cyberculture 8. While there I travelled to Cottbus (near the border of the Czech republic) and met up with several Sorbian 'old' friends. The reception I received was warm and much like an old friend returning, indicating the necessary interaction (in my case) between the real and the virtual.

The paper from the conference is available for viewing on <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical-issues/cyber/cybercultures/conference-programme-abstracts-and-papers/session-1-theories-and-concepts-of-cyberspace-and-cyberculture/>

# Table of Contents

Preface

Table of Contents

Abstract

Introduction		Page 1 - 5
Section 1	Expanded Interaction	Page 6 - 15
Section 2	Building Social Capital	Page 16 - 19
Section 3	Geographical Freedom	Page 20 - 25
Section 4	Intertwining Culture and Technology	Page 26 - 33
Section 5	Methodology and contribution	Page 34 - 40
Section 6	Data collection	Page 41 - 43
Section 7	Data analysis	Page 44 - 48
Section 8	Conclusion	Page 49 - 52
Bibliography		Page 53 - 59

## **ABSTRACT**

This exegesis serves to explore the theoretical approaches and empirical evidence of scholarly and political debate on the social relations enabled by the Internet through social media, it is a roadmap that can elucidate the processes of the attached visual and interactive methods of the creative work.

Several key questions are investigated within this research that explore the relationship between the virtual leash as both a tether to cyber connections and as a constraint that binds the user to the connection. These include possible impacts of online connectivity to develop social capital and the further prospect of a blurring of the on/offline dichotomy. It asks can network technologies enhance our relationship to other cultures and identities regardless of a physical presence to increase the possibility of greater global understanding and tolerance?

The exegesis complements the online documentary and a web source, which together contributes the entire assessment for the award of Masters of Creative Arts, (MCA). The creative visual essay provides a snapshot of issues and concerns that exist in present thinking of how, where, and why we embrace network technologies to guide us through virtual environments to both the advantage and the detriment of those connected. The creative work uses visual photography, text messaging, talking heads and disembodied voices to present theories on a research that daily incorporates within our everyday practices.





## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores questions around community and identity as they are formed and developed within online mediated space. Cyberspace allows us to explore avenues of self and community from multiple global sources and from this space we can be simultaneously constrained and geographically free to experience cultures, doctrines, identities and difference as both an individual or within a community group identity. This research explores this dichotomy using the metaphor the virtual leash as both a tether or connection, that is by allow users to be geographically free through networked virtuality, but also acting as a constraint holding users to the technology and possibly limiting aspects of physical immersion, or tethered to commercial doctrine and standardised ways of perception. Referring to this metaphor the research discusses how the technology may become a tool to construct and be meaningful to society, in particular to the greater development of social capital, as the general blurring between the on and offline continues.

The Web, primarily established as an information resource, is now part of our social glue. We use it for everyday communication from shopping, banking, and researching, to finding a mate. Freeing us from geographical bonds we can explore, build and develop bridges to communities of increasingly divergent realities. As an Australian with a bloodline that ties back to a small and often oppressed group in Eastern Europe, I want to explore the freedoms and constraints a virtual leash provides to establish, develop and maintain connections to online communities, identities and cultures.

Software such as Skype open up opportunities to experience meaning from facial expressions and gestures, while websites and blogs permit users to share languages, cultures and identity packages. For community groups such as the Inuit people using online programs to record oral histories, and traditional fishing practices as well as a means to maintain contact

during the winter months has become everyday practice.<sup>1</sup> Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways, TKRP, an Australian indigenous group in Cairns, Far North Queensland, is presently digitally recording, documenting and building a data storage system to secure fire-burning methods that in other parts of the country have been lost to urban Aboriginal communities.<sup>2</sup> For Diaspora communities, the Internet and mobile phone technology permits aural and visual connections to homelands.

Traditionally, cultural practices were localised and developed through participation in the community. Interactions within the group built cohesiveness and the development of social capital, as author Robert Putnam writes, 'the basis of what makes an active community'.<sup>3</sup> With the steady decline in civic community participation from the 1950s, particularly in the United States, debate continues on the impact social media networks could have to re-establish community involvement. What is becoming increasingly evident however is the intersection between the technology and traditional social capital seems to blur as on and offline activity in our everyday lives continue to merge. Donata Marletta states,

Although face-to-face and online communities have their own specificities and peculiarities, they should not be regarded as separate realities. Instead these communities exist in a kind of symbiosis, nourishing and complementing each other.<sup>4</sup>

Ancient civilization used many modes to communicate amongst their tribes. Messages sent by a runner, both oral and written, kept the larger community informed and connected. Carvings made to document cultural and religious beliefs maintained a historical record for the community. The postal system, established by the Chinese and further developed by the Romans, meant information could be sent and gathered over long distances. In the late 1800s a wire service established on electrical currents sent a code of dots and dashes from one side

of America to the other in a matter of minutes. Alexander Bell's telephone furthered long distance communication and took it into the people's homes. The possible impacts the telephone would have on the family environment were extremely controversial at its inception. John Brooks wrote in his history of the telephone,

Use of the telephone involves exposure; for some, to be 'hung-up on' is amongst the worst of fears; others dream of a ringing telephone and wake up with a pounding heart. The telephone's actual ring - more perhaps than any sound in our daily lives - evokes hope, relief, fear, anxiety, joy, according to our expectations. The telephone is our nerve end to society.<sup>5</sup>

Today we converse globally for little cost as online communication networks continue to replace the telephone as a primary communication tool. However as with the telephone new technologies also bring with them negative possibilities. Social networking sites, video conferencing and sharing domains such as such Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Vimeo can leave users open to criticisms and bullying. Diaspora communities, once more prepared to assimilate into country of residence, can now maintain daily participation, cultural practices and shared experiences with homeland despite the geographical distance. Social media sites primarily established to attract like-minded or singular cultural communities can establish homogeneous networks that stifle debate within the community. Andrew Jakubowicz suggests communities established with singular agendas have the potential to escape multicultural society into a 'monocultural virtuality'. He references the extreme racist group, White Power in the United States with its potential for cyber-racism and capacity to build membership online,<sup>6</sup> and French sociologist, Patrice Flichy believes these groups encourage a rigid rather than flexible point of view.<sup>7</sup>

A new level of sociability, or 'hyper sociability'<sup>8</sup> demands that we adopt the technology or risk being marginalized.<sup>9</sup> Fleeting reflections of the world as we scroll through endless sites give little time for absorb globally or personally.<sup>10</sup> As we embrace the technology we may become subjected to a sanitized standardised imagery<sup>11</sup> and group interactions become linked to specific popular cultures, often leaving out exposure to an 'other'. In his 2009 Cairo speech Barrack Obama spoke of the importance of spontaneous interactions to bridge the perceived differences that can divide us.<sup>12</sup> Locked within standardised commercial networks do we miss the opportunity to experience casual encounters? Automated banking or petrol stations equate to less experiences to interact with strangers and difference.<sup>13</sup> It may indeed be human nature to gravitate to those with similar values. Environments like gated communities or indeed military towns exist so families can feel secure in the belief that those around them have similar values and views. After all, the adage 'birds of a feather flock together' well precedes the Internet.

Finally then, we can ask what are the opportunities available for online identity developments that are not necessarily available from within traditional community practices? Online social networks may be able to provide important avenues to acknowledge a fluidity of identity, drawing out different aspects of one's identity including gender and sexuality<sup>14</sup> yet these interactions may produce quite erratic outcomes, with little conditions or community support. Flichy states, 'We may be heading for an identity crisis with so many possibilities for multi playing fields'.<sup>15</sup>

Headed down the super highway of multiple realities, fluid identities, hyper sociability, always-on availability, always located findability and locality, with little time to reflect and stop to 'smell the flowers', the future of multiple screens and constant access to cyberspace communities may disassociate us from the 'real', or as the line blurs, may contribute to new

levels of social capital both on and offline. These tensions and divergent perspectives set the context for the research that follows, of both connectedness and separation through social media. The research is divided into four key areas for discussion. Firstly I ask can we have a deeper level of interaction and connection through the technologies available and developed daily? If so can an expanded interaction via online networking allow for an increase in a dwindling sense of social capital and binding? Thirdly I ask what can we really gain from a connection spread across the globe and lastly is it possible to have real bonds to those geographically remote and culturally distant?

## NOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. p 130 -155 2003

<sup>4</sup> Donata Marletta. "Hybrid Communities to Digital Arts Festivals: From Online Discussions to Offline Gatherings". 2008

<sup>5</sup> John Brooks, *Telephone: The First Hundred Years*, Harper and Row, New York, pp. 8-9 1976

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<sup>8</sup> Laurel Papworth. Video interview Sydney Australia 19 May 2011

<sup>9</sup> John Hopkins, Video interview Sydney Australia 16 April 2011

<sup>10</sup> Papworth Interview 2011

<sup>11</sup> Paul Virilio, cited in Michael Jenson's essay, *The Global Nomad*. Routledge, pp52 -67 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Barack Obama, "Obama's Speech in Cairo", *New York Times* 2009

<sup>13</sup> John Hopkins Interviewed for this research. Sydney 2011

<sup>14</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen*. Orion Publishing, London 1995

<sup>15</sup> Flichy, p161 2008

## Section 1

### EXPANDED INTERACTION

Within this section of the exegesis I want to explore how network technologies are becoming increasingly integrated into the community regardless of social bearing, age or race. I ask, what are the potential benefits or impacts technological integration imparts to further develop heightened connections and opportunities for individuals and communities to explore aspects of identity and culture through mediated networks?

#### 1.1 The Numbers

Present communication statistics indicate there are approximately 2 billion Internet users and 5 billion mobile phones in operation worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Facebook, with a worldwide 800 million active users, is presently the largest social networking site<sup>2</sup> and in Australia almost 12 million or 55.08% of the population have a Facebook account with the bulk of users between the ages of 18 -55.<sup>3</sup> Statistics such as these illustrate the global embrace of network technology as a communication pathway to social and informational resources. As it become increasingly necessary to connect to the online system resisting this drive can be perceived as almost anti social and opportunities to connect marginalised.<sup>4</sup>

Recent studies in America indicate that social media networks are making us more social and often lead to meeting up in real world situations.<sup>5</sup> We Tweet, we Facebook, we Youtube; we can be informed day and night on topics from baby raising to political uprisings. We sit at home and enter virtual worlds where in the form of an avatar we can right the injustices of the world or simply sit around a campfire discussing philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Today expanded social media interaction presents access to a multitude of environments and interactions that crisscross seamlessly between the first and second life. As technology continues to play an important part in our socialisation we need to consider the contribution online participation

may have to further build a more socially committed offline society. Cultural studies researcher Donata Marletta writes,

(We are) blurring the gap between virtual communities and communities based on face-to-face embodied interaction, trying to deconstruct the obsolete online/offline dichotomy.

Since the 1990s the concept of virtual community has changed and has been substituted by a fluid perception where informational and physical contacts co-exist.<sup>7</sup>

Theorists have debated the merits and demerits of membership within cultures we don't physically inhabit since communication technologies were first introduced.<sup>8</sup> As Internet technologies continue to become integrated into our existence these debates have moved to how technology might build trust and goodwill in cyberworld communities that cross over into first life.<sup>9</sup> By further blurring the on and offline dichotomy attitudes are changing to why and how we adopt the technology. Many recent studies indicate a deeper level of commitment and depth to relationships built through cyber communities. However skepticism exist on the weakness of these ties compared to those created through everyday relationships such as the work place or community groups. These criticisms range from isolated individuals hunched over computer screens, relying less on physical connections, and removing users 'away from embodied local interactions'.<sup>10</sup> In his recent book, *Disconnected*, author Andrew Leigh writes,

Where once a 'weak tie' might have lead to a job offer or partnership, friendships made through social media networks such as Facebook are unlikely to lead to even this level of relationship.<sup>11</sup>

Author and academic Terry Flew states online relationships tend to be too fleeting to created binding and ongoing connection<sup>12</sup> however as networks continue to develop and

membership grows time spent within social media networks increases and with it further levels of commitment are documented.<sup>13</sup> For example the professional network LinkedIn offers members the opportunity to share and promote skills, offer jobs and find staff. Members can post text, audio and video or links to other resources to make work connections with others. When I first joined LinkedIn I rarely visited the site. Today as membership grows and I receive regular updates and notifications I find myself frequently checking the site and the work opportunities available. In October 2013 LinkedIn posted global membership had reached 200 million.<sup>14</sup> Australians are noted as keen participators per capita within social media networks as illustrated by the Facebook's membership statistics above. Whether this continues to cross over or blur the line between the on and offline dichotomy as noted by Marletta is dependent on how communities incorporate the technology to build social networks in first life environments.

### **1.2 Expanded interaction within Diaspora communities - maintaining culture and identity despite the dispersion**

Diaspora communities that are fast to adopt online technologies and maintain connection to homelands have been a good study on how a community integrates the online/offline dichotomy. In their 2006 paper, *Building Virtual Bridges to Home: The Use of the Internet by Transnational Communities of Immigrants*, Navarrete and Huerta created the term 'hybrid virtual communities' to refer to Diaspora communities that overlapped the offline/online gulf. Navarrete and Huerta's paper illustrated that community-like feelings and behaviors in online settings paralleled those of physical communities.<sup>15</sup> Further, in comparison to groups established only online, the Diaspora communities were more likely to keep a physical connection also.<sup>16</sup> As researcher Robert Smith found Diaspora communities were also likely to use the resource to influence local homeland policy. Smith used the example of Mexican's



living in the United States not only funding local Mexican politicians but also using mobile phone and internet technologies to influence voters.<sup>17</sup>

It is this instantaneous and relative inexpensive connection to homelands that allows a continuous bond between the new and the old. For many Diaspora communities news from home is immediate and often a visual and aural experience. What now concern scholars in this area are the possible outcomes this constant interaction may have on the integration and assimilation of the community within their country of origin? In particular for older members of the community that are already struggling with language and customs. Canadian communications professor Karim H. Karim believes technology undermines, not strengthens the integration of groups into a new society.<sup>18</sup> He states,

The ability to exchange messages with individuals on the other side of the planet and to have access to community information almost instantaneously changes the dynamics of the Diaspora.<sup>19</sup>

Further Karim states not only is integration into a new society limited but also technology transforms how the community conducts religious and cultural traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously as French theorist Tristan Mattelart states, 'The question of cultural integration can not be reduced solely to the consumption of media'.<sup>21</sup> The Internet is an influential tool that binds members of a community, especially those established initially offline, to develop new cultural practices in their country of residence and also maintain a voice in everyday decisions within their country of origin. These attributes, combined with the confidence and capacity to navigate new technologies, are according to Smith, enabling Diaspora communities to become more socially resilient.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.3 The Fluid Identity – expanded interaction to further develop identity

Virtual communities established in the 1990s – such as MUDS (multi-user domains) and The Well (an early online community in the USA) - used cyberworld forums to debate the merits of nurturing a fluid identity that was not considered possible through ‘real’ world community membership.<sup>23</sup> For both individuals and groups this debate has been an important part of a personal relationship to online networks. In part this is because online communities to discuss concepts of identity outside of the traditional notions of a fixed identity and gives users a space to experiment with aspects of sexuality, gender, race and religious beliefs.<sup>24</sup>

When a recent blog written by a 35-year-old Syrian lesbian, Amina, struggling to evade persecution in Damascus reported she had been “abducted”<sup>25</sup> by armed men, a global campaign was instigated to seek her release. This event revealed the true identity of Amina - a white male. The writer, Tom MacMasters, initially explained he created Amina to shed light on the difficulties women like her experienced and ‘enlighten people’ to their plight. MacMaster’s adoption of not only a different gender but also sexuality and religion has renewed debate on the legitimacy of creating online identities in this case a political identity. Feminist Beatrix Campbell writes that McMaster’s portrait of Amina, an oppressed lesbian, could be seen as male dominance, giving him a voice where he wouldn’t otherwise have one.<sup>26</sup> Whether MacMasters motives were to promote the plight of women such as Amina or simply to mislead people the consequences of creating fictitious online personae further cloud issues of authenticity, and generate ethical implications on inventing and adopting ‘other’ identities.

While recent moves by social media sites such as Facebook have tried to enforce real name policies it seems these are rarely enforced. In October 2013 Facebook made a sweep through their accounts temporarily suspending those with names that included symbols or numbers, characters from multiple languages or those that were offensive or suggestive.<sup>27</sup> It

seemed to be a half hearted administrative approach to appease the press and government bodies on the part of Facebook and as of time of writing does not appear to be closely monitored or policed in other open source blog sites such as that set up by Tom MacMasters.

Whether using a real name or a false one virtual communities and social media networks for those looking to explore or 'test the water' on a range of identity issues provide a multitude of communities in which to experiment.<sup>28</sup> Whether it's creating a social media identity using a name from the opposite gender or having a second family life online, for many these online spaces create an opportunity to participate in the expansion of an identity regardless of the motivation. Karl Jung wrote that it was important for humans to have a space in which to develop multifaceted identities and to experiment with fluid identities. He believed individual identity continues to develop into old age and insights gained throughout life continually influence identity growth.<sup>29</sup> The American psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton,<sup>30</sup> described it as a 'fluidity of self' and it is these opportunities that a modern technological society has available to engage in the less traditional notions of multiple aspects of an identity.

Traditionally identities were explored and developed through everyday social practices and social membership. Networked societies however have given users a virtual space to explore and gauge response from a variety of participants before acting out with 'real' life family members or friends.<sup>31</sup> For many this has made difficult decisions such as coming out a more socially informed process. For others these spaces can offer a way to re enter society and become more social as was the case with Milvia in Second Life.

### **1.3a Milvia: a case study of identity development in virtual space**

Second Life is a virtual world in which an avatar becomes your second body as you traverse through cities, landscapes that often mirror real life environments. Second Life, one of the largest virtual worlds, provides a space for residents to build societies and identities. For many, it is a world where they are able to re-invent themselves, as was the case with Milvia.

Interviewed for this research, Milvia spent much of her online time within a philosophy group where she could participate in philosophical debates, a big change from years spent at home with young children. The space made it possible for her to expand her interests and develop a new identity other than the stay at home mum. Milvia's participation within the online group later resulted in her enrollment within a philosophy course in her 'first' life and gave her confidence to re-enter the workforce. Several years after joining the group Milvia was diagnosed with breast cancer. She believes her friendships within Second Life not only gave her strength and encouragement, but also the philosophical background strengthened her mental ability to deal with the issues associated with the cancer.<sup>32</sup>

Like Milvia, many virtual world participants believe online relationships provide an environment in which to express important life matters, such as illness or death that may be difficult to discuss in real world face-to-face encounters. Milvia believes these discussions further bind the community, creating strong personal friendships<sup>33</sup> as was the case with her own health issues. Although online communities have been criticised as having a two dimensional, self-censoring nature, this shelter arguably provides a safe environment to aid identity development and the personal freedom to explore difference.<sup>34</sup> Author Tom Boellstorff suggests virtual worlds allow inhibited people to open up and further explore shared interests in large groups of people that are less possible in everyday 'real' life.<sup>35</sup> For Milvia, her expanded interaction through a virtual community and the subsequent crossover

into her first life experience illustrates social networks can influence and impact on first life social capital.

#### **1.4 The not so perfect expanded interactions**

Within this research I have looked at the expanded possibilities of network interaction including, Diaspora communities, identity development and the crossover or blurring of online and offline connections. In these examples there exist both the pros and cons of how network interactions act for individuals and within community groups. For example a Diaspora community's expanded interaction with its country of origin may equate to less integration within their country of residence.<sup>36</sup> What we learn and experience within mediated networks therefore may not always be positive and helpful. Critics of online communities argue freedoms such as, individuality, emotional reciprocity and human understanding become less prevalent within a cyber community<sup>37</sup> and the more time spent online the more detached we may become from everyday realities leading to less empathy for others.<sup>38</sup>

The debate continues as theorist explored the pros and cons of participation within online networks as the technology continues to impose within society. Terry Flew suggests culture is constantly being determined by its relationship to technology and the technologies that succeed are those adapted into the community.<sup>39</sup> It is the crossover between the two and the blurring of the line between the on and offline interaction that offers a future of expanded interactions globally. As the always-on culture continues to develop research on how this may impact the growth of first life social capital continues. The following section addresses some of the present theories of digital realms to rescue and develop social capital from years of decline.

## NOTES

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## Section 2

### BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Robert Putnam defines social capital as the trust and reciprocity that binds members of a community together. Within a community there exist both bonding social capital, that is localised communities living in close proximity and often bound by strong levels of trust amongst members, and bridging social capital, relationships to organizations rather than communities, perceived as weak ties, geographically distant and in the past less trustworthy. It is this trust and reciprocity that builds the development of shared knowledge and further binds community membership.<sup>1</sup> For communities such as Diaspora migrants, already bound by cultural specifics and set apart from their homeland, the motivation to adopt communication technologies, from the post to the telephone to the Internet, quickly develops to allow a connection to homelands.<sup>2</sup> For communities established primarily within online spaces trust regardless of geographical proximity must be built for the community to grow much as it is in physical communities.<sup>3</sup>

Social commentator Laurel Papworth has been involved in establishing, maintaining and participating within online social media communities since 1994. She states, in the past establishing trust online was vulnerable to a multitude of anonymous interactions and examples of misuse and deception. Today however, the growing number of online participants and greater time commitment spent within communities has led to the establishment of new levels of trust and the forming of stronger relationships.<sup>4</sup> Papworth believes online communities' have developed social structures that are closely overlaid to their offline equivalent where trust is an important part of binding relationships. The British sociologist David Gauntlett wrote,



Age-old social practices are being mediated by new communication and computer technologies even though there are some commentators who believe new media is about expelling traditional ways.<sup>5</sup>

Papworth, who spends her working hours helping people to build healthy online communities, uses these age old practices such as trust, the roles of members within the community and the etiquette of the group to develop greater levels of wellbeing within a networked society.<sup>6</sup>

As stated above traditional or 'pre-digital' social capital requires time and trust to build bonds. Bonding ties that connect us to family, friends and colleagues are naturally developed through time spent together and the sharing of information, emotional closeness and support. Weaker ties, or bridging ties are regularly established through everyday interactions such as shopping, interacting with the local storekeeper, or in the local environment, such as a dog park with other owners. It is the weak ties, author Andrew Leigh states, that aid in fostering tolerance within a society and are transferred into stronger bridging social capital. Leigh states that although Internet communities also foster weak ties they do not have the capacity to create a deeper level of connection that is established through physical daily interactions. Leigh's research states without weak ties online communities cannot potentially develop reciprocity to build social capital.<sup>7</sup> While Leigh concedes sites such as Facebook and Twitter encourage daily social interaction he does not believe these are binding enough to transfer into real social capital.<sup>8</sup>

In 2007 Michigan State University in America conducted a survey of 800 undergraduates that found Facebook users did indeed have more social capital than abstainers, and that the site increased opportunities for engagement outside of the network.<sup>9</sup> Further more recent studies have found that frequent blogging leads to increased levels of

social support and integration and may serve as ‘the core of building intimate relationships.’<sup>10</sup> To access the real impacts of Internet users over non-users can however be very subjective as Nancy Baym noted. Baym’s research of a number of studies and surveys found the viability of data collection on Internet use was extremely susceptible to a number of variables. She states,

Why would we expect the person who spends six hours a week online playing poker to experience the same social consequences as someone who spends her six online hours each week keeping in touch with distant relatives, arranging community events, and reading political blogs.<sup>11</sup>

Baym’s point illustrates the difficulty to measure what different users experience and the relationships they make while online. In general terms the data leans more heavily toward statistic that illustrate more time within social networks equals a higher likelihood of creating stronger online and offline relationship and levels of trust. The number of users that state they primarily use online social networks to enhance their offline relationships not supplant them documents this.<sup>12</sup>

In a 2012 interview Leigh concluded society could manage the rise of the Internet and a civic renaissance simultaneously but that it needs to be done smartly to truly build social capital.<sup>13</sup> As more communities such as, sporting and religious, in particularly ‘new’ churches such as Hillsong Church,<sup>14</sup> continue to extend their online presence there seems no doubt that online communities can impact on social capital.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1900s Emile Durkheim stated, “The absence of ties with family, community and other networks increases the risk of anomie and other negative psychosocial outcomes”.<sup>16</sup> Digital media technology may be the answer to negative social capital growth and the continued dwindling of participation within community institutions, once the foundations of social capital.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*. 2001

<sup>2</sup> Mattelart, 2009. Smith, 2002

<sup>3</sup> Howard Rheingold. Skype recorded conversation, June 15, 2010, Papworth Interview 2011, Harder Interview 2010

<sup>4</sup> Papworth, Interview 2011

<sup>5</sup> David Gauntlett, "Media, Gender and Identity. An Introduction". London, 2008.

<http://www.theoryhead.com/gender/about.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Papworth, Interview, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Leigh, Interview, 2011

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Leigh. *Disconnected*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press p 64 2010

<sup>9</sup> Nicole Ellison, Charles Steinfield & Cliff Lampe. "The Benefits of Facebook "Friends: Social Capital and College Students" 2007

<sup>10</sup> Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe 2007

<sup>11</sup> Nancy Baym. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Polity Press 2010 p93

<sup>12</sup> Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe 2007

<sup>13</sup> Leigh, Interview 2012

<sup>14</sup> Hillsong Church [www.hillsong.com](http://www.hillsong.com) accessed July 2013

<sup>15</sup> Rheingold, Interview, 2012

<sup>16</sup> Durkheim cited in *Psychological Sense of Community. Research, Applications, and Implications*. Eds; Fisher, Sonn, Bishop. New York p4 2002

### Section 3

#### GEOGRAPHICAL FREEDOM

Mediated networks have created a geographical freedom to traverse, converse and experience the world without leaving home. This freedom permits users to experience different cultures, languages and beliefs instantaneously and from a large volume of sources. Within this section I look at how technological exploration interprets a true perspective of a culture that was once discovered by physically traversing a landscape. I ask what is gained and learnt from the mass of media and speed of connection to a global community?

##### 3.1 The Virtual Leash

As portable technology continues to assimilate into everyday practices moving about connected to the Internet, guided by global positioning satellites (GPS), or directed by personalised applications to translate, interpret or inform has become a part of our movement through landscapes. The technology, as it becomes more mobile, becomes more accessible and this is spreading across the globe from the developed world and increasingly to developing countries. Today the mobile phone acts as a mini computer in our pockets, no longer primarily used to speak to someone. A recent article in *Time Magazine* reported that the most used aspect of a mobile phone was not talking on it but text messaging followed by using the Internet, camera and GPS.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned in the introduction I have used the metaphor the virtual leash to illustrate the constrains and controls a digital bond can have on what we perceive and experience in both the first and second life. The dictionary defines a leash as a tether, control or restraint. Put into context of a virtual leash the tether is a constraint to the technology, limiting aspects of spontaneous physical immersion, controlling users perception to

commercial doctrine and standardised ways of being. Virtual, as the dictionary defines it, a simulated or carried on by means of a network attachment,<sup>2</sup> opens access to geographical freedom, greater social ties to networks of friends and family. The virtual, as with the tether, simultaneously binds our spatial reality to a flattened image<sup>3</sup> while keeping users more socially connected. Connected 24/7 the virtual leash maintains the instantaneous connections to build and bind relationships that can transgresses boundaries and blur the line between the virtual and the real creating a tool to roam cultures, landscapes and difference.

The increase in mobile technology such as, laptops, tablets or smartphones, combines motion and connectivity to establish a distinct crossover between the mundane and cyber life. Video, voice and text applications open an instantaneous pathway to social media networks where we can share news, make new connections and interact with diverse social communities. Virtual worlds offer spatial visual reality that bind participants within supraterritorial<sup>4</sup> landscapes. The technology not only enhances our geographical imagination but leads to opportunities for exploration of self and otherness within imagined communities.<sup>5</sup>

The virtual leash creates new spaces to peer-learn and participate in a 'bigger world citizenship connectivity'<sup>6</sup> where ideas are shared, cultures examined, race and gender identity explored til we reach a point where we may no longer differentiate between the two. Vince Marotta asks,

'Is the virtual world that culturally and racially diverse people inhabit different from their real physical world or does it reflect or construct the real? Does the real world construct the virtual?'<sup>7</sup>

What was once considered a matterless space<sup>8</sup> is now a highly sophisticated network to construct different ways to experience and view global cultures and landscapes. However as we adopt mediated technology into our first life we become bombarded with a 'barrage of random informational imagery'<sup>9</sup> and structures that can potentially create standardised ways of thinking and behaving.<sup>10</sup> In first life we are confronted with billboards, headlines on newspapers or imagery in magazines that we can choose to view or not. Online specific site force viewers to watch commercials or other media before giving access to the site sought. This illustrates the freedom to choose what we view, how we view it and when, may in fact be directed by commercial interests. Turkle and Jenson both argue our perception of the world is becoming smaller as we are grouped through social media networks and other interest sites to view commercial imagery of cultures and landscapes.<sup>11</sup> The virtual leash that keeps users connected may now be constraining the users to mass commercial habits of viewing and thinking.

It is well documented that information is shared between global companies including our likes and dislikes, beliefs, hobbies or education. This was recently illustrated in a paper titled, *The Impact of the Internet on Advertising Markets for News Media*, which studied the effectiveness of online advertising, a more affordable option for many advertisers,<sup>12</sup> to efficiently match particular markets using geo-tracking technology to ensure local and tailored content is delivered to local customers<sup>13</sup>. This targets the viewer to a network that can influence notions of culture or landscape for the benefit of commercial interests in the area.

### **3.2 Volume and velocity**

Target marketing leads to large volumes of information being fed to users.<sup>14</sup> Instantaneously we can be transported into cultures, communities, cyber politics and as I discuss later avenues

to explore multiple identities. Pre Internet we traditionally learnt about a culture or geography by physically immersing ourselves; getting lost in the streets, playing a game of charades to be understood by a foreigner, being situated in the locale. Today we can bypass these conventionally slower, but more spontaneous methods and 'experience' a foreign space from the comfort of our home as 'supersonic and instantaneous communications'<sup>15</sup> give us the opportunity to converse globally. Cultural theorist and urbanist, Paul Virilio argues the 'flattened screen' has taken precedence over the real physical experience<sup>16</sup> and that we are over stimulated by imaginary that leaves us disorientated in real time space.<sup>17</sup> As we are 'stretched globally'<sup>18</sup> has the pressure to be always online marginised or eroded the connections we have to the physical world?<sup>19</sup> Fixing our gaze to the screen is something lost to a 'technology induced pressure for volume and velocity' with less time to reflect, consider and spend time within a culture or geography?<sup>20</sup> Spending time in highly mediated spaces means less time in physical face-to-face interactions. Social commentators believe physical interactions are essential in building emotional capacity such as empathy, understanding of difference and intuitive skills that may not be clearly understood or learnt with online technology.<sup>21</sup> Has the modern landscape become a product of the technology, as suggested by Ted Relph,<sup>22</sup> where we rely on technical skills to direct us at the cost of ethical and aesthetic human skills?

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Cultural practice or 'something you learn, perhaps without really being aware of it, yet it shapes your awareness of everything around you and how you react to things'<sup>23</sup> is increasingly dictated by a web of online applications and networks. The mobile technology with its faster and more accessible connections keeps our gazes firmly fixed to the screen. Being geographically free permits us to roam the world, discover what makes one culture different to the next or learn a little of the language. Does this lead to an honest interpretation without

the physical interaction? Virtual tours take us under the sea, across the mountains, tour a city and its points of interest without leaving home. Jenson notes the virtual experience lacks an essential element, that is, 'memories, shapes, colour, temperature and light'<sup>24</sup> that create an experience to a place, that as of yet, technology isn't able to provide. Jenson states,

The real and the virtual must co-exist as 21<sup>st</sup> century modernity becomes a matter of simultaneous existence – part situated in the 'real time of our immediate activities overlaid by a mediated realm that privileges the now... to the detriment of the here.'<sup>25</sup>

Working with the real and virtual into the future, as suggested by Jenson, participants of digital networks need to be socially and psychologically aware of many of the pros and cons the virtual leash provides. As discussed in this section the saturation of information and imagery can lead to commercial or standardised interests, including the intrusion of geographical marketing by global enterprises, to influence an understanding of a culture or place. The instantaneous nature of the digital realm, where immediacy is expected but not necessarily realistic in real life situations, has to be compared to time spent immersing in a locale. Lastly relying on social networks to build and maintain relationships to various cultures and landscapes is fragile without the physical presence. The virtual leash whilst geographically unbounding global participation is also binding participation to a virtuality that may conflict with how we interact and understand, the morals and ethics in real life experiences.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Gibbs, "Your Life is Fully Mobile" Time Magazine August 2012

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com> Assessed January 19 2014

<sup>3</sup> Michael Jenson, *The Global Nomad*. Routledge, New York. p52 2011



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<sup>4</sup> Ibid Jenson 2011

<sup>5</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* London and New York 3rd ed 2006

<sup>6</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Massachusetts USA p28 2009

<sup>7</sup> Vince Marotta, "Is the Virtual Ethnic Subject Real?" p461, 2011

<sup>8</sup> John Barlow cited in Patrice Flichy, *The Internet Imaginaire*. Paris p159 2009

<sup>9</sup> Paul Virilio cited in Jenson, *Global Nomad* p62 2011

<sup>10</sup> Cvetkovich & Kellner, 1997

<sup>11</sup> Jenson, *Global Nomad 2011*; Turkle, *Alone Together 2011*

<sup>12</sup> Susan Athey, Emilio Calvano and Joshua S. Gans. "The Impact of the Internet on Advertising Markets for News Media" p3 2011

<sup>13</sup> Athey, Calvano and Gans p8-9 2011

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 2011

<sup>15</sup> Virilio cited in Michael Jenson, *The Global Nomad* p61 2011

<sup>16</sup> Cited p61

<sup>17</sup> Cited p 57

<sup>18</sup> Cited p55

<sup>19</sup> Hopkins, Interview Sydney 2011

<sup>20</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, p166 2011

<sup>21</sup> Susan Greenfield. "How digital culture is rewiring our brains". 2012. Bridget Delaney, "Switching Off May Be the Key to Finding True Connection". 2011

<sup>22</sup> Ted Relph cited in Jenson p58 2011

<sup>23</sup> McKensie Wark, *The Virtual Republic*. Sydney, p19 1997

<sup>24</sup> Jenson, p57 2011

<sup>25</sup> Jenson, p56 2011

## **Section 4**

### **INTERTWINING CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY**

As online interaction develops some technologies will succeed while others fail. It is how the technology incorporates into the cultural behaviours of the society that determine its course and survival.<sup>1</sup> For example, a recent dating craze in Japan has an estimate 240,000 Japanese men register with virtual girlfriends. Using a portable gaming console these men go on dates with their girlfriends to the beach, café or park and are chastised, by the program, if the virtual girlfriends are not taken out regularly.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly the site, Love Plus, a highly sophisticated software program, has not been popular with Australian men.

From this anecdote it is clear there are a number of key criteria required to adopt a technology into everyday cultural practices. Terry Flew states, "If the anthropological definition of culture as the lived and share experience of social groups was sufficient, then we need not worry about global media cultures".<sup>3</sup> So while Japanese men go crazy for virtual girlfriends, Australian participation in political sites such as GetUp and Crikey continues to attract membership. Following, I want to explore how a culture interacts with the technology to develop strong communities that re-enforce the values and roles of participants including trust, individuality, freedom to express difference and a global stage to connect minority groups through the geographical freedom of a virtual leash.

#### **4.1 Trusting**

The popularity of online technology, in particular software applications, to access banking, social or trading websites, indicates Australian culture has readily adopted these services into everyday practices. We trust the technology to supply our personal information such as credit card details and trust the banks will keep the transactions secure. We trust local traders to

deliver our goods and research indicates we increasingly trust in social media networks to make new friends or find a partner - interestingly American statistics show dating service are one of the largest online revenue generators followed only by the pornography industry.<sup>4</sup> Increasingly however these spaces where our most valuable and personal information is stored is being hacked and identities stolen.<sup>5</sup> With an increase of information 'sharing' between multinational companies the trust we have in this security may be misguided. Trust within online communities has been a constant debate since the early days of the Internet. In 1991 Anthony Giddens suggested that we were creating a 'culture of risk' by opening up our lives to online resources.<sup>6</sup> Today we are faced multinationals and global surveillance agencies accessing our personal files and as intelligence 'leaker' Edward Snowden recently disclosed the extent that our private information can be accessed. He stated,

Full take means that the system saves everything. If you send a data packet and if it makes its way through the UK, we will get it. If you download anything, and the server is in the UK, then we get it.<sup>7</sup>

Snowden's statement, illustrates the extent personal accounts can be accessed by third parties however this doesn't appear to stop users from the convenience of banking, paying bills, shopping and socialising online. However it may make us a little less likely to share more intimate details of ourselves to those out in the virtual realm and this means some trust is lost. For those wanting to build and participate within online communities the loss of trust can impact upon the membership and health of the community. Add the possibility that a company can track your presence within a virtual community and target advertising to you whilst within a virtual community demonstrates Giddens' culture of risk may not be completely off the mark.

#### 4.2 Global Action Community

The French documentary maker, Vincent Moon, stated, 'New technologies are rescheduling society'<sup>8</sup> and in particular new ways of interaction within global movements. The Internet, with particular interest in visual components such as Youtube, gives everyone permission to contribute to world affairs and conversations. For example the recent unrest in Egypt and Syria or past uprisings such as the Arab Spring or the global Occupy Movement demonstrate technology's power to influence and infiltrate social movements. From the political activist to the tech savvy consumer a new voice is heard through social media networks that have become a powerful tool for the disenfranchised. Consumer can log online and comment on products, service, and companies or join a political discussion to share ideologies globally through social and political networks. The power back to the public means we now have the ability to talk back to companies unlike traditional media.<sup>9</sup>

The task for many avid online commentators, bombarded with unlimited source of imagery and information, is to determine that which is authentic and that which is not. Generally users tend to be more likely to be honest online than not as Nancy Baym notes from the numerous studies conducted in America.<sup>10</sup> For many 'seeing is believing' and video trickery is not contemplated however can we truly trust what we hear and view on social media or political sites? Political posts or blogs tend to be more obvious in their agenda and the persuasion of political leaning but this is not always the case with online communities. More generalised forums may purport to be giving a voice to the general public but may in fact be infiltrated by commercial interests. For example a post stating a company has a bad record of service could actually be posted from a competitor business.

For small communities the opportunity to share a cultural plight and receive global support may be a double-edged sword. In order to share details of their plight the community

needs to open itself to global markets and this can lead to diversification amongst the community and polarization of the group.<sup>11</sup> This is evident amongst the Sorbian community as they try to save their culture and language by reaching out to global networks. What they have experienced is the younger generation is being drawn to online cultures and this is further impacting on the diversification of the culture and language in the sea of information and technology.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years global communities have demonstrated their ability to bring together large numbers of people and resources very quickly. An Australian example was during recent bushfires in Tasmania, Australia. Mel Irons, a young woman residing in the state, set up a Facebook page to provide help and get supplies to those who were isolated and had lost everything to the fires. At the height of the disaster Irons Facebook page had two million hits globally and she was able to organise teams of volunteers to distribute supplies and transport victims more efficiently than other established services.<sup>13</sup> This example illustrates social medias ability to band users and work together to achieve change or support. It is this generosity not scarcity that leads Laurel Papworth to state, 'If there's a heart to social media it's around generosity'.<sup>14</sup>

#### **4.3 Possibility to go anywhere**

Technology gives us the opportunity to participate, interact and share within a world of communities and cultures without having a physical presence. The possibility to explore cultures, languages and landscapes without leaving home has obvious advantages. However what influence does this have on how we experience a culture? Having endless access to information do we get a true picture of the intricacies of a community? For many travelling to foreign countries involves loading up applications on mobile technologies that direct, interpret

and transport through the surrounds. As users become mobilised movement requires we keep one eye on the screen and the other on the location.

Where once a tour guide would share local knowledge today mobile applications permit the traveler to simply point their device in the direction of a landmark and Global Positioning System (GPS) through Wikipedia supplies data on geographical, historical, and nearby points of interest.<sup>15</sup> If the traveler becomes lost in the back streets of Paris GPS can direct them to a local train or bus station including supplying timetables. What do we learn if we rely less on humanity, through asking for help or advice, and more on using the technology?<sup>16</sup> Sitting in a café surrounded by people but absorbed in the non-present world of technological communication leaves the traveler, in the space physically, but mentally elsewhere. German writer Wolfgang Sachs wrote of 'piazas or streets, mountains or seashore, locations .... imbued with experience past and present,'<sup>17</sup> but if our perceptions are strongly influenced by a virtual leash to home has the travelers possibility for spontaneous encounters been marred by technological access to home influences?

Having trust in mediated spaces and maintaining connection while travelling, particularly if alone, will increase feelings of confidence and self-sufficiency to traverse through foreign cultures and landscapes. The flip side is trusting too heavily on mediated networks to guide and neglecting the face-to-face possibilities being lost in a foreign city, arguably can detract from an important element of the travel experience. Interacting with 'otherness' permits integration into what makes a culture and place unique. Though the information locals share might not necessarily be completely true or unbiased the experience of relating between languages, cultures and difference is essential to participating and maximizing the human and cultural elements of the journey. Michael Jenson wrote, 'When all histories and cultural hierarchies become neutralised, infinite possibilities to analyses and construct new traditions, identities, or cultural grounds quickly come to the forefront.'<sup>18</sup> Our

cultural embrace to combine technology and culture and connect the real/virtual spaces has become part of the challenge of a modern technological culture and it is important that we learn and teach future generations the importance of using the technology and taking hold of the leash and not the other way around.

#### **4.4 Identity**

Throughout this research the question of how cyber space may act as a place to unite, share, and explore personal developments such as identity growth has been discussed. The Internet has made available virtual worlds, forums, blog or chat rooms where experimentation with gender, sexuality, spirituality or race are available. Whether you are a white American male posting as a Syrian Muslim lesbian<sup>19</sup> or a man living dual married lives within physical and virtual worlds,<sup>20</sup> cyberspace opens avenues for identity experimentation that would not be easily available in a first life environment. In 1997 Sherry Turkle wrote of the importance of Jungian theory that individuals acquaint themselves with a whole range of personae, to connect with both the dark and other gendered self.<sup>21</sup>

Where traditionally family, friends and community leaders played an important role in the development of identity online networks now influence from a larger, global perspective. Confidantes and advice are available day and night and the possibility to remain anonymous in many cyberspaces allows users to unburden (perhaps similar to the confessional box?) and explore other options of identity. This 'hyper socialbility', being available 24/7 - having a 'friend' online to chat with at three in the morning - is seen to be an important part of the online relationship.<sup>22</sup> In his article, 'Facebook, thymos and the triumph of the individual', journalist Peter Hartcher states social media sites such as Facebook create a 'spiritness' or thymos, that bring about feelings of self-esteem and identity development.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.5 Conclusion

Despite stolen online identities, hacked accounts or the theft of personal details the positive aspects of networked technology has embedded itself within global cultures. How we continue to successfully incorporate the technology into 'real landscape' and, as Jenson states, comprehend 'the full impact of space on the human psyche'<sup>24</sup> needs to be determined. Global cultures, in particular smaller communities, need to survive within a mass of resources. For some, customs can be lost to the technology and what we expect may not be what we perceive. How we continue relationships between technology and cultures and how the two intertwine and crossover will influence stronger communities and social capital into the future.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Flew. Interview Brisbane 2010

<sup>2</sup> Danielle Demetriou. "Crazy, Stupid (Virtual) Love inside Japan's Latest Dating Craze." *Marie Claire*, March, p54-58, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Flew. Understanding Global Media p 139 2007

<sup>4</sup> [graphs.net/statistics-of-online-dating.html](http://graphs.net/statistics-of-online-dating.html) Assessed 29 January 2014

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/it-pro/security-it/16-million-email-accounts-compromised-in-germany-20140121-hv9el.html> Accessed 22 January 2014

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. California, USA 1991

<sup>7</sup> Dorling, Philip. "Snowden Reveals Australia's Links to US Spy Web". *Sydney Morning Herald* July 8, 2013

<sup>8</sup> Vincent Moon, Live at the Seymour Centre Sydney, 2012

<sup>9</sup> Nancy K. Baym 2010 p 7

<sup>10</sup> Ibid Baym 2010

<sup>11</sup> Peter Petriek, Video interview recording, Cottbus, Germany 2008

<sup>12</sup> Ibid



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- <sup>13</sup> ABC Australian Story. <http://www.abc.net.au/austory/specials/ironsinthefire/default.htm> Assessed 9 August 2013
- <sup>14</sup> Papworth. Interview, Sydney 2010
- <sup>15</sup> Geotravel, Travel application. <http://www.augmentedworks.com/> Assessed May 18 2013
- <sup>16</sup> John Hopkins, *Interview*, Sydney Australia, 2010.
- <sup>17</sup> Ann Cvetkovich & Douglas Kellner cited by Sachs, *Articulating the Global and the Local*, 37, Westview Press: USA, 1997
- <sup>18</sup> Michael Jenson, *The Global Nomad*, p61, 2012
- <sup>19</sup> Kira Cochane. "Straight Men as Gay Women No Laughing Matter." Opinion. *Sydney Morning Herald* June 16, 2011
- <sup>20</sup> Sherry Turkle. *Alone Together*, p134 2010
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid Turkle p259, 1997
- <sup>22</sup> Bridget Delaney "Switching off may be the key to finding true connection". *Sydney Morning Herald* July 2011
- <sup>23</sup> Peter Hartcher. "Facebook, thymos and the triumph of the individual". *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2011
- <sup>24</sup> Jenson p62, 2012

## Section 5

### METHODOLOGY AND CONTRIBUTION

Qualitative approaches open questions to ways people experience a community, stories that bind them to a community and the development of identities in relation to their community membership.<sup>1</sup>

A recent creative practice conference asked several key questions on the nature of creative practice as a contribution to academic research. It asked how is creative practice defined as research and what makes it research? Can a sound installation, an interactive artwork, a visual documentary be deemed research? Obviously at this conference the answer was resoundingly yes. However, as Theo van Leeuwan stated most viewers of creative practices need some form of explanation of the work and this usually entails words<sup>2</sup>. Van Leeuwan quoted avant-guard artist Theo van Doesburg who wrote over a hundred years ago,

The truly modern, that is, conscious artist has a double vocation; in the first place to produce the work of art and in the second to prepare the public's mind for the art.<sup>3</sup>

As a media arts practitioner, in this case using the medium of video, my methodology to create this research visual essay required me to question what had been previously said, what is now being said and what might be said in the future. The Virtual Leash, the metaphor I developed for this research, was used to visualize our growing reliance on technology to guide, direct and predict our movement. The visual essay is a set of pieces from on-camera commentary, audio vocal inserts, visual and audio effects to develop a creative output on the present day debate. This visual documentation can be found on,

<https://vimeo.com/87383442><sup>4</sup> The exegesis or as Van Leeuwan puts it, 'the explanation

in text', not only supports the visual essay but also uses material from interviews not included in the documentary.

Another speaker at the conference, Gillian Leahy, stated that film and television are perceived as mass arts and are therefore not regarded in the same way as literature and the high arts, painting, music and dance.<sup>5</sup> Leahy believes media arts test and question the hypothesis of a thesis and what is viewed and discussed with an audience is as valuable as that which is read.<sup>6</sup> This view is backed up by academic Ross Gibson who argues a film is a piece of research as it asks question such as, 'Is this a useful view of the world? Is this the way you see the world? Is this a good analysis of the world?'<sup>7</sup> My MCA video was made to prompt questions on virtual community engagement and attachment, and as an opener to further discussion on the pros and cons of the virtual leash to bind communities and make the crossover into first life experience.

### **5.1 Tools**

It is often said that the tools in research are transparent and that the work should be about the ideas not the tools.<sup>8</sup> However within this work it was paramount that I explore different techniques and aesthetics to create the visual and textual research combination. The production of the visual essay included working with tools that would aid the work aesthetically such as green screen compositing, animation, photographic experimentation, audio recordings, visual textual statistical information, soundtracks and on-camera footage of interviewees. As the project reached its conclusion outcomes for accessing, viewing and reading the research were influenced by multimedia outputs including, digital publishing for websites, blogs, iPad, iAuthor and mobile applications, online publication including links to visual essay and other relevant sites, broadcasting to online channels such as Youtube, and

Vimeo, as well as physical and virtual<sup>1</sup> presentations including giving 'The Virtual Leash' paper in Prague May 2013. The combination of the digital tools permitted the project to be unbound from or exist solely in the written word, and it is therefore able to incorporate multimedia techniques to both enhance and engage audience participation with the content. In part the interactive aspect of the MCA exists in the Wordpress site that gives viewers the opportunity to comment and view extra visual, aural and text-based research that was not used in the final cut of both the documentary and the exegesis.

## **5.2 Process of the creative practice**

The video acts as a stylistic conversation between social media participants, theorist and social commentators. All were interviewed, using a qualitative framework, on how the 'virtual leash' might serve to support or dissociate everyday experiences versus the face-to-face interaction within the physical real world. The varied perspectives from the range of interviewees, many of them revisiting their prior theories, e.g. Rheingold and Flew, provided the visual essay with often new and unpublished views and comment not available in textual literature reviews. A number of fifteen people were interviewed over a three-year period for the video documentary. As the research developed so too did the creative work. During a trip to San Francisco in 2012, I became aware of the extended bond I had to home through mobile technology. On this trip regularly connecting to home I realised the attachment and the impact of the virtual leash on my journey. This term therefore became the focus of my visual essay and interviews that broached this connection were used. As is seen in this work many views are quite polarized on the pros and cons of maintaining strong connection to mobile technology while moving through spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> A great example of this form of presentation are the TED talks

As the research employed explorative methods such as green screen composition, experimental photography and audio inserts a lot of time was spent on building and employing these procedures to create a visually engaging composition that as a creative work would also inspire discussion. These techniques and impacts will be further discussed in the data analysis chapter.

The research, including interviews and the exegesis took place over a three and a half year period (part-time). As the creative work required interviewees to be recorded on video ethics clearance through the University of Technology, Sydney, ensured that the project was conducted with a clearly designed process to ensure participants were not misrepresented in either the documentary or accompanying exegesis.

### **5.3 Participants**

As stated above a total of 15 interviewees were recorded on high definition video for this project and although not all were included in the video presented, in this research they all influenced the thinking within the exegesis and the footage. Further much of this footage will be included in part 2 and 3 of this documentary, which I am in the process of completing (post MCA). The interviewees represented a range of participants within online communities and networks that were dissected under three main research areas. These included, the key informants, theorists and an autobiographical aspect.

The first group consisted of the key informants. These interviewees had specific knowledge of participation and engagement within online spaces and often operated as 'gatekeepers'<sup>9</sup> for their communities. An example of a key informant was Milvia, who, as a regular visitor to the site Second Life, gave a personal description to her strong sense of trust and belonging to the members of a philosophy group within the virtual world. Milvia's growing

sense of identity to members within the community furthered her participation and built new relationships within the community that crossed over into her 'real' life.

Jalal, a refugee from Palestine, spent many years in a Lebanese refugee camp before migrating to Australia. Jalal's sense of his cultural background was influenced by Lebanese culture throughout these formative years. Today Jalal uses the Internet to connect back to his Palestinian background through online forums where he is learning to read and write Arabic and within chat rooms where he is corrected over his Lebanese accent. Originally Jalal was interested in developing stronger ties to family in Palestine however he found online communities could also further develop his identity and create new relationships to Palestinians in Australia.

The second group included a range of theorists who reflected on the processes involved within online communities. These theories also drew on and were backed up by the literature review. Theories and comment came from many peer networks, which included social media 'grandfather', Howard Rheingold, as well as authors, academics, social media consultants and journalists. Many of these discussions focused on highly populated sites such as Second Life, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, LinkedIn and Skype and how they have integrated into our everyday lives and experiences. These discussions were then focused back to the nexus research questions of the virtual leash and the tether to community and identity.

Lastly my relationship to the minority Sorbian community supplied an autobiographical element to the methodology. Through this personal connection to heritage and an ancestral community thousand of kilometres away the research was able to explore how a connection to a community can be maintained and grown via Internet, email and digital applications such

as Skype. This autobiographical data presented a personalised use of digital technologies to explore a distant heritage.

#### 5.4 Outcomes

The visual and textual essays can be found on my Wordpress blog, <http://teigank.wordpress.com/>.<sup>10</sup> This site also contains further recorded interviews and transcripts and a treatment for the three-part documentary. As I further develop my documentary I will update this blog and I plan to generate more interest in the site through social media networks such as Facebook. The project will therefore continue to contribute and expand with input and possible further technologies after the completion of the MCA. The visual essay will be broadcast on social media networks such as Vimeo, Youtube, Facebook and LinkedIn with links inserted within the soft and hard copy of my final submitted research paper.

Finally interviewees were given access to the cuts used within the documentary and authorised final sign off on any further rights to the project. It is important to note here that all the material used in interviews was not misrepresented in any way and that the documentary's research strength relied on creating a valid and relevant discussion on our connectivity to the virtual leash.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher, Sonn, Bishop. Eds; *Psychological Sense of Community. Research, Applications, and Implications*. New York p14, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Theo van Leeuwan quotes Theo van Doesburg. Creative Practice conference, University of Technology, Sydney 21 June 2013

<sup>3</sup> Leeuwan 2013

<sup>4</sup> The Virtual Leash video. 11'21" Teigan Kollosche <https://vimeo.com/87383442> 2013

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<sup>5</sup> Gillian Leahy. Creative Practice conference, University of Technology, Sydney 21 June 2013

<sup>6</sup> Leahy 2013

<sup>7</sup> Leahy citing Ross Gibson 2013

<sup>8</sup> Chris Caines, in conversation, August 24 2011

<sup>9</sup> Papworth, Video Interview, Sydney 2011

<sup>10</sup> The Virtual Leash. Wordpress site. Teigan Kollosche <http://teigank.wordpress.com/> 2013



## Section 6

### DATA COLLECTION

As stated in the methodology, this research includes a visual essay, a web blog and an accompanied written exegesis. This chapter concerns itself with how the data was collected and incorporated into these three research components. The data collection, being a combination of original video interviews and a literature review, contributes to present discourse and theories with particular emphasis on changing technologies over the period of the research - three and a half years. In particular the interviews gave interviewees the opportunity to expand on past theories and/or elaborate as the technology and usage of social networks changed and increased. The data collected through the interview process demonstrated a diverse group of fifteen interviewees who contributed with theoretical, personal and commentary views, often complementing and updating theories from the literature review.

All, bar one, of the video interviews, were conducted in a face-to-face environment and these interviews were recorded in either a studio or the interviewee's own space. The exception was a transatlantic video interview recorded via Skype. The data for all interviews, except the Skype call, were recorded on high definition video format. Interviewees selected were chosen according to their practiced based experience and/or theoretical participation within social networks. Interviewees were questioned on knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, values, motivations, shared meanings, identity development, norms and codes, within these networks.

To ascertain the necessary data for the documentary I developed questions building on themes from the literature review. Certain readings in particular developed areas the

research moved into. An example was an early reading of Tom Boellstorff book, *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Boellstorff's book influenced my questions to an avid participant of this virtual world, Milvia. Further Rheingold's early research into virtual communities continued to resonate and be compared to present virtual/social media participation. Being fortunate to interview Rheingold twice and as recently as 2012 offered an opportunity for him to expand on his recent research and these thoughts to be included in my work.

As the interviews progressed the interviewees were given the time and space to explore personal perspectives and expose the data collection to new angles and concepts. To maintain a spontaneous discussion in these sessions most interviewees were not given the questions but rather I conducted a general conversation prior to the recording session to establish what I hoped to discuss with each participant. For example, when interviewing Milvia on her experience within Second Life I discussed with her how she might explain the sense of community and belonging within the virtual space. My reasoning for not giving specific questions was to engage in a more spontaneous discussion where preconceived answers were not rehearsed or pre-planned. Only in one situation was I required to give questions on paper and these I also limited to general areas of discussion. Most people, even those experienced with appearing on camera, feel nervous when the camera starts recording. As the interviewer it was important I considered this and develop a conversational style of interviewing so participants were less conscious of exterior factors such as the camera, lights, crew etc. and enjoy and be present in the interview process. My background in the Australian television industry, including documentary, drama and commercials, provided the necessary skills base and experience to both conduct and record interviews.

Doing research in a constant changing environment such as technology has created several different angles to change, develop and in some cases, such as the interview

conducted on Chat Roulette which quickly became obsolete, to be discarded. For this reason the research changed focus particularly in the creative work to concentrate on the term I coined for this research, The Virtual Leash. As I built the new visual storyline I included scripted audio recordings to emphasis certain elements from the interviews. This meant the entire genre, from talking heads documentary to a more experimental filming style, was created. The impact I wanted to create with these vocal pieces as well as the use of photography and compositing will be further discussed in the next chapter.

As stated collecting data for a research project on technology, as it changes daily, is a risky process and in part my decision to change the focus on my video towards a more stylised visual work was made in response to the technology changing and evolving. However as previously stated I am writing a three-part documentary, which will include these spaces as a reference to the fleeting, drop in, drop out nature of social networks post MCA.

## **Section 7**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

In the following chapter I explored the data collected and how the processes used, in this case video interviewing, combined with a literature review, contributes to the research of technological community involvement. I also examine the pros and cons of conducting video interviews, particularly in a research field centered on constantly changing technological advancements. Finally I propose to explain the use of techniques such as green screen composition, experimental photography, animation and audio inserts to engage and visually enhance the viewing experience.

#### **7.1 Contributes to research**

Turns out there's a lot of research that indicates if you're communicating with people online you're also likely to be communicating more face to face'.<sup>1</sup>

Comments such as Howard Rheingold's, recorded in July 2012, come from his many years as a writer and researcher of virtual communities and social media. Rheingold's view on the crossover between the on/offline dichotomies was generally held by many of the participants and reviewers in this research and as we further engage in social media real opportunities for closer social bonds in the community can be expected. As I stated in the data collection section a primary advantage of personal data collection, in this case video, is the ability to question new theories and have the opportunity to develop them further with the theorist. This allows the research to bring up to date theories previously discussed and when researching a subject that is constantly evolving this kept the work relevant.

Like Rheingold, Andrew Leigh utilised the interview process to expand on recent insights from his book, *Disconnected*. Leigh, on a discussion on technological impacts for Diaspora or expatriate communities related the difference in available communication resources between himself and his father while living overseas. Interviews such as these give the research not only an up-to-date perspective, but also are often intertwined with personal anecdotes such as Leigh's.

I lived in the States for four years as did my father in the 1960s. For him it meant letter writing to parents and one phone call in the whole four-year period. For me it was daily emails, phone calls whenever I felt like it and I stayed much more connected than my father did'.<sup>2</sup>

Conducting interviews with theorist and participants within Australia pinpointed specific cultural and geographical elements to the study. The example of time zones argued new media author, Terry Flew, greatly impact on Australian online participation. Flew used the example of a student researching multiplayer online in role-playing environments.

Participating from Australia you are very aware that the bulk of the action happens in the middle of the night and the bulk of the action happens in the middle of the night because that is peak time in the US.<sup>3</sup>

These interviews serve to record these perspectives and document a period of time of rapid changes in attitudes and trust within online social networking.

## **7.2 Changing technological advancements and using video**

Throughout the three and a half years of this research literature suggested not only a large increase in the use of technology, in particular portable devices such as smartphones, but also a new level of dependency on these devices to keep us connected. Turkle coined it the always-on culture<sup>4</sup> and recent Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate Turkle is correct. The exponential increase in mobile phone usage, more than 17.5 million an increase on average of 7% every 6 months,<sup>5</sup> illustrates soon every Australian will be carrying a mobile phone with them.

The increase in the portability of online communication demonstrated a change in attitude in usage over the candidature. The combination of Wifi connection through a smartphone, larger data packages and more competitive pricing meant more time online. This impacted the type of online communities users participated in and while some grew, others dwindled. Of particular interest was the increase in membership in sites that included offline interactions and a decrease in virtual worlds, such as Second Life and sites such as Chat Roulette with random interactions.

## **7.3 Impact to visually engage viewers**

From a more technical aspect the project benefitted from the use of several key stylistic applications as briefly discussed in the data collection. In detail effects such as green screen compositing or chroma keying is a technique of laying two images together using the background hue of a green (or blue) screen to superimpose the images on top of one another. The effect is often seen in television news or weather forecast broadcasts. In this research I decided to use this technique originally in my interview with Milvia to capture the essence of the virtual world Second Life in the background. Sections of this interview are posted on my Wordpress site for viewing - <http://teigank.wordpress.com/quick-cuts-for-viewing/> When

interviewing Laurel Papworth I used this technique to create a more engaging background, (as this interview was recorded in a studio) of a cityscape. I could then also speed up the background to create movement in the clouds.

Other visual techniques used in this composition included slow exposure photography. This involved continuous shooting of still photographs with a long exposure to create a ghosting of background movement while a central figure remains as still as possible in the foreground. Each still is then inserted into a timeline to create a moving video. This footage was used as overlay to accompany scripted audio recordings and with interviewees. Finally animated titles and text created to represent text messaging were created to underscore the audio scripts and emphasis points made throughout the documentary and accompanied with a music bed. All the aesthetic effects engaged in the creative work were used to create a connection to the visual and aural world of online participation.

#### **7.4 The measurement of outcomes**

This Masters of Creative Arts research set out to document community and identity development through online social media networks. It morphed along the way to hone in on our attachment to 'The Virtual Leash' and the consequences this entails. The exegesis continued as a debate on issues of social capital, interaction, community and identity development and the blurring of the line between our first and second lives.

The physical outcomes of this research are a video essay, text exegesis and a Wordpress site for further input and contribution. This research allowed me to take a section of the study and develop it into a paper, which I presented at an international Cyberculture conference in Prague in May 2013. Interdisciplinary Press will publish this paper and a draft is presently available on - <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/critical->

[issues/cyber/cybercultures/conference-programme-abstracts-and-papers/session-1-theories-and-concepts-of-cyberspace-and-cyberculture/](#)

Further this research allowed me to develop an interactive art installation for Sync! at the Sherman Gallery, Sydney, Australia in April 2013. Pictures and video of this work are available to view on my Wordpress site.

A future outcome of this research is to develop an idea that was born from a meeting with a Czech animator and software developer. This project will be a collaborative project with the Sorbian culture council to build a 3D smartphone application using video, textual and pictorial footage. This project is in discussion and comes as a result of a discussion I had with Sorbian community members in 2013 to build an online resource that engages the Sorbian younger generation of its culture and language.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Rheingold. Interview, San Francisco, July 2012

<sup>2</sup> Leigh. Interview Canberra, 2012

<sup>4</sup> Turkle, *Alone Together*. 2011

<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, <http://abs.gov/ausstats/> Assessed August 3, 2013



## Section 8

### CONCLUSION

This paper and the associated creative visual essay sought to explore how online networking could meaningfully aide in the development of present day social capital and the present pros and cons associated with networked relationships. Throughout this research scholarly consensus indicated a growing trend in the integration of social media to generate stronger social ties and build group membership between the dual realities, that is within the both first and second world life. The research indicated that users could benefit from an expanded interaction pool that transgresses continents and borders. The nature of these interactions, though considered by some to be fleeting and 'drop in, drop out'<sup>1</sup> in nature, provided members with an environment for discussion, the sharing of information and a space to develop group and individual identities.

To develop the critical parameter that frames successful social media networks certain aspects of what constitutes a successful community were discussed. These key parameters included the establishment of trust, the roles of participants and time spent within the community. Interviewees for this research spoke of their experiences within virtual worlds such as Second Life and how these relationships often mirrored their offline friendships. Virtual communities were shown to offer a community environment to experiment with identities and boundaries and a place to playfully test issues, in contrast with experimentation in first life that may involve great risk to the experimenter.

The research whilst coining the term, the virtual leash, explored the tether that technology has created to family, friends and like-minded online communities. Through this metaphor the research asked if there were possible consequences to a constant connection to

the known? It also delved into the importance for humans to participate with difference and outside influences. It asked can we become cocooned within social networks in a world of sameness or an 'anti' with 'otherness'?<sup>2</sup> It also asked has something been lost to the spontaneous interaction we have on the street asking directions or at a counter paying for goods?<sup>3</sup>

### **8.1 What has been learnt from the study and how it can be applied?**

To draw up a final conclusion to this research I placed network societies into two distinct modes, the reactive and the reflective mode. For some participants the benefits of online community related to the ability to quickly mobilise a group and react to an immediate situation, as is the case with the recent uprisings in Egypt and Syria. This reactive mode of online community as illustrate in the intertwining technology and cultures section, allowed for mass movement of community participation and a rapid awareness often necessary for emergencies. However this reactivity may leave little time to consider the consequence of mass action and the impacts and depth of 'emergency' driven connections. Further the reactive connection may be ill considered and although appearing to promote a cause, may also be misleading, as was the example of MacMasters' Syrian lesbian. The second mode of Internet community involved a more reflective agenda where time was spent within the community to develop and integrate more complex community and identity based politics for the benefit of long-term growth within the community. This is particularly relevant for Milvia and her relationships within Second Life. For communities such as the Sorbian people network connections to other minority communities contributed to discussions on maintaining social capital and as a resource for the sharing of customs and language.

By applying these two modes to this conclusion I draw on the commitment, intention, and types of relationship built by differentiating between two aspects of expanded

interactions. The research concludes both modes of interaction have the potential to bind and build community membership and involvement as long as certain levels of trust are maintained, which was demonstrated to be difficult for both at times. The research therefore concluded that both modes were capable of contributing to ongoing community and real life social capital but on distinctly different levels.

## **8.2 Future possibilities**

Terry Flew states the future will be less about computers and more about mobile technologies<sup>4</sup> and this has been evident in this research. Today, freedom to roam while geographically unbound to any physical locale and source connection via Wifi is commonplace in most western and increasingly non-western countries. To stay in constant contact with family and friends across the globe illustrates how technology can make us more social. However the outcomes of constant sociality may be quite mixed in its impacts. Where we can rely on the devices to guide and instruct they may also impact on our psychological involvement in a culture or intergration as was shown in a University of Michigan study that noted, Facebook, the biggest social media network, while keeping us more connected doesn't actually give us feelings of well-being.<sup>5</sup> This is further evident in the number of daily newspaper articles on teenage suicides from the effects of cyber bullying or the negative effect of viewing other peoples perfect lives on social media network and these will continue to contribute to the negative aspects of Turkle's always on society. Adopt or be marginised<sup>6</sup> seems to be the mantra for a technological future and as technology continues to take part in directing ethical and aesthetical human behaviour,<sup>7</sup> our future will increasingly push towards the technological landscape, high with stimulation but perhaps lacking in time to reflect an inner world of thoughts and creativity.

## POST NOTE

Anything written or recorded on technology has a due by date therefore this project is still a work in progress. At present I am continuing to work on the following parts to the visual essay. The treatment I have written for this is available to view on Wordpress site, <http://teigank.wordpress.com>. It includes a thirty-minute 3 part documentary, The Virtual Leash – completed for this assessment, The Sorbs (an autobiographical experience) and Virtual World: Secondlife and beyond. Also the research will be continually updated on my Wordpress site as new papers, videos and any other associated works become available. Please check it out and pass on comments.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Flew Interview, Brisbane, Australia 2010

<sup>2</sup> Chris Caines in conversation. May 5, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Hopkins Interview, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Flew. Interview, 2010

<sup>5</sup> Press Association, the UK and Ireland's national multimedia news agency. "Not happy: Facebook linked to a decline in wellbeing". *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 August 2013

<sup>6</sup> Hopkins Interview, 2011

<sup>7</sup> Ted Relph cited in Jenson 2011 p58

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