

# **Identities On the Line**

## **Articulations of On and Off-line Communities Amongst UK Youth**

A thesis submitted to the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Law, Environment and  
Social Sciences

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## **Abstract**

### **Identities On the Line: Articulations of On and Off-line Communities Amongst UK Youth**

This research presents empirical work which grounds the discourses of socially inclusive 'communities' in a 'global information society'. The empirical work focuses on a specific group of young people aged 11 to 25 living in one of the most ethnically diverse and poorest boroughs of London, Newham. The thesis explores the ways in which the group construct their 'online' community (Newham Young People Online) and how their identities as young people are re-produced through the interplay between their everyday and their technocultural lifeworlds. Key to the work is how the group is using and shaping ICTs and cyberspace(s), which are central to a 'global information society', in different ways: to explore creativity, to find diverse ways of self-expression, to understand 'difference' and to discover other spaces of learning and education against a background of social exclusion.

#### **Keywords:**

**virtual community, online community, offline community, cyberspace, social exclusion, technoculture, information society, identity, youth**

## Chapter One

### Introduction

[T]he history of city growth, in essence, is the story of man's (*sic.*) eager search for ease of human interaction.<sup>1</sup>

Technologies, and more specifically information and communication technologies (ICTs), have been heralded frequently and historically as tools of political, economic and cultural change in societies. Although not always the case, often the discourses which organise visions for ICTs are constructed from technologically determining perspectives and neglect the potential of human agency and the operation of attendant power relations in the appropriation of such tools for change.

As the UK government becomes increasingly 'concerned' about the idea and ideal of a 'socially inclusive' society, attention is directed to 'deprived' urban communities and their marginalised and often disenfranchised residents who are represented in public sector discourse as 'socially excluded', and in particular, socially excluded from the 'Information Age'.<sup>2</sup> The notion of an 'Information Age' is inherently tied with processes of globalisation and the world economy, intersected with the discourse of a borderless world. Paradoxically, the proposition by the UK government in particular, is to focus on the value of 'local' community regeneration, through the use of ICTs which facilitate globalisation. These ideas are not new: what *is* new concerns the developing community-ICT relations, the configurations of social relations which are emerging in a landscape which is both 'virtual' and physical. This emerging landscape is shaping not only ideas about 'community', but ideas about identity, difference and urban space.

This research presents empirical work which grounds the discourses of socially inclusive 'communities' which are shaping their own community-ICT relations in a UK context. It is vital to understand these geographies of social relations in order to close the current gap which

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<sup>1</sup> M Webber (1964) 'The urban place and the non place urban realm' in M Webber et al (eds.) *Explorations into Urban Structure* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 86 cited in S Graham & S Marvin (1996b) 'Approaching telecommunications and the city' S Graham & S Marvin (1996) *Telecommunications and the City* (London: Routledge), 114

<sup>2</sup> See M Castells (1989) *The Informational City: information, technology, economic restructuring and the urban-regional process* (Oxford: Blackwell Press)

exists between cultural and urban geographies and ideas about ICTs. The empirical work focuses on a specific group of young people aged 11 to 25 living in one of the most ethnically diverse and poorest boroughs of London, Newham. Newham is dominated visually by the iconography of Canary Wharf, the symbol of the Docklands re-development and which represents a key node in the global economic hub of London. The work explores the group's landscapes of computing, their processes of internalising technologies, the ways in which they each negotiate and construct their 'online' community (NYPO: Newham Young People Online) and how these negotiations impact on their enactment of gender and racial identities off-line as well as online. Key to the work is how the young people are using and shaping ICTs and cyberspaces<sup>3</sup> which are central to an 'information society' in different ways; to explore creativity, to find diverse ways of self-expression, and to discover others spaces of learning and education.

The thesis empirically and analytically considers the value and importance of a different type of community formation which is placed at the junction between the on and off-line. The work also evaluates the importance of play, learning and creativity which takes place in the 'technocultural lifeworlds' of young people. Later in the thesis, ideas drawn from Tobin's analysis of 'Otaku'-type learning communities are employed to help explain and understand the ways in which a particular group of young people are negotiating their experiences in-between an on and off-line community.<sup>4</sup>

In this way, the research highlights the power of agency in human experiences, shaping and negotiations of cyberspaces as well as urban places. Within the study of cultural geography, understandings of human experience, identity and politics can only be successful when one understands the dynamic intersections of society, space, people and place.<sup>5</sup> Entrikin suggests (cultural) geographers can only seek to understand these complex intersections by occupying a space nestled 'in-between' these intersections.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the research explores these

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<sup>3</sup> See glossary

<sup>4</sup> J Tobin (1998) 'An American *Otaku* (or, a Boy's Virtual Life on the Net)' in J Sefton-Green (ed.) (1998) *Digital Diversions: youth culture in the age of multimedia* (London: UCL Press)

<sup>5</sup> S C Aitken & L Zonn (1994) 'Re-Presenting the Place Pastiche' in S C Aitken & L Zonn (eds.) *Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A geography of film* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield)

<sup>6</sup> J N Entrikin (1991) *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Postmodernity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press)

intersections and evolving spaces in-between the group's online and off-line experiences of 'community'. The work ultimately illustrates how top-down, institutional ideas regarding how ICTs can encourage economic and social regeneration in The UK's most marginalised urban 'communities' and any emerging policy recommendations on such issues must recognise that not only are community-ICT relations dynamic, but they are also contingent on spaces, places and social, economic, cultural and political landscapes. The term 'community-ICT relations'<sup>7</sup> will be used throughout the remainder of this work to denote the social relations and processes which shape and fashion forms of 'community' in the context of a global information society.

### **Rationale for the study**

There is an increasing volume of commentary concerning cyber-spatial flows of space, time, communication and information, which are mediated through cyberspace and which facilitate a 'global information society'. Langdon Winner suggests that within this 'cyberbole' there is no imagining of the ways in which such technologies might,

strengthen local communities, revitalise democratic politics, eradicate chronic urban poverty and encourage environmentally sound means of production around the globe.<sup>8</sup>

Although this may be a fair comment in terms of the lack of a holistic and institutionalised social policy which seeks to employ ICTs to these ends, it is clear that there are many fragmented attempts. These attempts, mainly outside of the UK, have been discussed elsewhere to a reasonable extent.<sup>9</sup> It is evident that the actors and agents who might hold power to create a holistic imagining have different and conflicting agendas for community-ICTs relations. These agendas will influence the cultural, social, economic and political landscapes of future urban places.

This research argues humans are making relationships and connections through ICTs and the Internet in particular. The power and role of human agency in shaping local and global human-ICT relations must be interrogated however. The work reveals how structural policy

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<sup>7</sup> See Glossary

<sup>8</sup> L Winner (1997) *Cyberlibertarian myths and the prospects for community* Available URL: <http://www.rpi.edu/~winner/cyberlib2.html>

<sup>9</sup> A good example is R Tsagarousianou, D Tambini & C Bryan (eds.) (1997) *Cyberdemocracy: technology, cities and civic networks* (London & New York: Routledge)

discourses of the 'global information society' and the form of community and urban life in the 'global information society' are constructed. This is set against the ways in which humans construct relationships, connections and differences in the context of an evolving 'technoculture', in practice. Key to this is how people articulate on and off-line 'communities', particularly those who reside in urban areas of UK which the Government is trying to 'include'.

Winner suggests that media, academic and commercial sectors do not imagine a positive vision of technologies *and* humanity. The future of human-ICTs in different places and in different configurations is not imagined. Hence, Winner suggests, the starting point for research which attempts to explore the relationships between society and ICTs must be relocated. The starting point for this research then is relocated from conventional polar theoretical positions of ICTs and society to somewhere 'in-between'. Of increasing significance in urban research and geographical analysis is not only the way in which places and environments are represented, but also how the powerful meanings which are attached to them are contested.<sup>10</sup> As touched on above, Entrikin proposes that human experiences be understood by exploring the changing and contested intersections of society, space, people and place.<sup>11</sup> Geographers can understand human experiences by researching spaces 'in-between' these intersections.<sup>12</sup> This is a significant point as different groups of individuals hold unequal power and control over, and access to, spaces and places, including cyberspaces. This control does not necessarily manifest itself in any visible rule and is better known as 'hegemony'.<sup>13</sup> Thus space(s) can be delineated hegemonically and boundaries drawn for 'communities'. In the same way, hegemonies operate in relation to power over and access to ICTs in places and spaces. In the process of delineation and boundary construction, inclusions and exclusions are created: but places 'in-between' simultaneously exist. This research inserts ICTs into this discussion, particularly within geography and urban research. More specifically, this work illustrates the importance of social relations in 'virtual' or on-line spaces for critical urban research. A fault in past research, argues Winner, is that much

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<sup>10</sup> Aitken & Zonn (1994); L McDowell (1994) 'The Transformation of Cultural Geography' in D Gregory, R Martin & G Smith (eds.) *Human Geography: Society, Space and Social Science* (London: MacMillan), P Jackson (1992) 'The politics of the streets: a geography of Caribana' *Political Geography Quarterly* 11 (2): 130-151

<sup>11</sup> Aitken & Zonn (1994)

<sup>12</sup> Entrikin (1991)

<sup>13</sup> A Gramsci (1971) *Selections from the prison notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart). See also J Duncan (1990) *The city as text: the politics of landscape interpretation in the Kandy Kingdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)



discussion of the impressive terms that are attached to 'ICTs', such as community, democracy, citizenship or equality, neglect historical, philosophical or contemporary contexts.<sup>14</sup>

***Relationships, (inter)connections, difference and articulations***

Urban spaces are vital to humans, so how can electronic spaces be used and integrated effectively within the everyday landscapes of human lives and experiences? The prominent concerns of this research are precisely about how community-ICT initiatives are articulated, negotiated, shaped and internalised by different people, in diverse urban spaces. It is necessary to start, then, with an examination into the context of how ICTs are understood and constructed.

Theorisations about 'virtual', on-line 'communities' are not only notoriously scant empirically and US-centric but existing studies predominantly fail to make effective links to physical, 'off-line 'communities'. Indeed, Jones goes further to suggest that,

What is missing is the concomitant conceptualisation of space and the social, the inquiry into *connections* between social relations, spatial practice, values, and beliefs<sup>15</sup>

This work attempts to connect conventional concepts of global and local spaces with more unconventional concepts of cyber-spaces and places. This is achieved through thinking about ideas of 'community'.

Integral to the research is how ideas about 'community'-ICT relations in a global information society are constructed across different sectors and how these ideas are institutionalised and manifested in urban places through ICT initiatives. The main channels through which these ideas are articulated are community-ICT initiatives such as community networks, so it is necessary to understand what these discourses or ideas are and from where they derive.<sup>16</sup> To

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<sup>14</sup> Winner (1997)

<sup>15</sup> S G Jones (1995) 'Understanding Community in the Information Age' in S G Jones (Ed.) *CyberSociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community* 23 (London: Sage)

<sup>16</sup> See A Cohill & A Kavanaugh (2000) *Community Networks: Lessons from Blacksburg Virginia* (Second Edition) (Archtech Publishers)

<http://www.bev.org/>

A Beamish (1995) *Communities Online: community-based computer networks*. Unpublished Masters thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Available URL:

<http://sap.mit.edu/anneb/cn-thesis/>

explore these ideas, the ways in which public, private and third sectors have constructed and employed various narratives of community and ICTs in the global information society are explored.<sup>17</sup>

### **What the thesis is about**

If the aim of the research is to approach a more thought provoking and grounded inquiry into *connections* between social relations, spatial practice, values, and ICTs, engaging with discourses as points of departure is a fruitful method. There are five crucial drivers of this research which are explained below.

#### **1) Failure of urban research and geography**

Urban research and geography has failed to empirically and critically engage with the ideas of 'virtual', cultural expressions of ICTs as on-line communities. It has so far neglected the social relations which are formed and which feed into social relations in physical spaces, cityscapes and the geographies of community-ICT relations in positive ways. The spaces opening up in the 'cracks' of these disjoints between the on and the off-line might be considered to be too abstract and insignificant to merit attention. Yet, this research argues that it is precisely within these spaces in-between, within these fissures, that new articulations of 'community' and ICT relations can evolve and expand. Graham proposes that the same could be argued for debates about 'cyberspaces':

Despite the central importance of the 'urban' in cyberspace debates, issues of urban policy and planning have been virtually absent within both popular and academic debates. Questions of agency and local policy tend to be ignored in the simple recourse to either generalised, future-oriented debates, or to macro-level, binary models of societal transformation. In these, new technologies are seen to be somehow autonomously transforming society *en masse* into some new 'information age', 'information society' or 'cyberculture'. The implication is that local councils, policy-makers and planners are little more than irrelevant, even anachronistic, distractions in this exciting and epoch-making transformation.<sup>18</sup>

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S Cisler (1993) 'Community Computer Networks: building electronic greenbelts' Paper presented at the *Apple Conference on Community Networks 1993*; Tsagarousianou et al. (1997); D Schuler (1994) 'Community Networks: Building a new participatory medium' *Communications of the ACM*, 37 (1), 39-51

<sup>17</sup> Throughout the sections, examples of these constructions are provided where necessary.

<sup>18</sup> S Graham (1999) 'Towards urban cyberspace planning: grounding the global through urban telematics policy and planning' in J Downey & J McGuigan (eds.) (1999) *Technocities* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage), 10

This research will help redress these failures through an empirical exploration into micro-level community-ICT initiatives. This way, the research elucidates the power of agency in the shaping and configuring of community-ICT relations in urban place.

**2) Failure in current research to positively and effectively relate on and off-line ideas of 'community'**

There are many examples, particularly in the last three or four years, of works which theorise about on-line or virtual communities which exist in cyberspace. There are also many examples which theorise about off-line or physical communities. However, works which address the ways in which the two are mutually influencing one another are scarce. This research asserts it is important to understand how members of a 'community' embed ICTs into their everyday lives in different ways and in different places.

**3) Overly dualised conceptions of 'virtual' and 'real'**

The distinctions are blurring between the 'real' and the 'virtual'. This is not a new argument and one can trace the production of 'virtual' and 'real' in postmodern concepts regarding simulation, authenticity and so on in a range of theoretical literatures from urban studies, communications studies and indeed cultural geographies.<sup>19</sup> However, merely relying on these theorisations ignores the point that increasingly, interconnections and relationships are being played out in the 'virtual' or on-line as well as the physical, the off-line, in local and global spaces. The ways in which people understand or articulate the difference or similarity between the interactions is important to track, as there is evidence to suggest that this type of interaction will increasingly become inherent in the everyday production of social relations.

**4) Unquestioning use of the term 'community' in public, private and third sector rhetoric about the information society**

'Community' is too often employed as a generic term to describe groups of people who gather around shared interests: but people form 'community' around shared geography too. This 'gathering around shared interests' is often assumed to be the rationale behind 'virtual' or

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<sup>19</sup> See M Dear (1988) 'The postmodern challenge: reconstructing human geography' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13, 262-274; M Sorkin (ed.) (1992) *Variations on a Theme Park: the new American city and the end of public space* (New York: Hill & Wang)

online communities. This research illustrates that this is not always the case and indeed critiques this notion of 'virtual' community formation.

**5) Need to contest the often dystopian critiques which some level at 'virtual urbanity' and 'technoculture'<sup>120</sup>**

The main critique this research offers is of the totalising nature with which technoculture is discussed. There is little space or recognition of the power of human choice, agency and resistance in the criticisms of virtual urbanity in a technological landscape. This research goes much further than the work which is offered by critics of technoculture: it does this through an empirical illustration of how technoculture(s) can be *re* - produced in a particular way by a particular group.

At its core, this work examines the production and reproduction across time and on and off-line spaces of a 'technocultural landscape'. This term is used to describe the everyday use and integration of ICTs in human social, political, economic and cultural landscapes. The research is concerned with showing how policy discourses of the global information society and community-ICT initiatives which aim to include people in this 'society' are constructed, and how they consequently contrast with the ways in which community-ICT relations are constructed in practice. This is achieved in **Part One**. **Part Two** takes these ideas and examines the ways in which groups articulate the relationship between on and off-line communities and how they produce and articulate their technoculture. **Part Three** reveals the interplay between the themes raised in **Parts One** and **Two**.

**How this research is different**

There are three main ways in which this research aims to differ from previous research which are explored below.

**1) What exists 'in-between' on and off-line landscapes?**

The work seeks to understand how the on, or 'virtual', and the off-line relate, interconnect and how the social relations which are produced are articulated by users.

## **2) Institutionalisation of the Internet**

The work addresses how ICTs like the Internet are being institutionalised in places and used as tools for community regeneration whilst overcoming social exclusion in cities.

## **3) Perceived decline of the urban realm**

By linking arguments and discourses which suggest that the city is in 'crisis' in a global information society or indeed is becoming a pastiche and spectacle only to be privatised and consumed, a useful theoretical framework can be constructed for the empirical fieldwork.

In order to approach the research goals, this study critically explores the multiple structural and wider discourses that have constructed a powerful vision of the 'global information society'. In particular, the work probes ways in which 'community' and ICTs are imagined as mediators of social relations in the information society. Part of this involves a discussion of the articulations between cyberspace or 'virtual on-line communities' and 'physical urban off-line communities'. Key to this work is the neglected point that 'virtual communities' work best if related positively to place-based 'communities'.

As humans begin a new century, the concern for cities, 'communities' and social relationships is becoming stronger. The prevailing notion within private and public sector rhetoric is that there is a need to re-create some form of lost 'community'. In doing this, social and cultural interaction might be fostered and the gap between global commerce and local business might be bridged. In the last five years, there has been considerable attention to what are known as 'community networks'. As a result, the pervasive idea that private and public sectors have adopted is that connectivity through the Internet will nurture these economic, social and political 'ideal communities' for the new century.<sup>21</sup> It is thus important that such ideas and theories about community-ICTs relations in urban areas be empirically grounded, and hence the rationale for the empirical evidence presented in this work.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, M Slouka (1996) *War of the Worlds: the assault on reality* (London: Abacus)

<sup>21</sup> This idea of the 'ideal community' comes from Iris Marion Young's critique of the 'ideal of community'. See I M Young (1990a) 'The ideal of community and the politics of difference' in L Nicolson (ed.) (1990) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge) 300-323; I M Young (1990b) *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)

There are a multitude of stories to be told, explored and woven together before any theorisations or conceptual claims can be proposed in this research. These stories, or narratives, emerge from different theoretical perspectives and make use of powerful discourses. In order to successfully fulfil the research aims of this work, an exploration into the ways of thinking about urban places, cyberspaces, social exclusions and inclusions, ICTs, and so on needs to be undertaken. This is effected by:

- exploring discourses of the global information society, community, and the impact of ICTs in cities;
- developing a theoretical and analytical framework for theorising how community-ICT initiatives develop in practice; and
- a qualitative examination of a case study example of a particular type of community-ICT initiative, revealing how the meanings of 'community' in the information society might be re-imagined by members of such physical place based communities and how the uneven geographies of community-ICT relations are developing.

In order to develop a fuller understanding of the empirical work, a theoretical framework must first be developed. This is achieved in chapter three and is organised around four main structuring discourses:

- 1) the global information society;**
- 2) disappearing/decline of urban place and the 'end of geography';**
- 3) representations of 'community' in urban place;**
- 4) representations of 'community' in on-line spaces.**

These four discourses are appropriate starting points because a key issue for critical geography and urban research is how ICTs, telecommunications infrastructure and networks relate to the geographical place and space of which they are a part.

Furthermore, the success of community-ICT initiatives rely upon how effectively they connect with the rich communicational fabric of urban places in which over 80 per cent of humans live.

City spaces are perceived to be constantly and unevenly redefined by processes of globalisation and politico-economic change.<sup>22</sup> However, ICTs provide a further impetus to the evolving identities of urban spaces:

Network infrastructures need to be rolled out through the congested physical space above, within and below cities and in the intervening corridors between them. This shapes the economies of network development within and between cities. Fuelled by more market-based telecommunications regimes, new networks increasingly now tend to concentrate where the best profits can be made.<sup>23</sup>

All of this is increasingly related to how the discourses of the global information society discourses are being embedded in everyday lives, and how those discourses are played out in urban places.

This could be interpreted as a worrying pattern of network embedding in places: it suggests that community-ICT configurations will follow geographies of 'best profit'. How do communities which are represented as 'excluded' and which are marginalised from other types of networks, such as ATM machines, private telephone lines include themselves in this process of 'rolling out' and in the global information society?<sup>24</sup> Indeed, why is a need felt to include people in this global information society?

### The questions

As already explained above, one key concern is the neglect of the spaces 'in-between' 'virtual', on-line 'communities' and physical off-line 'communities': this is the point where future landscapes for urban communities will evolve. A question to be considered might be 'what is the *difference/similarity* between on and off line 'communities'?' and not simply 'what are 'communities?'. Although this latter question will indeed be visited in this research, the arguments are not new and so will not be overly revisited. What is more fruitful in the light of current and recent commentaries - even within geography - of 'cyberspace' and 'virtual communities' is to re-think how the questions posed in the context of the on-line *and* the off-line can be different and more revealing. This type of re-thinking replaces tendencies to polarise and homogenise the arguments. This type of approach also shows how research can

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<sup>22</sup>Graham & Marvin (1996b), 114.

<sup>23</sup>ibid., 116

<sup>24</sup> See S Graham & S Speak (2000) 'Service not included: Marginalised neighbourhoods, private service disinvestment, and compound social exclusion' *Environment and Planning A* 1985-2001

reach better understandings of the construction and evolution of urban communities which seek to embed and institutionalise ICTs into their everyday geographies. So, it could be argued that the questions for research should be concerned with how people construct relationships and connections on varying levels through online communities which are place-based. Linked to this is how people negotiate and articulate the different social relations that are produced through on and off-line in-betweenness.

There are three questions which the research will ultimately evaluate in conclusion:

- How do community-ICT initiatives vary to ideas about them in structural policy discourses?
- Do community-ICT initiatives celebrate difference or dissolve difference?
- How are the evolving 'communities' in a technocultural landscape articulated?

At present, it seems that 'community' is only imagined through political and economic enlivening. Indubitably, as this research shows, experiences of 'communities' are related to much more than 'what capital gets up to'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Synopsis**

This chapter has aimed to summarise the issues, problems, gaps, aims and focal points of the current research. It has also served to situate the theoretical context in which the research is located. The theoretical context is constructed around four key and recurring and familiar discourses. These are concerned with ideas which shape the concept of a 'global information society' and perceptions of the 'city' or the 'urban'. Situated within the context of a global information society, these perceptions imagine the city and 'community' as in decline with many areas of the urban realm perceived to be in crisis.

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<sup>25</sup> D Massey (1991) 'A global sense of place' *Marxism Today* June 1991



Associated with these ideas about society and the role of ICTs within these ideas are the representations and meanings of 'community' not only in urban places, but increasingly in what can be described as electronic, online or, commonly, 'virtual' spaces and places. Chapter three probes these issues in more detail and illustrates how they serve as a useful type of theoretical framework for the research. The following chapter, however, discusses some preliminary methodological concerns which must be examined.

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## Chapter Two Research Strategies

### Preamble

Before the four discourses with which **Part One** is concerned are unpacked, it is vital to understand the methods and perspectives which guide the processes of unpacking. This chapter explains some practical elements of the study as well as considering why qualitative perspectives and methodologies were used for this inquiry in a rather reflexive manner. The chapter addresses research stages I & II of this work which involve discourse analysis and interviewing. The material which these methods elicit are evident in chapters five and seven. Stage III of the research moves onto the substantive case study materials and the strategy for this stage is discussed in chapter eight.

### Section I: Research Strategy Stages I & II

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Throughout this work, it is evident that there are recurring and powerful discourses which inform and produce much of the thinking around community, ICTs and society. From these discourses, questions concerning the geographies of community-ICT relations arise. These include understanding the spaces in-between the on and the off-line as well as the power of human agency to shape these spaces in the context of a global information society. So, the broad questions which drive the research are as follows:

- What are the structural discourses which shape ideas about the global information society?
- Where are notions of on and off line communities situated in the wider context of the global information society?
- What notions of community do public, private and third sectors hold?
- What visions and ideas do the various actors in these different sectors have about how ICTs can bring together communities?
- How do on line and off-line communities relate?
- What is evolving in-between?
- How do community-ICT initiatives overcome social exclusions and urban regeneration?

There are three primary stages in this work. Firstly, the context which forms the backdrop for the arguments presented in this research is briefly visited. This takes the form of an analysis of four current discourses which inform present, past and indeed future debates about ICTs and their relationships with humans and their societies. Secondly, the research identifies and examines some examples of popular rhetoric of the relationships between communities and ICTs which are apparent in public, private as well as third sector discourses. Finally, the ways in which community-ICT relations are constructed in practice are explored.

The research stages are threaded throughout the writing of the following chapters but the case study stage is clearly separated as a specific body of empirical work. This serves to differentiate between the parts in the research which build a contextual and theoretical framework and the parts of the work which empirically ground the theorising. The research stages are demarcated as follows.

### ***Stage I: Contextual documentary discourse analysis***

The aim of this stage is to explore some general contextual questions. For instance, where are notions of on and off line communities located in the wider context of the global information society? How do public, private and third sectors understand 'community' in such a global context? Pertinent to this stage is understanding what visions and ideas the various actors in these different sectors have about the manner in which ICTs can apparently bring together fragmented communities. This kind of thinking is represented in policy documents and media commentaries.

The first stage in the research strategy is very much concerned with context-setting and documentary analysis. This involves identifying key public, private and third sector organisations and actors which have contributed to the ideology of community-ICTs relations in cities. For example, a number of key policy documents illustrate the pervasive and powerful ideas that are driving the institutionalisation and development of community-ICT relations. These ideas are discussed in chapters three and four. It was felt that formally coding and utilising a software package such as Nu.Dist was unnecessary for this purpose as a general understanding was all that was required at this stage.

### ***Stage II: Contextual discursive discourse analysis***

This second stage involved a preliminary interviewing process and field visit with identified key actors who are involved in the documents and key public, private and third sectors identified in stage I. Six interviews were conducted with various key actors. The respondents were initially sent a formal letter explaining the research context as well as the areas of interest where the respondent's knowledge and opinion was required. Fifteen letters were initially sent but few responded even after second and third attempts of contact. The interviews were recorded and each lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour. On each occasion, except one, the interviews were conducted at the respondent's place of work. One was conducted in a café, which proved problematic for transcription.

Each interview was semi-structured and the questions varied in style depending on the respondent, but were structured around the set of questions above. The thrust of the interview in each case however, was to explore each respondent's ideas of what was the 'global information society', how ICTs could be used in marginalised communities and what each respondent understood by the term 'community'. In some cases, the rationale behind projects was explored. Each interview was then transcribed.

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## **Section II: Reflecting on Methods**

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### **Qualitative methodologies: the arguments so far**

The empirical work in this study, as discussed above, is inherently concerned with cultures, social relations, identities - individual, group and place identities. Thus, there is no question of employing any other methods than those which attempt to elicit multiple experiences, perceptions, and identities. A research strategy which engages a number of different methods, such as discourse or narrative analysis, in-depth interviewing and group interviewing in a case study context is wholly suited to the research queries which have been proposed in the preceding chapter.

Research is an inherently social process which demands careful attention and reflexivity. Qualitative research, as a diverse enterprise, can be considered as a language used to view and describe social lives, events and experiences. At the same time, though, as Gubrium and Holstein suggest, the language of qualitative method shapes knowledge of

social reality.<sup>1</sup> In this way then, qualitative research serves to construct different versions of social realities. What must also be remembered is that the social realities of the researcher are a significant influence on the interpretative practices of the researcher, which ultimately help to shape the research project itself. As Koch and Harrington write,

We assume that interpretation is at the heart of all research practices. That we drive research projects with our values, histories and interests is central to this understanding. Such a conception of interpretation is fundamentally critical. This position assumes that the researcher makes the text.<sup>2</sup>

Partly because of this, qualitative methods have come under intense criticism for lacking in 'scientific' rigour, the most common of complaints being that qualitative research is anecdotal and subject to researcher bias. As Koch and Harrington point out, it is additionally very often criticised for its inability to generalise findings as a large amount of data is generated from small samples.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is difficult to know whether a research 'text' is believable or reliable. Undertaking a research project which is qualitatively 'rigorous' demands an awareness of the methodological and ethical issues which will become explicit in the research process.

Cyberspace is a space where text based interactions and communications over and through the Internet take place.<sup>4</sup> This section examines some of the implications of carrying out ethnographies of cyberspace, particularly of computer mediated communication based 'cultures'. Many studies concerning computer-mediated communication have concentrated on the technology which mediates computer-mediated communication as a tool rather than as forming part of a constructed setting for social and cultural interaction. Indeed, much of the discussion concerning technologies, such as the Internet, focuses on the mere instrumentality of technologies.<sup>5</sup> Recently, anthropological and sociological theories have been of use to commentators of computer-mediated communication, and particularly concerning individual interactions, in what are described

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<sup>1</sup> J F Gubrium & J A Holstein (1997) *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press)

<sup>2</sup> T Koch & A Harrington (1993) 'Reconceptualising rigour: the case for reflexivity' *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28:4, 887

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 882-890

<sup>4</sup> The term 'cyberspace' first appears in William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. It has since been adopted by many popular and academic commentators to differentiate between physical, spatial interaction and interaction which is mediated through the Internet. Information exchange also occurs within this cyberspace, but for the purposes of this paper, communication and interactions are emphasised. CMC (computer mediated communication) is the term commonly used to denote these interactions and communications.

<sup>5</sup> This is characteristic of technological determinism which theorises technologies as driving social, political and cultural change: see D Chandler 'Shaping and Being Shaped' in special issue on Technological Determinism *CMC Magazine* (February 1996) URL

<http://www.december.com/...mag/1996/feb/chantd.html>

as 'virtual cultures'.<sup>6</sup> However, the term 'virtual' suggests that these 'cultures' are viewed as incomplete or illegitimate.

Not only has there been a turn in recent years to an examination of spaces other than the physical and familiar ones, there has also been a great deal of introspection concerning the methods of social and cultural inquiry, particularly with regard to ethnography. There have been a number of turns within social and cultural research which have contributed to an inspection of the possibilities of different ways of thinking about ethnography as a legitimate form of inquiry.

## **Methodological and ethical issues**

### ***Discourse analysis***

Discourse analysis is a way of critically interpreting texts and documents, so understanding the languages that construct them as discourses which create and reproduce systems of social meaning.<sup>7</sup> The aim of analysing discourse is to understand the productions and reproductions of social meaning and identities through talk and texts. What is revealed through discourse analysis is the way in which perceptions, understandings and identities can be influenced by language. Foucault and post-structural ideas have played a significant role in this approach to language. As Tonkiss explains:

Following Foucault one might ask, for example, how our understanding and even our experience of sexuality is shaped by a set of moral, medical and psychological discourses. How does deviance (for example, 'mad' or 'delinquent' behaviour) become an object of psychiatric discourse, or repression (for example, of childhood trauma) an object of psychological discourse, or poverty an object of sociological discourse? While these may be seen as rather abstract questions, Foucault's accounts go further to ask: how are these discursive constructions linked to the shaping of social institutions and practices of social regulation and control? In this way, Foucault's work provides an important conceptual backdrop to a great deal of social research currently undertaken in the form of discourse analysis.<sup>8</sup>

So, discourse analysis allows an insight into the ways in which the key discourses discussed in chapter three are constructed, shaped and reproduced in various ways. This analysis reveals the organisation of influential modes of thought about community-ICT relations in a global information society. These ways of thinking are inherently social and the empirical work shows how these discourses can be re-shaped by individual and group

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<sup>6</sup> For example, H Rheingold *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley 1993) and S Cisler (1995) 'Convergent Electronic Cultures' *Serials Review* 18 (1-2), 55-57

<sup>7</sup> F Tonkiss (1998) 'Analysing discourse' C Seale (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage) 245-260

agency in specific contexts. Accordingly, one might ask in a similar way as the quote above suggests, how are the discursive constructions of ICTs in marginalised urban areas of the UK related to the shaping and regulation of and by social institutions such as public, private and third sector agents? Can the language of ICTs in a global information society be challenged and moulded by different groups and individual agents?

### ***Case studies***

Broadly, the empirical work has been organised through a case study approach. Using such an approach allows for an integrated and detailed methodological perspective. Case studies engage multiple methods, for instance, participant observation, in-depth interviewing, unstructured interviewing, secondary sources and historical analysis. This type of qualitative approach additionally allows for the observation and exploration of particular research questions within the context of their operation. In this way then, one can seek to understand the sets of processes and politics involved in policy making, for example. Finally, this method permits an exploration into the range of actors and their roles which has important implications for the exploration of community networks and the institutionalisation of ICTs in urban communities. This is useful as this research seeks to understand both the producer-led constructions of community and place as well as those which are constructed by users.

Yin indicates three principles of data collection which, if adhered to, will maximise the opportunities for validity and reliability of a case study:

- using multiple sources of evidence;
- creating a case study data base;
- maintaining a chain of evidence.

This, however, may be viewed as a prescriptive 'model' for qualitative research which, one might argue, constricts the research process. It is more useful to allow the fieldwork to grow and change in a more organic fashion, within certain parameters. It is often more productive to allow for a certain fluidity on the fieldwork process, to certainly allow for an approach within a case study practice, but to permit a degree of flexibility. This means not

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 247

adhering to 'models' of prescribed 'case study' methods and if this is encouraged, a wider scope for other methods begins to emerge.

### *Interviewing*

In a 'case study' research strategy, the interview is viewed as a key way of complementing other sources, such as documentary evidence, archival sources and so on.<sup>9</sup> The interview, in particular is suggested as one of the most important sources of case study material. Yin suggests that the interview can exhibit several formats, but there are two main forms that this researcher employed: *open-ended*, which allow for opinions about events or ideas and *focused*, which takes a short time period and is generally conversational but guided by specific sets of questions. Both types of interview take the form of what McCracken terms, 'long interview'. McCracken comments that,

The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armoury. For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing.<sup>10</sup>

The in-depth or long interview as opposed to the social survey or questionnaire for the purposes of this research is the most fruitful method of inquiry as it allows the researcher an insight into the 'mental worlds' of the researched individual, groups, cultures or communities. This insight theoretically grants the researcher a way of stepping temporarily behind the eyes of the research participant to view and experience their lifeworld and social spaces as they experience them.<sup>11</sup> In this way, the categories and logic with which the respondents shape their lifeworlds, social and cultural landscapes are uncovered for examination by the researcher.<sup>12</sup> There are limitations to the understanding of experiences gained through this method, but the in-depth interview serves as a starting point to attempt an understanding the respondents' worlds in particular social and cultural contexts. Yin proposes that interviews of this kind are vital to a case study strategy because a case study approach permits a deep examination of what he terms 'human affairs'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this research is very much concerned with human affairs: how social relations and ideas about 'community' are re-configured in relation to community-ICT initiatives. Yin further proposes that,

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<sup>9</sup> R Yin (1984) *Case Study Research: design and methods* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage) 83

<sup>10</sup> G McCracken (1988) *The Long Interview: Qualitative Research Methods Series 13*, a Sage University Paper, 9

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 56-70

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 56-70

<sup>13</sup> Yin (1984), 84



These specific human affairs should be reported and interpreted through the eyes of specific interviewees, and well-informed respondents can provide important insights into a situation. They also can provide shortcuts to the prior history of the situation, so that the investigator can readily identify other relevant sources of evidence. However, the interviews should always be considered *verbal reports* only. As such, they are subject to the problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation.<sup>14</sup>

These verbal reports can also be thought of as personal and local *narratives* and as such it is accepted and indeed encouraged that bias and interpretation shapes what is reported. A more detailed exploration of narratives and methods used to analyse such narratives is offered in chapter seven, but first several dangers and difficulties should be highlighted.

### ***Dangers and difficulties***

Respondents have a limited amount of time with which to privilege the researcher and the question of privacy prevents the researcher from gaining an absolutely accurate insight of the respondents' experiences and thoughts - if indeed there exists such a notion. The researcher can never fully empathise with the respondents and is liable to introduce familiar concepts that she/he uses to organise, interpret and construct their own world.<sup>15</sup> This is difficult to avoid but Jones suggests that the researcher can merely recognise this 'second level' of meaning and link it to the constructions of the respondent.<sup>16</sup>

Another danger is that of 'undisciplined abstraction'.<sup>17</sup> 'Undisciplined abstraction' leads to concepts that bear little relation to the social world to which they are meant to refer. This may be because the concepts are either not based in any empirical research or are laboured edifices of theory based on scarce empirical research.<sup>18</sup> As there is scarce existing empirically qualitative research on the subject this project addresses, leaps of faith and constructions of elaborate theories must be avoided.

A further danger is the use of 'ivory tower' academic language when conducting interviews which may serve to alienate certain respondents.<sup>19</sup> As the interviews were conducted in the physical spaces with which the respondents were familiar, such as youth centres, resource centres and so on, behaviour and speech used in the interviews had to adapt to the context in order to allow respondents to feel at ease with the interview context.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 85

<sup>15</sup> S Jones (1985) 'The analysis of depth interviews' in R Walker (ed.) *Applied Qualitative Research* (Gower: London) 56-70

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 56-70

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 56-70

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 56-70

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 56-70

However, in recognising the adaptations made the respondents should not be or feel they are being patronised. These issues are particularly salient considering the age of the respondents. Averaging 14 years old, there are certain unequal power relations which operate between respondent and researcher. The balance of power continually shifts and should not preoccupy the researcher, but the researcher should always reflect on whether the shifts are adversely influencing what the respondents are reporting.

These power relations operate again, but in different ways, when interviewing those who are in perceived to be in positions of power which can render the interview process fraught with difficulties. Indeed even gaining access to such people is a difficult task. There are many barriers which may prevent the researcher from gaining what might be considered 'real' access. Time, as already mentioned for example, is a valuable and scarce resource for many key actors in private, public and third sectors whose 'knowledge' and experiences one might wish to explore. Another barrier is also the compelling unequal power relations that operate on multiple levels between such actors and postgraduate researchers. The other dimensions of these unequal power relations are gender, ethnicity, age ability and so on. Additionally, a researcher is often made aware that the responses given to certain questions may be 'tried and tested' answers if the respondent is accustomed to talking with lobbyists, funding bodies and so on. In this way, the format and text of the interview may be highly skewed. Such ways of affecting the interview, as Puwar suggests,

range from monologues of speech, highly defensive off-hand behaviour, to a delivery of pre-scripted official speech. So the collection of field notes within elite studies quite often portray the researcher as having to spend a lot of energy on trying to maintain some control over the interview as the management of the whole interview can become quite slippery and problematic.<sup>20</sup>

Puwar's experience in gaining interview access to sixty-five women MPs in UK is a useful illustration of the types of problems encountered. The common problem, which was eluded to earlier, is related to the bombardment that some respondents, particularly those in positions of power, receive from journalists and other undergraduate/postgraduate student researchers.

Often the reason given for a rejection was that the MP was overwhelmed by requests for interviews on the experience of being a woman in politics. This was a rather odd response given the paucity of published studies. It seems in fact, that interviews by journalists on this subject and requests for information from school, college and university students, were being used as reasons for refusing an academic interview. Given that MPs are constantly receiving requests

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<sup>20</sup> N Puwar (1997) 'Reflections on Interviewing Women MPs' *Sociological Research Online* 2:. Available URL: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/2/1/4.html>

for interviews it is understandable that they have to prioritise who they give their time to. As journalists act as a communication channel between the MPs and the electorate, which means that they can often make or break a MP, its no surprise that MPs are less impressed with requests from academics.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, these requests for interviews do encroach on time geographies of respondents. This is particularly evident when respondents work in the voluntary (third) sectors for little or no money.

Puwar overcame this barrier to access, however, with persistence and by engaging in a discourse of power:

(I)n a second round of letters, it was pointed out that this was a staff research project, not only a Ph.D. study, and the data would be used in an academic book. As I was apparently competing against others for the right to an interview, it was felt that such statements of status might give me a 'competitive advantage'. The response to this version of the letter was in fact much more positive. Three requests were sent to each female MP before a final refusal was accepted. Amusingly, one MP told me that she usually gave in to a third request for an interview because it showed the serious intentions of the researcher.<sup>22</sup>

There are third and fourth forms of interviewing which were exploited for this research - the *group interview*, otherwise known as a *focus group* and the *on-line interview*, both of which are discussed in more detail in chapter seven.

### ***Constructionism and self/place construction***

Another vital way of understanding the empirical fieldwork material is through ideas of social construction. European and American perceptions of 'global societies' are constructed and grounded in the context of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the Industrial and Scientific revolutions of the nineteenth-century. These periods were characterised by the belief that individuals could understand the world through objective, scientific knowledge which would reveal that world 'as it really exists'. Such knowledge would lead to a rationally grounded culture of abundance, justice, and universal peace. This was the age of 'modernity' and during that period the study of the mind centred on how humans achieved 'true' knowledge of the world and how 'reality' was achieved.<sup>23</sup>

Many academic commentators of the middle and late twentieth-century claim no longer to adhere to these two axioms of 'modernity', arguing that humanity cannot afford the

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

illusions implicit in either belief. Hence, the origins of knowledges are currently understood to be 'socially constructed' since knowledges rely upon the socially crafted tool of language. 'Constructionism' of this kind offers that 'selves' and individuals are socially and historically constructed, not naturally occurring objects, which casts doubt on the Western Enlightenment version of the 'self'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, universal goals, such as scientific planning, abundance, justice and peace, are considered suspect since they are frequently linked to the ideologies of 'master theories', such as fascism, Marxism, capitalism. Thus, a 'post-modern' position seeks to reject the notion of 'meta-narratives' in favour of 'micro or local narratives' where claims to 'truth' are more modest and less subject to abuse.<sup>25</sup> A preference for 'local narratives' offers the prospect that the stories and voices of those who are conventionally silenced and excluded from full and democratic participation in a society of modernity - due to powerful demarcations of poverty, gender, ethnicity or sexuality, which are mechanisms of social control - might be empowered through 'voice'.<sup>26</sup> 'Social constructionism' and 'post-modernism' both reject and question scientific and empirical methodologies, theories which stress an autonomous, consistent, logical human self and the notion of one author and one interpretation of a text.<sup>27</sup>

'Constructionism' is used in two senses: the first embraces the perspective that human understanding of reality is not a direct representation of what essentially and objectively exists 'out there' but the result of individual, cultural and social processes mediated through forms of language which select and transform human experiences. The second and more restrictive sense of constructionism refers to the notion that individuals actively shape and interpret their experiences by various processes. Here the emphasis is on the personal and agentive aspects of experience as constructed. Constructionism is the understanding that individuals are born into a social, cultural world and live their everyday lives inextricably bound to the social and cultural matrix, particularly language, which serves as an *a priori* interpretative framework for different experiences. Therefore, social

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<sup>23</sup> J Bruner (1991) 'The narrative construction of reality' *Critical Inquiry* 18:1, 1-21

<sup>24</sup> R Harre (1989) 'The deconstruction of self' in J Shotter & K J Gergen (eds.) *Texts of Identity* (London, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks: Sage), 7

<sup>25</sup> See J-F Lyotard (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) and D Harvey (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell)

<sup>26</sup> For example, feminists emphasise 'giving voice' to women who have been 'silenced' in society, by describing the diversity of their experiences: see S B Gluck & D Patai (eds.) (1991) *Women's Words: the feminist practice of oral history* (London & New York: Routledge). However, K Reissman, *Narrative Analysis* is sceptical about this idea, arguing that 'We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret', 8

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, post-modern positions recognise that it is unclear who authors any text and that meanings of any texts always multiple: see J Clifford & G Marcus (1986) *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography* (University of California Press)

and cultural everyday life has a vital role in establishing not only what experiences an individual will have, but how those experiences will be interpreted.<sup>28</sup> This is a fundamental point to remember throughout this thesis.

### Synopsis

**Section I** and **II** of this chapter aimed to set the context for the analyses in the following chapters. The themes which are identified in chapter three will be further understood through the methods which are detailed above. **Section I** outlined some of the practical elements for this research stage. This involved interviewing and case study techniques which require the employment of multiple methods to understand the research. **Section II** reflected on the practice of research and research methods. Research of this kind explores language used to view and describe social lives, events and experiences not only of the 'researched' but also of the 'researcher'. The social realities of the researcher often have an influence on the research 'text' that is produced. This is a crucial point to remember in the course of this text. This section also outlines the dangers and difficulties involved in using such techniques as interviewing.

**Section II** also considered the idea of discourse analysis. This method provides a vital way to understand the productions and reproductions of social meaning and identities through talk and texts. It is through discourse analysis that the themes have been drawn out of chapter three. Discourse analysis will also be useful in structuring the analysis of the following chapters. Finally, another way of thinking which will be useful for the analysis of material in subsequent chapters is social construction. This approach is discussed in chapter three in relation to the social construction of technologies, but it is a useful concept to understand how places, selves and narratives are constructed by individuals, groups and institutions. Again, this perspective suggests that research of this kind is not a representation of the world 'as it actually exists'. It is a vital perspective when analysing the construction of the structural discourses identified in chapter three. Additionally, this perspective will be vital in understanding the construction of the technocultural lifeworlds of on and off-line community. This approach emphasises that experiences and interpretations are mediated through cultural and social context and processes.

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<sup>28</sup> See J Bruner (1990) *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA. & London: Harvard University Press)

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**PART ONE**

**CONSTRUCTING POLICY  
DISCOURSES OF  
'COMMUNITY' IN THE 'INFORMATION  
SOCIETY'**

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## INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE

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[T]he challenge of ensuring that the electronic community enhances the quality of life and encourages active and equitable involvement in this new community sphere cannot be overemphasised. Our recent experience with the place-based and social environment in which we currently live has hopefully shattered out naiveté concerning how a convivial yet complex living environment is brought into being. The naiveté of the business firm that claims it is only adding a new product or technology to the marketplace; the naiveté of government that formulates its policies in response to short-term political pressures rather than long-range communications priorities; the naiveté of the systems planner or engineer who believes that a neatly drawn blueprint can anticipate the needs of a dynamic, pluralistic society; and the naiveté of the citizen who leaves decision-making about the future up to others until that future impinges on his [sic.] doorstep: these are not adequate postures for the building of a new communications environment.<sup>1</sup>

**Part One** of this thesis is essentially about what the above quote reveals.<sup>2</sup> It covers the types of different perspectives and visions that different actors have about technologies. This part is concerned with the various constructions of discourses of 'information society', the city, and 'community'. It continues the theoretical and methodological perspectives which were approached in chapters one and two. Most pertinent is the idea of social construction and the (re)-production of meaning through text and language.<sup>3</sup> The ideas of social construction in this research borrow a 'post-modern' approach which emphasises the rejection of meta-narratives and instead embraces the micro, local narratives. The ideas which influence this research in particular, are expressed through a certain set of discourses. These discourses are constructed discursively and they have an impact on the structural policy discourses which shape the idea of community-ICT relations. However, this part is also concerned with showing how these discourses are in turn constructed and re-shaped in practice. The role of **Part Two** is to highlight this, and to show how community-ICT initiatives often draw on the hegemonic ideas which are produced by common discourses.

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<sup>1</sup> K Kalba cited in S Doheny-Farina (1997) *The Wired Neighbourhood* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press) 176. This quote is referring to community television, but is still relevant in the current context.

<sup>2</sup> Although it is recognised that this quote refers to community television.

<sup>3</sup> This way of thinking is developed from W E Bijker & J Law (eds) (1992) *Shaping Technology, Building Society: studies in sociotechnical change* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press) and S Woolgar in W H Dutton (ed.) (1996) *Information and Communication Technologies: visions and realities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

## Chapter Three

### Constructions of Cyberspace and Community in the 'Global Information Society'

#### Preamble

Chapter one outlined the aims, directions and the research questions as well as suggesting gaps in previous research which make this work necessary. It also indicated that a theoretical framework would be constructed in order to approach answers to the research questions. Chapter two then considered the reflexive and practical elements of the work. These are employed to extract the major themes so far and how they structure the analysis of community-ICT initiatives and politics in practice. This chapter now introduces three sections which address a set of key structural discourses.

**Section I** explores the discursive discourses which shape thinking about ICTs and society. It highlights four main discourses which feed into the theoretical concerns and which are important for the research queries. The theoretical framework relies heavily on these discourses, but it must be emphasised that these are by no means the only discourses which could be identified as significant. They are, however, what are considered to be the most powerful and pervasive in the context of this work which shape much of the understanding of community-ICT relations. This research starts with an understanding of community in urban places as constructed through various concepts, processes, and ways of expressing social relations. It has been proposed by various commentators that processes of globalisation have simultaneously been decidedly uneven, but also have homogenised cultures, popular cultures, politics and economics.<sup>1</sup> What is represented as 'global media' has rendered these processes more apparent. Yet, reactions to this idea of globalisation have been processes of localisation. Here is where a paradox emerges. Certain media such as the Internet and ICTs in general have supported and indeed facilitated these processes of globalisation, apparently rendering the globe, and global information and communication resources, more reachable and controllable. The same ICTs are being appropriated and indeed institutionalised in what are represented as

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<sup>1</sup> For example, D Harvey (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity: an enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Cambridge, MA. Oxford: Blackwell)



'deprived' urban communities in cities, at least in the UK, as a tool for re-localisation, local identity creation and identity reinforcement. The background to the uptake of these technologies has been the retreat by the less deprived into privatised and sanitised suburbs away from the inner cities.<sup>2</sup> Those left behind in deprived urban spaces are subsequently and institutionally understood to be the 'socially excluded'. Localisation and the use of ICTs in order to generate local content, creativity and identity is seen as a way in which deprived communities might be regenerated and included in the idea of a 'global information society'.

In this context, **Section II** explores the structural 'technocultural discourse' – and hence 'technocultural landscapes' – discussed and critiqued by Robins. This is an important section as Robins' critique is carried and contested throughout the work. It is against his critique of a 'technocultural landscape' that the broader empirical work is situated in later chapters. The discursive discourses, highlighted in **Section I**, feed into this idea of a technocultural landscape. Robins critiques the notion of virtual communities and 'virtual urbanism', suggesting that it offers society an 'escape' into an 'other' place which is ordered and which is shaped by Enlightenment imaginings of urbanism. The section, additionally, outlines some other ways of reflecting on ICTs. The purpose of this is to locate the way in which this researcher situates ICTs. It also prepares the reader to understand the ideas that drive the discourses examined in **Section III**.

**Section III** then goes on to, examine structural policy discourses and shows how these policy ideas draw heavily on the broader discursive discourses. These discourses can also be examined using Robins' critique of the 'technocultural landscape', but it becomes evident in later chapters that his critique naively neglects the micro-politics of on and off-line communities.

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## **Section I: Discursive Structural Discourses**

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### **Setting the theoretical scene: four discourses**

There is an extensive body of literature on technology(ies) and society(ies), a great deal of which emanates from ideas about scientific achievement in the Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Enlightenment was very much a Euro-

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, M Davis (1990) *City of Quartz* (London: Verso); M Davis (1992) *Beyond Bladerunner: urban control, the ecology of fear* (Westfield NJ.: Open Magazines Pamphlets); Slouka (1996); Sorkin (1992)

centric project of 'progress', technological achievement and power by 'man'. Undoubtedly, the Enlightenment can provide a useful critical historical perspective for an analysis of the ways in which technologies have played a vital role in human social, political, economic and cultural landscapes. Indeed, as Katz suggests,

I've always seen the significance of the Internet as having much more do with the Enlightenment than the dawn of a New Millennium. Like the brave philosophers of the 18th century, Digital Citizens are united by an ambitious vision, much like the one historian Peter Gay described in his book *The Enlightenment* as "a program of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism, and freedom, above all, freedom in its many forms - freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realise one's talents, freedom of aesthetic response, freedom, in a word, of moral man to make his own way in the world."<sup>3</sup>

From this historical context other perspectives are revealed, such as technological determinism and social constructivism, which have tended to characterise human interactions with and writing or thinking about technologies.

Before beginning to situate the research within the context of the relevant literatures, it is necessary to briefly outline commonly applied discourses of technologies, specifically in relation to ICTs and urban spaces. These discourses have given shape to the more salient arguments in this current research. These discourses have served to guide the debates thus far. The four basic but crucial discourses which must be addressed describe:

- the global information society;
- the city in the global information society;
- off-line urban 'community(ies)';
- online 'community(ies)'.

What follows is an exploration of the theoretical cores of these discourses, their key proponents, and the various narratives that have come to intersect them. These discourses, or systems of language, encode specific forms of knowledge and powerfully influence perceptions, understandings, configurations and identities of community-ICT relations in a global information society.<sup>4</sup> This part of the research, then, is concerned with understanding the ways in which *meanings* of an information society and community-ICT relations are produced and reproduced in the private, public and third sector imaginations.

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<sup>3</sup> J Katz (1997) 'Birth of a Digital Nation' *Wired Magazine*, *Netizen*

<sup>4</sup> See M Foucault (1984) 'The order of discourse' M Shapiro (ed.) *Language and Politics* (Cambridge, MA. Oxford: Blackwell)

Later chapters explore how these meanings are then re-shaped and embedded in local places within different communities.

### **Discourse One: critiquing the global information society?**

The first discourse is that of the 'global information society'. The notion of a '*global information society*' is structured by narratives of globalisation and, in particular, the 'network society', of which Manuel Castells is a leading commentator. Castells suggests that the social landscape of human life has been re-shaped by a long and historical technological revolution driven by ICTs of various kinds.<sup>5</sup> Added to this, as Kevin Robins proposes, 'globalisation' can be represented as virtual capitalism of which ICTs are a crucial organisational factor.<sup>6</sup> The idea has many proponents in the public, private and third sectors, including - and probably one of the most hegemonic - the European Union.

Accordingly, within the discourse of the global information society, there are intersecting narratives of capitalism, technologies, knowledge as information and, *vice versa*, globalisation, localisation, and the networked society. Castells, the leading commentator of the 'informational city' and the 'network society', suggests that the ways in which Western societies are organised is shifting. Castells distinguishes between a *capitalist mode of production*, which he considers as a way of organising a social system, and a *mode of development* which is the way in which a level of production is achieved. Different societies, Castells suggests, use different modes of development, but it is a certain new more autonomous mode of development - that of information processing - which is producing a new 'socio-technical paradigm' for Western societies.<sup>7</sup>

Castells claims that the global economy, brought about by economic and political processes of globalisation, is not the same as a world economy.<sup>8</sup> The 'world economy' has been in existence in the 'West' since at least the Enlightenment, so Castells argues, but the 'global economy' is a 'new reality':

This globalisation has developed as a fully fledged system only in the last two decades, on the basis of information/communication technologies that were previously not available. The global

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<sup>5</sup> M Castells (1996) 'Prologue: the net and the self' *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA. Oxford: Blackwell) 1

<sup>6</sup> K Robin (1999) 'Foreclosing on the City? The bad idea of virtual urbanism' in Downey & McGuigan (1999), 34-59

<sup>7</sup> This is explained in F Webster (1995) 'Information and Urban Change: Manuel Castells' *Theories of the Information Society* London & New York: Routledge) 194

<sup>8</sup> M Castells (1997b) 'An introduction to the information age' *City* 7, 6-16

economy reaches out to the whole planet, but it is not planetary, it does not include the whole planet. In fact, it excludes probably a majority of the population.<sup>9</sup>

Castells suggests that the new economy which has emerged in the last couple of decades is distinctive in two ways: it is *informational* and it is *global*.

It is informational *and* global because, under the new historical conditions, productivity is generated through and competition is played out in a global network of interaction. And it has emerged in the last quarter of the century because the Information Technology Revolution provides the indispensable, material basis for such a new economy.<sup>10</sup>

Castells is quick to stress that ICTs do not *determine* this global economy: they do not create the network society, but facilitate it. Castells goes on to explain that in this context, a Fourth World of exclusion is emerging which consists,

not only of most of Africa, and rural Asia, and of Latin America shanties, but also of the South Bronx, La Courneuve, Kamagaski, or Tower Hamlets of this world ... A fourth world that... is predominantly populated by women and children.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, Castells proposes that 'the Information Age does not have to be the age of stepped-up inequality, polarisation and social exclusion. But for the moment it is'.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Orthodox views of the 'Age of Information'***

So, it is clear that the idea which pervades public, private and third sectors is that 'society' is moving into an 'Age of Information and knowledge' and that this is an inevitable process. Some suggest that this 'revolution' is having as strong an impact socially, politically, economically and culturally as the industrial revolution.<sup>13</sup> For example, the European Union Green Paper *People First* suggests:

We are living through a historic period of technological change, brought about by the development and the widening application of information and communication technologies. This process is both different from, and better than, anything we have seen before. It has a huge potential for wealth creation, higher standards of living and better services.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) imagines that:

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 7

<sup>10</sup> Castells (1996), 66

<sup>11</sup> Castells (1997b), 8

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 10

<sup>13</sup> J Barnes, J Chalmers & I Pearson (1994) 'Internet Futures: East Meets West in Cyberspace?' *Paper presented at Intercom 94 Conference*. See Alvin Toffler's thesis of technological 'waves' A Toffler (1980) *The Third Wave* (London: Pan)

<sup>14</sup> EU Green Paper (1996) *Living and Working in the Information Society: People First* COM (96)389, July

the major differences between society today and the emerging Information Society is that the IS [information society] is, and will increasingly become:

- more interconnected;
- more interactive;
- more instantaneous (fast-paced);
- more information rich;
- more informal;
- more affordable;
- and more uncertain.<sup>15</sup>

The National Working Party on Social Inclusion in the Information Society (INSINC), which is comprised of members of IBM, the Community Development Foundation (CDF), and a mixture of public, private and third sector actors, offers this definition of the global information society:

A society characterised by a high level of information intensity in the everyday lives of most citizens, in most organisation and workplaces; by the use of common or compatible technologies for a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities: and by the ability to transmit, receive and exchange digital data rapidly between places irrespective of distance.<sup>16</sup>

The key, and some might say naive and simplistic perception is that humans can now conduct and perform their everyday lives through telecommunications networks and ICTs. New forms of relationships are being constructed through ICTs and economies are becoming more interconnected and interdependent because ICTs make this possible.<sup>17</sup> From this idea emerges the attendant notion that the world is more reachable, graspable, controllable, borderless and that geography and spaces are no longer a *barrier*. This is certainly represented in many powerful media images. Webster explains this idea, evident in Castells' theorisations, and the implication for geography:

Castells' core argument being that the development of IT networks around the globe promotes the importance of information flows for economic and social organisation while simultaneously it reduces the significance of particular places. It follows that, in the 'informational economy', a major concern or organisations becomes the management of and response to information flows. This is in keeping with the geographer's concern with spatial relationships, a central argument

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<sup>15</sup> An Information Society For All Communication on a Commission Initiative for the Special European Council of Lisbon, 23 and 24 March 2000

<sup>16</sup> INSINC (1996) *The Net Result: Social inclusion in the Information Society* Report of the National Working Party on Social Inclusion in the Information Age (IBM in collaboration with Community Development Foundation)

<sup>17</sup> M Castells (1996) 'Prologue: the net and the self' *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA. Oxford: Blackwell) 1

being that information networks and the consequent circulation of information results in organisations becoming increasingly able to transcend limitations formerly imposed by place.<sup>18</sup>

### *Spatialities in the 'borderless world'*

This idea can be expressed in the concept of a 'borderless world'. There is evidence to suggest that the private and public sectors are embedding, and in turn becoming embedded within, this particularly compelling idea of the 'borderless world' in the 'global information society'.<sup>19</sup> The idea of a 'borderless world', and placelessness - 'there is no there' - is indeed powerful. However, commentators, such as Henry Wai-chung Yeung, who critiques Kenichi Ohmae's notion of a 'borderless world', suggests that it is a popular notion which is adopted particularly within the discourse of the 'global' economy:

(B)ecause of this increasing integration and interdependence of national economies at a global scale, it is now fashionable among business gurus, international economists and liberal politicians to assert that the world is 'borderless'.<sup>20</sup>

The perceived impact of this 'borderless world' where global firms, industries, and individuals, are becoming intertwined and interconnected, is the *demise of 'geography'* and national boundaries. Yeung suggests though that the underpinning logic(s) of 'globalisation as an ongoing process' have not been adequately addressed. Instead, he argues that globalisation has not signalled the end of geography or the creation of a borderless society. Rather than diminishing the scope of local action, different forms of local resistance and expression have found a 'place', 'reinforcing the interconnectedness of the local and the global, and the multiplicity and hybridisation of social life at every spatial scale'.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, Yeung asserts, although the processes of globalisation are theorised as producing a culturally, socially, economically homogenised state of being, a dialectical response can be identified which suggests that the state condition reaffirms *difference*.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Saskia Sassen suggests a new logic of agglomeration in a globalising world economy. She suggests that, as opposed to neutralising geography and place, ICTs actually reinforces

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<sup>18</sup> Webster (1995), 199

<sup>19</sup> K Ohmae (1990) *The borderless world: power and strategy in the interlinked economy* (London: Harper Collins)

<sup>20</sup> H Wai-chung Yeung (1998) 'Capital, state and space: contesting the borderless world' *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 23, 292

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 292

<sup>22</sup> H Wai-chung Yeung (1998) 'Capital, state and space: contesting the borderless world' *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 23, 292

spatiality, the local and place-based economic, political, cultural and social relations.<sup>23</sup> Sassen explores these issues in the context of global cities, of which London is one. However, what of other urban contexts such as 'communities' which are out-with the square mile of the City of Westminster, for instance? Castells suggests that as global centres become increasingly advanced and interconnected on the global networked society, 'territories surrounding these nodes play an increasingly subordinate function, sometimes becoming irrelevant or even dysfunctional'.<sup>24</sup> It could be argued that this idea of enhanced local identity in a globalising and borderless world is inextricably tied with reactions against the perceived postmodernisation of 'communities', suburbanisation and consequent alienation of society and individuals from public spaces, discursive and physical. These ideas are encompassed in the second main discourse relevant to this research: that of the disappearing place or the 'urban crisis' and so are explored more fully in the following sections.

### ***Conflicting perspectives in discourses of the global information society***

Miles summarises some of the conflicting perspectives and attitudes to the information society.<sup>25</sup> He is concerned with the inequalities and uneven power which might be exercised through ICTs in an information society. He suggests that there are two dimensions that underpin the debate on the social implications of ICTs and the information society. Miles' summary of these dimensions is reproduced in the table below.

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<sup>23</sup> S Sassen (1994) 'A new geography of centers and margins: summary and implications' *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks & London: Pine Forge Press)

<sup>24</sup> M Castells (1996) 'The space of flows' *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge, MA. Oxford: Blackwell) 380

<sup>25</sup> I Miles (1996) 'The Information Society: competing perspectives on the social and economic implications of information and communication technologies' in W H Dutton (ed.) (1996) *Information and Communication Technologies: visions and realities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 37-52

FIGURE 3.01  
VIEWS OF THE DEPTH AND WIDTH DIMENSIONS OF THE INFORMATION  
SOCIETY  
SOURCE: MILES (1996)

DEPTH: The 'change' dimension

Continuism	Transformism	Structuralism
<p>Claims about the information society, ICTs, and the predicted rate of diffusion of the technology are regarded as overstated. Main features of society and basic power structures are thought unlikely to alter, although social and political initiatives may lead to change. Forecasting mainly for short- and medium-term, based on extrapolating past experience.</p>	<p>Information society is viewed as representing a major historical shift, changing the bases of political power and social classes with a growing role for information workers and knowledge class. ICT seen as revolutionary technology with practical benefits which will promote rapid diffusion. Long-term forecasting based typically on generalisations of leading -edge experiences.</p>	<p>Recognises both barriers to change and openings for far-reaching innovation. Outcomes expected to depend on actors and interests, shaping ICT applications, with an uneven diffusion of the technology. Social change seen coming mainly in new organisational structures, styles, and skills. Forecasts draw on other approaches, usually in areas like industrial organization, employment.</p>



**WIDTH: The 'control' dimension**

Concordism	Antagonism	Structuralism
<p>Access to information regarded as liberating; communication systems as promoting decentralisation and democratisation. ICT seen as aid to abolishing tedious and dangerous work and improving quality of working life. Options opened for: new forms of community; meeting growing education and training needs; dissolving distinctions between regions and social groups.</p>	<p>Information linked to great increases in social and political control. Existing inequalities expected to be widened by gaps between information-rich and poor. ICT seen as increasing de-skilling and degradation of work and separation between mental and manual labour. Likely acceleration of tendencies to withdraw into private, often highly stressful worlds in everyday life.</p>	<p>Information society treated as a shift between different regimes of social actors with unequal opportunities to intervene, but all of whose actions have consequences. Some de-skilling is likely but new skills and job types will be created. Evolution to new cultural forms; new resources and interests; and new areas of co-operation and contestation.</p>

The 'depth' dimensions, Miles explains, are concerned with issues related to the speed and scale of change. For example, 'Continuism' implies limited change due to ICTs in an information society. 'Transformism' suggests that the information society is wholly new akin to a 'revolution'. The 'width' dimension view of the information society is constructed through two other perspectives. 'Concordism' understands the information society as decentralising, democratising and offering new forms of self-expression. The other perspective, 'Antagonism' views the information society as offering new forms of social control and surveillance. Miles contends that 'Structuralism', in both dimensions, seeks an understanding which combines the opposing perspectives. Structuralism as a means through which these perspectives can be synthesised, recognises that a diversity of actors and agendas are embodied in different social structures of different organisations, countries and groups. Thinking about ICT-human relations in terms of structuralism means that it is accepted that there is not one future outcome, that there are many

different possible 'information societies'.<sup>26</sup> This is a critical perspective which shall be re-examined in later chapters. Many other questions arise from the discourse of a global information society, including one which Miles, again, raises. Miles asserts that one of the many critical issues facing the information society is:

Will the expansion of computing and telecommunication power within the home lead to new forms of privatisation of family and personal life and the strengthening of boundaries between individuals and groups - or to the encouragement of more interpersonal contact involving mutual reliance, problem-solving, and understanding?<sup>27</sup>

Castells asserts that in a world which is undergoing such radical transformation, it is easy to see how groups and individuals gather around common shared values in order to ground and stabilise some form of collective or individual primary identity. This search for identity, whether it be ascribed or constructed becomes 'the fundamental source of social meaning'.<sup>28</sup> As Castells asserts,

[W]e ought to locate this process of revolutionary technological change in the social context in which it takes place and by which it is being shaped; and we should keep in mind that the search for identity is as powerful as techno-economic change in charting the new history.<sup>29</sup>

This is precisely what this research intends to do. The 'city' or the 'urban realm' is one such social context where the 'revolutionary' technological change and search for identity is taking place and is being re-produced. This research does not concentrate on the typical spaces of production, such as the financial locales of the global economy in the centre of London for instance. Instead, this research concentrates on the re-production and re-shaping of technological change at the margins. The work explores how those who are not 'globalpolitans' are challenging the logic of control which is being embedded in the global information society.<sup>30</sup> First, though, one must inquire more deeply into the meanings and form of the 'urban' in the global information society.

### **Discourse Two: the city in the global information society**

When discussing the contemporary nature of the 'city', a great deal of the commonly referenced literature emanates from North American perspectives. In some respects this

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<sup>26</sup> I Miles (1996) 'The Information Society: competing perspectives on the social and economic implications of information and communication technologies' in W H Dutton (ed.) (1996) *Information and Communication Technologies: visions and realities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 40

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 51

<sup>28</sup> Castells (1996), 3

<sup>29</sup> Castells (1996), 4

<sup>30</sup> Castells uses this term 'globapolitans' to describe the 'elites' who reap power, wealth and control from the global economy. They are described by Castells as 'half beings, half flows', thus they are embedded within the space of flows of a 'new global

makes cross-national translation and comparison difficult. It is, however, still worthwhile. There are some characteristics of American city life which, it could be argued, have migrated to Europe and the UK in particular, through processes of globalisation and consumerism. Jacobs and Appleyard, for instance, note in what ways work and commerce have gradually flowed out local US neighbourhoods and communities, while fear of crime has created homogenous social enclaves and communities. In summary, they argue 'cities have become meaningless places beyond their citizen's grasp'.<sup>31</sup> Part of this 'meaninglessness' stems from the inability to discern the origin of products and materials which surround humans as well as who owns them, as a result of globalising processes. To Jacobs and Appleyard, it is not surprising that humans withdraw to enjoy their privatised lives, dislocated from 'community'. As a result, cities to Jacobs and Appleyard are 'symbols of inequality' where the differences between the rich and poorer areas are inscribed in the physical landscape.

Rhetoric which intersects the discourse of a globalising, increasingly borderless information society have influenced key conceptualisations and discursive constructions of the 'city'. As Winner suggests:

(F)or modernism the prescribed frame for social relations was that of the city and suburb. But today, for significant parts of society, attachment is no longer defined geographically at all. Many activities of work and leisure take place in global, electronic settings.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Conceptualising city-ICT relations***

Graham and Marvin offer an insightful critique of ways in which cities and urban place/space have been conceptualised and imagined in relation to technologies.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, they suggest that not only has there been a lengthy neglect of the impacts of telecommunications on cities in urban studies, but also that the predominant theorisations about cities themselves are crudely represented by inadequate technological metaphors. The table below taken from Graham and Marvin illustrates quite clearly the dominant metaphors of the 'contemporary city' adopted by various commentators:

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order'. M Castells (1997a) 'The other face of the earth: social movements against the new global order' *The Power of Identity* (Cambridge, MA. Oxford: Blackwell) 69

<sup>31</sup> A Jacobs & D Appleyard (1987) 'Toward an Urban design manifesto' *Journal of American Planning Association*

<sup>32</sup> Winner (1997)

<sup>33</sup> S Graham & S Marvin (1996) *Telecommunications and the City: electronic spaces, urban places* (London & NY: Routledge) 8

**FIGURE 3.02**  
**METAPHORICAL CHARACTERISATIONS OF THE CONTEMPORARY**  
**CITY**  
**SOURCE: GRAHAM & MARVIN (1996)**

The 'invisible city' (Batty, 1990)  
 The 'informational city' (Castells, 1989)  
 The 'weak metropolis' (Dematteis, 1988)  
 The 'wired city' (Dutton *et al.*, 1987)  
 The 'telecity' (Fathy, 1991)  
 The 'city in the electronic age' (Harris, 1987)  
 The 'information city' (Hepworth, 1987)  
 The 'knowledge-based city' (Knight, 1989)  
 The 'intelligent city' (Latterasse, 1992)  
 The 'virtual city' (Martin, 1978)  
 'Electronic communities' (Poster, 1990)  
 'Communities without boundaries' (Pool, 1980)  
 'Electronic cottage' (Toffler, 1981)  
 The city as 'Electronic spaces' (Robins and Hepworth, 1988)  
 The 'overexposed city' (Virilio, 1987)  
 The 'Flexicity' (Hillman, 1993)  
 The 'Virtual Community' (Rheingold, 1994)  
 The 'non-place urban realm' (Webber, 1964)  
 'Teletopia' (Piorunski, 1991)  
 'Cyberville' (von Schuber, 1994, quoted in Channel 4, 1994:1)

The 'city', which embeds telecommunications infrastructure and ICTs into the fabric of its political, physical, economic, social and cultural landscapes, is caricatured in sometimes simplistic, technologically determining and homogenising ways. Graham and Marvin suggest that many commentators predict that, as a result of 'instantaneous communications' across time and space the 'spatial 'glue' that concentrates all large cities' will be eroded, which in turn will alter the geographies of the city:<sup>34</sup>

(I)n fact, evidence points to a wide range of experiences in city-telecommunications relations; a complex set of new processes is leading to a new type of 'telegeography' (Staple, 1991). This is based on the degree to which nation states, regions, cities, rural areas, neighbourhoods and households are the foci of investment in telecommunications or are switched into the new globally driven dynamics of telematics-based change.<sup>35</sup>

They propose a more sophisticated approach to city-ICT/telecommunications relations, one which seeks to elicit more thoughtful imaginings of 'city', the 'urban', and 'urbanity'.

<sup>34</sup> Graham & Marvin (1996), 9. Such predictions or imaginings are offered by Toffler (1981)

The image of 'the city' as integrated, unitary and bounded has become defunct - if indeed it ever prevailed.<sup>36</sup> So, Graham and Marvin suggest:

Cities and urban areas, then, must now be seen as the fixed sites and places where the many separate and superimposed social, technological, institutional and economic networks which link them intimately into wider social, economic and cultural dynamics coalesce, cross and interact ... It is the complex interactions between cities as fixed places and the networks that bring intense mobility (telecommunications, infrastructure, transport, the institutional networks of transnational corporations, media flows etc.) that now shape urban life and urban development.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Assertions of growing in-authenticity in urban landscapes***

In other words, the role of the city is changing in important ways as ICTs become increasingly embedded in the different geographies of everyday life. These conceptualisations can, additionally, be associated with a reaction to commentaries which suggest that cities, public spaces and urban 'communities' are eroding, that the urban realm is becoming more fragmented, privatised, simulated, gated and alienating. Often, associating ways of thinking about human landscapes through ICTs suggest elements of inauthenticity in human-ICT relations. Indeed, this is evident in the prefixing of 'virtual' to communities or space that many commentators use, which is amenable to a postmodern perspective. There is a broad body of literature which imagines the city or urban form as a set of fragmented, juxtaposed patchwork of spaces and styles, which form a set of postmodern landscapes. This representation of the urban landscape is intimately related to the changing nature of economic landscapes: a move from a logic of production to a logic of consumption and commodification.<sup>38</sup> Zukin contends that the city is transforming into a commodified object and spectacle to be consumed by 'the public'. 'Places' are constructed as simulated landscapes specifically for this purpose; buildings are mutated and mutilated and presented as pastiches of their 'original' selves. Processes of globalisation, Zukin contends, have evoked fissures between the *market* and *places*.<sup>39</sup> This means that, as production and marketing operate along global networks, places in cities consume increasingly globally homogenous and placeless products. Zukin views this as problematic for cities operating within the networked society which strive for a stable

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<sup>35</sup> Graham & Marvin (1996), 10

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 71

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 71

<sup>38</sup> However, some would argue that the dominant *neoliberal* perspective contends that technology is now the only factor of production: see J Armitage (1999) 'Resisting the neoliberal discourse of technology: the politics of cyberspace in the age of the virtual class' *Ctheory*, February URL: <http://www.ctheory.com>

<sup>39</sup> S Zukin (1991) *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley: University of California Press)

and constantly meaningful image, albeit an image which is meant to 'attract', parading as an 'authentic' representation of the city. As Kitchin reiterates:

These are places that have been 'redeveloped' into 'authenticated' sites; representations of the original, where the fake substitutes itself for the real and in the process becomes more real than the real (e.g. 'olde world' theme pubs).<sup>40</sup>

Sorkin and Soja both expound this theory of the pastiche, inauthentic, simulated, globalising cityscape and insert ICTs into their arguments as a form of confirmation.<sup>41</sup> To them, ICTs embedded within cityscapes create 'no sense of place' by rendering time and space obsolete and erasing *difference*. The instability of life in the informational city, as Webster proposes, 'something constantly stimulated by innovations in the realm of culture', is represented as characteristic of a postmodern experience.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Cities in the space of flows***

Possibly the most eloquent imagining of a global information society and the place of the city within this society is articulated by Castells' imagining of a space of 'flows'. Within this thesis Castells argues that a global informational society is constructed around flows of capital, information, technology, organisational interaction, images, sounds and symbols.<sup>43</sup> He suggests that,

because of the nature of the new society, based upon knowledge, organised around networks, and partly made up of flows, the informational city is not a form but a process, a process characterised by the structural domination of the space of flows.<sup>44</sup>

This idea of the city as a fluid form of processes in a global information society is an important and is a useful concept. It allows room for change and dynamism. If the city, as a process in a networked society, permits changing patterns of structural domination then it also permits local resistance strategies.

As the city is perceived to lose it's sense of 'nationhood' - an idea which can be challenged - notions of 'local agency' are activated in order to reinstate a sense of local identity against a landscape of global political and economic power and structural domination.<sup>45</sup> This idea

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<sup>40</sup> R Kitchin (1998) *Cyberspace: the world in the wires* (New York: John Wiley & Sons), 157

<sup>41</sup> E Soja (1989) *Postmodern Geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory* (London: Verso); Sorkin (1992)

<sup>42</sup> Webster (1995), 210

<sup>43</sup> Castells (1996), 412

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 398

<sup>45</sup> Robins questions the term 'local agency', querying whether it can be thought of as a 'coherent entity': this is explored in more detail later in this thesis.

of constantly shifting meanings in and of the informational city is evocative. It is not the same as 'difference' in the information city, though, which is discussed in this work. There are differences in the city of the information society: Castells imagines the informational city as one etched with social disparities. As Webster explains:

As the 'global city' consolidates its position as a centre of information management and control, to which end it generates large numbers of professional and technical occupations, so does it create the 'dual city' that is marked by exceedingly sharp class polarisations in which the working class is denuded and the underclass grows.<sup>46</sup>

To counter much of the North American bias in academic writing on the condition of cities, it is helpful to look to the UK government action on the 'city' to understand how cities are considered to be of concern. In April 1999 the UK Labour government initiated the Urban Task Force (UTF) whose remit was as follows:

- to develop a framework for the future of urban areas of England which is capable of being translated into locally defined solutions, in co-ordination with the development of Government policy;
- drawing on available best practice, to identify ways of overcoming existing barriers and to propose practical and realisable new measures for achieving quality urban development, with specific reference to housing, considering both new development and the potential for re-use of existing buildings;
- to act as a sounding board for the work on the assessment of previously developed land and to advise Ministers accordingly;
- to work alongside, advise and help develop initiatives through English Partnerships, local authorities and others in identifying, targeting and promoting development on key demonstration sites throughout the country.<sup>47</sup>

The leader of the UTF, Lord Rogers of Riverside, in the introduction to the UTF Prospectus suggested that,

The future of our towns, cities and neighbourhoods is at a crossroads. We can see all too clearly down one particular route. It is characterised by environmental degradation, gridlock, increased privatisation of public space, social segregation, low standards of urban design and poor quality of life. We should not fool ourselves that in England, one of the world's most urban countries, we

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<sup>46</sup> Webster (1995), 204

<sup>47</sup> Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1998) 'Ministerial Terms of Reference' *Urban Task Force Prospectus* July

will not go down this route. The wrong choices have already been made in many cities throughout the developed world.<sup>48</sup>

Two of the issues apparently challenging cities in UK are increased *privatisation of public space* and *social segregation*. These ideas echo Castells' evocation of a 'dual city' demarcated by polarisations. Although the Urban Task Force is concerned predominantly with the physical fabric of UK's urban areas, this is the type of language which is commonly employed across policy documents related to 'the urban', particularly in the context of the global information society.

So, where do ideas of 'community' sit within these dual conceptualisations of the city in a global information society? Does this mean that 'difference' in urban communities, particularly marginalised communities are experiencing the same sort of commodification?

### *Whose city?*

Through processes of globalisation and virtual capitalism the 'city' has been represented as a competitive entity which mobilises new ICTs in order to attract global economic as well as political power.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, it can be argued that cities are dynamic starting points for global processes: global business, cultures and habits which emerge under the influence of global consumer and media firms.<sup>50</sup>

Amin and Graham suggest two processes related to globalisation and cities. These two processes act on cities, shaping them, almost all over the world. The first process is the stretching of social relations and institutions across space. The second process is the enhancement of contact and connection between places.<sup>51</sup> Cities in a global information society are, they suggest,

sites of ceaseless flows of people, money, commodities, information and cultural influences. They are home to the institutions associated with these flows and, as such, also centres of influence within chains. This global linkage has increased the heterogeneity of cities by adding a new layer of influences upon older connections between the city and the countryside, the nation, and the rest of the world.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1998) 'The Task Ahead' *Urban Task Force Prospectus* July by Lord Rogers of Riverside

<sup>49</sup> Robins (1999) in Downey & McGuigan, 34-59

<sup>50</sup> A Amin & S Graham (1999) 'Cities of connection and disconnection' in J Allen, D Massey & M Pryke (eds.) (1999) *Unsettling Cities* (London & New York: Routledge), 8

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 8

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 8-9



Thus, there are increasingly more diverse social worlds in cities in an information society. Amin and Graham call this a 'relational' perspective. A relational perspective concentrates on the notion that cities are places of intersection between multiple webs of social, cultural and technological flows. These multiple webs are overlaid upon the physical spaces of cities.<sup>53</sup> Amin and Graham offer the example of the New York urban landscapes to illustrate this relational way of thinking. For example, one can consider the spaces of the top city working professionals who have access to exclusive housing, telecommunications, transport networks, as well as access to highly specific consumer goods, services, commodities, which are selected at will from across the globe. Then, Amin and Graham lead us to examine the very contrasting spaces of Lower East Side Manhattan only a few miles away. This is a landscape populated heavily by Afro-Americans with high unemployment and poverty levels. Few services such as banking facilities remain located in this landscape, one which could be considered to be fundamentally, ideologically and functionally 'disconnected' from the wider cityscape.<sup>54</sup>

### *Multiplicities in city-ICT relations*

While Allen suggests that processes of 'globalisation' have 'drawn' people into the same social space,<sup>55</sup> Amin and Graham contend that:

one central factor may be the existence of projects or sense of social cohesion which serve to provide a genuine sense of collectively and belonging across the social and spatial divides in a city. This we propose against the idea that creativity stems from the anarchy of urban diversity and conflict (i.e. the properties of the melting pot), or from which seek to hegemonise particular social agendas over a city.<sup>56</sup>

Can this be a way then of thinking about on and off line spaces? Graham suggests that relations between cities and technologies such as ICTs, which facilitate the processes of globalisation, are complex and indeterminate with different effects in different places and times.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, as an alternative to many commentators who suggest that globalisation aided by ICTs has caused urban dissolution, Graham as well as Sassen suggest that processes of globalisation and ICT use have compounded the *advantages* of large metropoli:

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 9

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 13

<sup>55</sup> J Allen & D Massey (eds.) (1995) *Geographical Worlds* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press), 107

<sup>56</sup> A Amin & S Graham (1997) 'The ordinary city' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, NS 22, 421

<sup>57</sup> S Graham & A Aurigi (1997) 'Urbanising Cyberspace? The Nature and Potential of the Virtual Cities Movement' *City*, 7-8: 18-38

The very specificity of the urban has much to do, as ever, with the way cities facilitate all sorts of communications and exchange, both telemated and face-to-face.<sup>58</sup>

Cities and ICTs stand in recursive interaction - they shape each other. Cities, then, are being 're-modelled' rather than 'dis-invented' in a global information society.<sup>59</sup> Public spaces, Sharon Zukin argues, are the primary sites where public cultures are articulated.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, as Amin & Graham suggest:

New shared spaces, new, improved public realms, new mixed-use urban landscapes, new intercultural interactions and an urban time-space fully animated and enlivened with a rich array of social and cultural activities are seen to be the answer to the problems of decay, alienation, polarisation and the crisis in urban public space.<sup>61</sup>

Christine Boyer, however, suggests that the 'figured city' - the carefully designed spaces of consumption for the affluent - now overlays the 'disfigured city', which consists of the interstitial, neglected spaces for the less affluent:<sup>62</sup>

Design and planning, transport and telematics infrastructures, regressive systems of urban politics and taxation and intensive surveillance systems work to keep the two utterly segregated.<sup>63</sup>

So, a multitude of spaces can be identified within the urban form or city. Within the workplace, for example, it is suggested there has been a shift in power as work place hierarchies are broken down. These hierarchies are being eroded with the increased use of the Internet, allowing for more flexibility in and out of the workplace. Power relations also intersect at points where electronic and physical networks, utilised to create business, meet. Thus, it is claimed that this spread of the horizontal organisation allows and encourages a certain type of individual to flourish who is imbued with flexibility and the 'spirit of informationalism' and whose mind is devoted 'to the job' - whatever and wherever that may be.<sup>64</sup> Although power relations are shifting, there still appears to be a 'capitalist class' who rely on networks of relationships, and thus have a constellations of interests through which they can maintain power.<sup>65</sup> Castells writes that these 'elites' form their own societies within cities,

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 23

<sup>59</sup> Amin & Graham (1999), 28

<sup>60</sup> Sharon Zukin cited in Amin & Graham, 422

<sup>61</sup> Amin & Graham, 415-416

<sup>62</sup> Christine Boyer (1995) cited in Amin & Graham, 421

<sup>63</sup> Amin & Graham, 421

<sup>64</sup> F Webster (1997) 'Is this the Information Age? Towards a critique of Manuel Castells' *City* 8, 72

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 78

and constitute symbolically secluded communities, retrenched behind the very material barrier of real estate pricing. They define their community as a spatially bound, interpersonally networked subculture. I propose the hypothesis that the space of flows is made up of personal micro-networks that project their interests in functional macro-networks throughout the global set of interactions in the space of flows.<sup>66</sup>

This is a clear example which is evident in one important node in the network of a global information society: the Docklands and surrounding residential area in the East End of London, which shall be discussed in more detail in chapter five. In relation to the proposition of polarised cities in the information society, Webster suggests that those who prosper and thrive in an informational city negotiate ways of living close to the 'ghetto underclass', even exploiting the cheap and available labour in these areas. At the same time these 'elites' strategically maintain a physical and imagined distance from this 'ghetto underclass'.<sup>67</sup> This shall be explored more fully in later chapters.

### **Discourse Three: expressing place-based urban 'community'**

Within the spaces of flows in a global information society, there still remain social groupings and the desire to construct barriers around particular social groupings, as the example of the 'elites' which Castells examines above, suggests. Webster notes:

We know from Castells and others that the informational city owes much of its present character to the pressures that stem from managing globalised information flows, but what about the informational dimensions of this new urban form? Just what way of life, what cultural representations and features, do we come across in the informational city?<sup>68</sup>

A way of exploring these cultural dimensions and features is through analysing the social groupings that emerge in places and spaces. So, it seems it is necessary to explore what forms and what processes influence the shaping of these groupings and 'communities' within the global space of flows, as Castells suggests:

One of the oldest debates in urban sociology refers to the loss of community as a result of urbanisation first, and of suburbanisation later ... People socialise and interact in their local environment, be it in the village, in the city, or in the suburb, and they build social networks among their neighbours. On the other hand, locally based identities intersect with other sources of meaning and social recognition, in a highly diversified pattern that allows for alternative interpretations.<sup>69</sup>

The formation and enactment of identity is very much tied in with local physical environments. Castells argues that people tend to resist atomisation and individualisation,

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<sup>66</sup> Castells (1996), 416

<sup>67</sup> Webster (1995), 207

<sup>68</sup> Webster (1995), 208

<sup>69</sup> Castells (1997a), 60

preferring instead to gather around 'community' organisations that create communal cultural identities. This is linked to the instability that many experience in a world whose social landscape is shifting in the global information society.<sup>70</sup> The search for a collective identity is, some would argue, increasing. However, it is evident that those who are benefiting most from the rewards of the global economy are creating collective identity which might not be based in geography.

Perhaps one of the currently influential thinkers about 'community', particularly in North America is Amitai Etzioni. To Etzioni, the American 'society' is represented well by the idea of a 'mosaic' which,

depicts a society in which various communities maintain their religious, culinary, and cultural particularities, proud of and knowledgeable about their specific traditions while at the same time they recognise that they are integral parts of a more encompassing whole. The communities are, and see themselves as, constitutive elements of a more encompassing community of communities, a society of which they are parts.<sup>71</sup>

This might be an illustrative metaphor to use in many ways, but it still maintains that social groups can be seen as bounded and homogenous, identifying with and subscribing to implicit and explicit cultural, religious, and other practices and ideologies. It eclipses the notion of difference within groups as well as between them. Etzioni takes issue with ideas of 'difference' and whilst understanding that difference is necessary, he suggests that:

by stressing diversity but not the elements that bind us - we further diminish our already weak and weakening commonalities. We face the danger of coming apart at the seams.<sup>72</sup>

### ***Defining the urban 'community'***

Before delving deeper into these questions, it is important to approach some sort of understanding about what 'community' might mean. Richard Sennett is often quoted in discussions of community formations and public and 'civil' life in general. Sennett elucidates quite poetically in some ways the actions of humans ('man', as he quotes) in public as well as 'private' spaces, in the 'universe of social relations'. His work is particularly interesting for this research in his exploration of why and how people cluster in social groupings such as 'communities', explaining such actions with historical references. In this way he illustrates the external forces and politics which might act on individuals and

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<sup>70</sup> Castells (1997a), 60

<sup>71</sup> A Etzioni (1996) 'From melting pot to mosaic: America's community of communities' *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 1996, 127-138

groups, as well as forces such as *narcissism* which shape certain social relations, according to Sennett.<sup>73</sup> Sennett suggests that a fear of impersonality, which directs modern society, means that humans imagine 'community' on increasingly restricted scales. This means that forms of social groupings, the means through which the 'self' in society is shared, is constricted to exclude those who are different in terms of class, politics or style.<sup>74</sup> It is perhaps more appropriate to return to Sennett's work in later chapters.

In any discussion of 'community' in this research, there has to be an understanding of what the reference to the 'third sector' implies in the research. The 'third sector' and articulations of 'community' are inherently linked in the UK context. The third sector very often forms the conduit for representations and encouragement of 'community' activities and indeed identities. Lipietz discussed the notion of a third sector in his early works of the 1980s, connecting the idea to a paradigm based on trust, participation and inclusion.<sup>75</sup>

In my books, when I speak of the third sector, I speak of community, not welfare state, but welfare community. So I think it's strongly connected. If you think that the community is the place where your real stake is, at the same time, where we hold the same hopes, and take in charge the same problems, here we have one of the best connections. It's not the only one of course.<sup>76</sup>

This paradigm is evident in much of the rhetoric which accompanies many private and public sector policies on 'community' regeneration and development and can be further traced in the language and understandings of community that private and public sector actors hold.

### ***Political concerns with urban 'community'***

Returning to the discussion of a globalising information society and what that might mean for third sector or community activities, one can see, as Sassen does, that in the globalising urban realm politicians represent cities as:

hopeless reservoirs for all kinds of social despair. It is interesting to note again how the dominant economic narrative argues that place no longer matters, that firms can be located anywhere thanks to telematics, that major industries now are information-based and hence not

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, 128

<sup>73</sup> R Sennett (1977) 'The end of public culture' *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge & London: Cambridge University Press), 262

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, 263

<sup>75</sup> A Lipietz (1992) *Towards a New Economic Order: postfordism, ecology and democracy* Trans. M Slater (Cambridge: Polity Press)

<sup>76</sup> A Lipietz (1997) 'Urban regeneration, architecture and the stakeholder society' *City* 7, 68

place-bound. This line of argument devalues cities at a time when they are major sites for the new cultural politics.<sup>77</sup>

The future of cities, social relationships and, in particular, communities, is an area of increasing concern for the third and public sectors in particular.<sup>78</sup> 'Community' is an elastic term that has often been appropriated and misappropriated. It is also, as shall be illustrated, an extremely contradictory term. Few attempts are made anymore to critically unpack the term, especially in the context of ICTs. This research treats 'community' as characterised by processes of relationships, connection making, the negotiation of difference and the articulation of identities. Although the term originated in sociological theory, the term shapes and has been re-shaped by social realities.<sup>79</sup> It could be argued that there are four predominant articulations which represent the (mis)-appropriation of the term 'community'.

The first articulation of community is its reification as a tangible entity. A second common articulation of community is that of a small-scale collectivity, situated within the semantic space between 'household' or family and city or 'nation'. Thirdly, community is articulated as a morally desirable way of being. The entity of community is often imbued with an organic quality which is represented as not only intrinsically harmonious but unifying. Within this metaphor, social divisions and exclusions on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity, age, ability are transparent and unproblematic. This means that compliance to hegemonic cultural norms within the boundaries of the morally desirable community is rendered normative. The final articulation of 'community' is that which is nostalgic. This nostalgic articulation of community is constructed by and mediated through consumerist, fragmented, and de-contextualised lifestyle images.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, the articulation of nostalgic community leads to pockets of gentrification in post-industrial urban areas which rely on a constructed collective re-imagination of community living.<sup>81</sup> However, community

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<sup>77</sup> S Sassen (1994) 'A new geography of centers and margins: summary and implications' *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks & London: Pine Forge Press)

<sup>78</sup> See for example Tony Blair's 'New Deal for Communities' scheme developed by the Social Exclusions Unit which has provided a fund of £800 million, from which targeted communities have to bid.

<sup>79</sup> I acknowledge here the vital work of Etzioni and 'communitarianism'. See Etzioni (1994). See also the Demos sponsored London lecture by Etzioni in 1995, covered in the Times (Etzioni 1995) and published other titles such as Atkinson's 'The Common Sense of Community' (1994). However, Ed Schwarz (1991) traces some of the debates back to Plato and Aristotle claiming the latter as a proto-communitarian, as well as citing St. Augustine and Toqueville. Plant (1974) traces the development of communitarian thinking in the German and British philosophers and sociologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mentioning for example Hegel, Marx, Tonnies, Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin, Eliot, Leavis and Lawrence. The debate between liberalism and communitarianism is extensively covered from a sympathetically critical feminist perspective in Frazer & Lacey (1993).

<sup>80</sup> For example, see the ideas of theme parks, malls etc. as postmodern reconstructions of lost communities, such as M Crawford (1995) 'The world in a shopping mall' in Sorkin (1992)

<sup>81</sup> See, for instance, L Bondi & M Domosh (1997) 'What's wrong with public space? Or, a tale of three women' *Antipode*

can further be articulated as institutional or organisation communities - communities of interest, for example, groupings of individuals organised around a common topic or activity.

Eyles, in an early work, comments that the term 'community' is evocative as well as ambiguous yet very meaningful in academic and everyday life.<sup>82</sup> Eyles suggests that, for the academic, the idea of 'community' is an albeit flawed starting point for,

the investigation of localised social relationships and institutions and the interpretation of images and meanings which individuals and groups hold about the world and themselves. For the latter, community in some unspecified way refers to a place or sense of refuge, where people like ourselves interact or simply peacefully coexist. It has the connotations of home, roots, belonging. In this sense it is an ideal which people wish to achieve through conscious striving or simply by living their lives to suit themselves and their families.<sup>83</sup>

Eyles refers to the meanings of community, with help from Sussman and others, as referring to social groupings sharing the same local space. Community also exists when interaction between individuals takes place in order for individual and group needs and goals to be satisfied.<sup>84</sup>

### ***A global sense of community? Communitarian concepts***

What happens to this idea of 'community' in the context of globalisation? In the early 1980s, Castells discussed the emerging paradox, which was touched on above, of increasingly local politics in a world structured by global processes.

There was production of meaning and identity: my neighbourhood, my community, my city, my school, my tree, my river, my beach, my chapel, my peace, my environment. But it was a defensive identity, an identity of retrenchment of the known against the unpredictability of the unknown and uncontrollable. Suddenly defenceless against a global whirlwind, people stuck to themselves: whatever they had, and whatever they were, became their identity.<sup>85</sup>

It could be argued that in the context of an apparently increasingly homogenising and barrier-free globe, there has been increasing concern for local community regeneration and development. The ideas of communitarianism have had a strong impact on such interests. Communitarianism developed within the context of a period of radical liberalism in the 1960s and early 1970s when urban renewal and community development programmes were becoming increasingly popular. Globally, economic restructuring meant that national governments had diminished control. Against a landscape of New Right

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<sup>82</sup> J Eyles (1985) *Senses of Place* (Cheshire: Siverbrook Press) 59-84

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, 59

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, 60. Eyles quotes Sussman (1959) here.

<sup>85</sup> Castells (1997a), 61

politics, ideas from aforementioned Amitai Etzioni of the Washington DC Communitarian Network helped to develop the Communitarian Platform.<sup>86</sup> The UK think-tank Demos, as well as the Labour Party, have been amongst many bodies to adopt the ideas of Etzioni *et al.*<sup>87</sup> Communitarianism as an ideology suggests that the 'state' and the 'citizen' have mutual responsibilities. The ideology is also used as a political weapon. Community can easily be articulated and mobilised as an alternative to the coercive state or exploitative global firm.

It might be proposed that, from a policy perspective, recent community development initiatives have been concentrated in neighbourhoods of urban deprivation. However, when observed from the grass roots, it is not so clear that 'community life', as opposed to 'community work', flourishes or withers in such localities. One idea is that, in the context of increasing social and economic inequalities, it is among the most deprived areas of society that mutual help emerges. However, there is another hypothesis that the 'more deprived' are less able to maintain social networks of support than the less deprived, and indeed that poverty or social exclusion is the denial of the possibility of social participation and so a compounding factor in deprivation is the absence of community. These social networks are important as they form the basis for connections that individuals and groups have with wider powerful social structures. The unevenness of connections and networks is seen as a key problem for 'community development' in the UK.

So, broadly, the use of the term 'community' is evident in both the UK and the US as a politically rhetorical device. As Millar explains in the US context:

Community has become a political buzzword used both to evoke nostalgia for an imagined past and provide inspiration for a better future. Conservatives uphold 'community standards' as a weapon in their fight against the subversive vulgarity of the mass media. Liberals support 'community economic development' as a strategy to compensate for the economy's trampling of low-income areas. Progressives promote 'community control' as a way to reinvigorate democracy. Communitarians think our entire society needs to be reorganised on a community foundation.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See A Etzioni (1994) *The Spirit of Community Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Simon & Schuster)

<sup>87</sup> See The Times 8 November 1995. See also The Independent 29 July 1998

<sup>88</sup> S Millar (1996) 'Community, diversity, and citizenship: online ethics and the need for meaningful connections' *Civilising Cyberspace: policy, power, and the information superhighway* (New York: ACM Press), 320



'Community' is clearly a powerful tool and carries with it a useful vocabulary. Although, when the term 'community' is associated with a perhaps even more powerful idea such as 'technology', does this power increase?

#### **Discourse Four: expressing online 'community'**

So far, it has been suggested that 'society' is imagined as moving into a global information society where space is no longer represented as a barrier to interaction, communication and economics. Theoretically, there are many critiques and contestations which can be situated against and through these visions. Where do the arguments sit in the context of a more cultural landscape of the global information society, namely the world wide web of the Internet?<sup>89</sup>

The Internet (cyberspace, online spaces, the Net, the world wide web and so on) can mediate social relations, communication and information across spatial and temporal boundaries.<sup>90</sup> There are different ways in which this mediation happens. Email, bulletin boards, instant messaging, IRC (inter-relay chat) chat rooms are the most common ways. There are, however, other peripheral technologies such as web-cameras, which also enhance communication. The different methods of mediation may be used alone, or at the same time, for communication or information exchange.<sup>91</sup> A key commentator on interactions and identity in cyberspace explains:

A rapidly expanding system of network, collectively known as the Internet, links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities.<sup>92</sup>

Castells suggests that any analysis of the global information society would be flawed without critically considering the transformation of cultures through developing electronic communication systems, the Internet being key to this.<sup>93</sup> Marshall McLuhan is often heralded as the premier commentator of technologies which, he forecasted, would

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<sup>89</sup> I use the term 'world wide web of the Internet' because the Internet has existed as a network since the 1960s as a military network. The world wide web (www) is the organisation of networks which offers the digital landscape for groups and individuals to create 'sites' in order to communicate, interact, shop and so on. See Castells (1996), 345-358 for detail on the technological history of the www and the Internet.

<sup>90</sup> See Castells (1996), (1997a)

<sup>91</sup> A very good summary of the different elements of mediating social relations through the internet can be found in P Kollock & M A Smith (1999) 'Introduction: communities in cyberspace' in M A Smith & P Kollock (eds.) *Communities in Cyberspace* (London & New York: Routledge), 3-25

<sup>92</sup> S Turkle (1995) 'Introduction: identity in the age of the Internet' *Life on the Screen: identity in the age of the Internet* (London: Phoenix, Orion Books), 9

<sup>93</sup> Castells (1996), 329

transform the world into a homogenised mass.<sup>94</sup> McLuhan's thinking was used before any imagining of mass communication through the Internet, to suggest that mass media such as the television would mean the creation of mass homogenous audiences. The idea of mass culture which would then be produced was 'a direct expression of the media system resulting from the control of new electronic communication technology by governments and corporate oligopolies'.<sup>95</sup>

### *Exploration of cyberspace and community*

Many preliminary studies of cyberspace, though, concentrated on identity formation, performance and play, proposing that cyberspace allowed for experimentation with subjectivities.<sup>96</sup> Specifically, much of this work focused on how gendered identities were subject to recreation in cyberspatial interactions. Cyberspace could potentially open up spaces for more democratic experiences for women than those offered by the urban public spaces of modernity. Urban public spaces are often demarcated by specific ideological exclusions of class, gender and race constructed and maintained through structures of modernity.<sup>97</sup> Many early studies of cyberspace showed, however, that it was possible to perform an alternative identity through cyberspatial communication by the manipulation of language and textual strategies.<sup>98</sup> Nonetheless, commentators such as Lyn Cherny concluded that women and men have gender specific communications which do not foster democratic electronic interaction.<sup>99</sup> Yet, the prevailing claim which guided much of the thinking was that cyberspace functioned as different from and resistant to urban public spaces of modernity.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> M McLuhan (1964) *Understanding Media: the extensions of man* (New York: MacMillan)

<sup>95</sup> W R Neuman (1991) *The Future of Mass Audience* (New York: Cambridge University Press) cited in Castells (1996), 331

<sup>96</sup> Turkle (1995) provides one of the most thorough work to date concerning the possibilities of multiple identities within cyberspace.

<sup>97</sup> Bondi & Domosh (1997). See L Lofland (1973) *A World of Strangers: order and action in urban public space* (New York: Basic Books)

<sup>98</sup> See, for example, S Herring (1993) 'Gender and democracy in computer-mediated communication' (CMC) in *Electronic Journal of Communications* 3:2. There are also many cases of harassment in cyberspace encounters. See, for example, J Dibbell 'A rape in cyberspace' *Village Voice*.

<sup>99</sup> L Cherny (1994) 'Gender differences in text based virtual reality' *Proceedings of the Berkeley Conference on Women and Language* April 1994. Cherny's work concentrates on role-playing in MOOs which are object orientated multi user dimensions (MUD). These are textual spaces located in cyberspaces which originated from the games of Dungeons and Dragons. MOOs/MUDs consist of textual 'rooms' where conversations can take place between characters. Some MOOs/MUDs grant the 'player' the tools to build rooms themselves, to the player's specifications. There are many MOOs/MUDs each with a different theme. One can adopt a character thus hiding one's identity whilst constructing an alternative one but some MOOs/MUDs demand that the 'player' identify her/him self without anonymity: this is the case in the academically themed MOO/MUD MediaMOO. Most MOOs/MUDs have no restrictions on membership, although this is changing. MediaMOO's membership is restricted to those who are involved in academic media and communications researchers. This type of gatekeeping is rarely addressed in current research.

<sup>100</sup> M Poster (1995) *Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the public sphere* (Irvine: University of California), 9

Some commentators have situated cyberspace as an 'evocative object' through which the 'self' can be projected as fluid, multiple, decentred and de-corporealised, allowing for an evolution of unfixed 'post-modern' subjectivities.<sup>101</sup> However, it can now be more reflexively argued that ideological hierarchies, such as gender, which shape physical spaces of urban modernity are not eliminated through electronic communication.

So, much has been written about the increased integration of computer mediated communication through cyberspace into everyday lives that has apparently shaped a new social and cultural realm of interaction.<sup>102</sup> The spaces of cyberspace are often represented as alternative, utopian spaces of communication where cues to physical appearance are absent or articulated in other non-visual forms.<sup>103</sup> Cyberspace at present requires that vision and written text predominate over other senses in order to construct and present 'selves' and identities to others for communication. A variety of linguistic disguises can be adopted in cyberspace interactions. Consequently, some have suggested that this attention to the visual, simulated and textual presentation of self is symbolic of the dissolving of the boundaries between body and machine and the creation of the ambiguous 'cyborg' self.<sup>104</sup> It is claimed that the moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality thus, the body is increasingly conceptualised as 'pure meat' with little significance to interaction and identity in cyberspace.

### ***Cultures of cyberspace and community***

Researchers from a variety of academic fields conceive of cyberspace and particularly communication and interaction through cyberspace as inherently linked to cultural contexts.<sup>105</sup> For example, one could possibly appropriate the ideas of Bourdieu and his idea of *habitus* to structure research which focuses on the social and cultural contexts of cyberspace and online communities. In order to conceive of aspects of cyberspatial interaction and experiences within a cultural context, theoretical justifications must be provided. However, the aim is not to solely examine the cultural context in which the

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<sup>101</sup> S Turkle (1984) *The Second Self: computers and the human spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster)

<sup>102</sup> Rheingold (1994); W Mitchell (1995) *City of Bits: space, place and the infobahn* (Cambridge MA.: MIT Press); Turkle (1995)

<sup>103</sup> See Turkle (1995) and Cherny (1994)

<sup>104</sup> See D Haraway (1991) 'A cyborg manifesto' *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature* (London: Free Association Books), as well as A R Stone (1992) 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: boundary stories about virtual cultures' M Benedikt (ed.) *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press) provide some useful discussions on the notion of the blurring boundaries of machine/body, nature/technology. Also see R R Wilson (1995) 'Cyber(body)parts: prosthetic consciousness' M Featherstone & R Burrows (eds.) *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk: cultures of technological embodiment* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage)

technology of the Internet is embedded - the physical, material space and context - but to justify the existence of online 'cultures' within the space and context of cyberspace. Rheingold's classic but oft criticised examination of online community formations, on bulletin boards, computer conferencing services and the Internet, over a number of years has led him to theorise the medium as composed of communities with specific cultures.<sup>106</sup> More precisely, it is the interactions and the experiences of the individuals interacting within and through online communities that are regarded as constituting 'culture' (although Rheingold neglects the actual theoretical constructions of 'culture'). This is perhaps more a reflection of the difficulties in reifying 'culture': it becomes an extremely problematic term to 'define' when one attempts to differentiate between and essentialise 'culture', 'subcultures', communities or societies.

Nonetheless, 'culture' has been and remains a central concept within many academic studies of community and online community, particularly in anthropology and geography.<sup>107</sup> These areas of academia have witnessed a multiplicity of definitions of 'culture', which can prove productive.<sup>108</sup> The lack of a clear and fixed definition of the term 'culture' allows for its appropriation by many social researchers out with anthropology and geography. An overview of what constitutes 'culture' will not be attempted here, but the understanding is that many definitions situate 'culture' as deterministic or as a set of processes.<sup>109</sup> An important shift of emphasis in the various definitions of 'culture' is toward the notion that it is constituted by collective constructions of meanings. Alternatively, one could suggest that the concept of culture has moved from an objective, positivist approach to a subjective, relativistic one.<sup>110</sup>

Perhaps a useful term to use alongside 'culture' is 'everyday life', although it too is a highly complex and localised term. It highlights the importance of social activities and the construction and negotiation of meaning in circumstances that enable the creation of self

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<sup>105</sup> For example, Rheingold (1994) and Turkle (1995)

<sup>106</sup> Rheingold (1994)

<sup>107</sup> See D Gregory 'Areal Differentiation and Post-Modern Human Geography' in D Gregory & R Walford (eds.) (1989) *Horizons in Human Geography* (New York & London: MacMillan Press), 85-87

<sup>108</sup> See M Freilich (ed.) (1989) *The Relevance of Culture* (New York: Bergin & Garvey), 1 for a discussion of how the concept of 'culture' has given anthropology a distinct personality within the social sciences.

<sup>109</sup> For example, see E S Miller (1979) *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall), 9 and E L Schusky & T P Culbert (1978) *Introducing Culture* (3rd edition) (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall), 216 respectively.

<sup>110</sup> See J C Alexander (1990) 'Analytic Debates: understanding the relative autonomy of culture' in J C Alexander & S Seidman (eds.) *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1-27

and identity.<sup>111</sup> Geertz commends writing which seek to describe these everyday lives of humans in different cultures through sustained contact with them. This produces 'thick description' which makes the layers of meaning in which the everyday practices are embedded less impenetrable to those outwith the studied culture. This thick description does not compromise the 'unfamiliarity' of the culture to which the ethnographer was originally drawn.<sup>112</sup>

Returning to more specific questions of community, culture and cyberspace, it is evident that many of the academic narratives which prevail in current work about cyberspace produce somewhat utopian stories of cyberspace. Cyberspace is often theorised as a monolithic space of ideological freedom: freedom from censorship, gender hierarchies, fixed identity, ethnicity, hegemonic politics, where the social divisions and exclusions of modernity can be overcome.<sup>113</sup> Cyberspace is constructed as a space in which 'avant-garde' artists may locate their work;<sup>114</sup> a space where anyone can publish, where electronic journals and popular culture electronic magazines can be found. Cyberspace is perceived as a space which permits the liberal productions of different, multiple, resistant and alternative knowledges. It is also perceived as a space of collective capitalism and virtual entrepreneurship.<sup>115</sup>

Many have attempted to theorise cyberspace in this way. Mitchell Kapor, developer of Lotus 1-2-3, identifies what he calls the 'Internet model'.<sup>116</sup> The Internet model, according to Kapor, breeds activism, critical thinking and democracy. Within this model individuals have decentralised and direct control over with whom, when, and why they exchange information and communication.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Poster suggests:

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<sup>111</sup> J Eyles 'The Geography of Everyday Life' in D Gregory & R Walford (eds.) (1989) *Horizons in Human Geography* (New York & London: MacMillan Press), 114-115

<sup>112</sup> C Geertz (1973) 'Thick description: toward an interpretative theory of culture' *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books)

<sup>113</sup> See N Negroponte (1995) *Being Digital* (London & New York: Hodder & Stoughton) and Mitchell (1995) for examples of utopian pontificating. In the United States, Al Gore envisages the National Information Infrastructure (NII) as a metaphor for functioning democracy.

<sup>114</sup> For example, the website Herspace has a list of female artists who are viewed as resisting hegemonic forms and media by locating their work in the 'different' medium of cyberspace. Available on-line URL: <http://www.herspace.com/herspace/cafelife/Art.html>

<sup>115</sup> K Robins & F Webster (1999) 'Introduction: the changing technoscape' *Times of the Technoculture: from the information society to the virtual life* (London & New York: Routledge)

<sup>116</sup> M Poster (1995a) 'Postmodern Virtualities' in Featherstone & Burrows (1995)

<sup>117</sup> M Kapor (1993) 'Where is the digital highway really heading?: the case for a Jeffersonian information policy' *Wired* 1:3, 53-9, 94

socialist or radical democratic control of the media results in more freedom, more enlightenment, more rationality, capitalist or centralist control results in oppression, passivity, irrationality.<sup>118</sup>

Cyberspace is constructed and situated as a space of potential democracy, activism and resistance to hegemonic powers. Consequently, many commentators situate and categorise the spaces of cyberspace as a landscape of 'post-modernity'.<sup>119</sup>

If modern society may be said to foster an individual who is rational, autonomous, centred and stable (the "reasonable man" of the law, the educated citizen of representative democracy, the calculated "economic man" of capitalism, the grade defined student of public education), then perhaps a postmodern society is emerging which nurtures forms of identity different from, even opposite to those of modernity. And electronic communications technologies significantly enhance these postmodern possibilities.<sup>120</sup>

Herein, it could be contended, lies a contradiction. There may be opportunities in cyberspace to experiment with identities and escape identity fixing. Nonetheless, the idea that electronic communication can permit a post-modern liberation of identities is comparable to a narrative of Enlightenment. It establishes a process of liberation at the heart of history which requires at its base a pre-social, foundational, individual identity. The individual is posited as outside of and prior to history, only later becoming ensnared in externally imposed chains.

In its rush to ontologise freedom, the modern view of the subject hides the process of its historical construction ... Postmodern theorists have discovered that modern theory's insistence on the freedom of the subject, its compulsive, repetitive inscription into discourse of the sign of the resisting agent, functions to restrict the identity of its modern form, an ideological and legitimising gesture of its own position rather than a step towards emancipation.<sup>121</sup>

Despite all this there is evidence, which will be explored in later chapters, that the meanings of the Internet are being shaped by increasing e-commerce and commercial interests rather than anarchic, post-modern liberation of identities. This is a reflection of the failure of many policy makers to experience the multiple cultural spaces of the Internet.

### ***New spaces, new communities? The growth of virtual cities<sup>122</sup>***

It is vital to understand precisely where new forms of social groupings, formations and social relations are located to progress with this research. This is necessary in relation to the theorisations of the informational city in a networked society, Castells' imaginings of

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<sup>118</sup> Poster (1995a)

<sup>119</sup> See for example, Turkle (1995)

<sup>120</sup> Poster, (1995a) 1

<sup>121</sup> M Poster (1995b) 'CyberDemocracy: Internet and the public sphere' (University of California), 2. Available on-line URL: <http://www.hnet.uci.edu/mpposter/writings/democ.html>

present Western society. Within this particular imagining, Webster argues, is little exploration of the ways of life, cultural representations and features which exist in the informational city.<sup>123</sup> Castells argues that,

Shifting to the cultural realm, we see the emergence of a similar pattern of networking, flexibility, and ephemeral symbolic communication, in a culture organised around electronic media, including in this communication system the computer-mediated communication networks. Cultural expressions of all kinds are increasingly enclosed in or shaped by this world of electronic media. But the new media system is not characterised by the one-way, undifferentiated messages through a limited number of channels that constituted the world of mass media. And it is not a global village.<sup>124</sup>

Many of the cultural expressions of social relations and features of life in the informational city, which Webster seeks, are increasingly being located in what are known as 'virtual communities'. As mentioned in chapter one, there have been few attempts by geographers to engage with the configurations of social relations in the sets of discursively constructed social spaces of cyberspace.<sup>125</sup> Most crucially, the majority of commentaries from disciplines other than geography about virtual communities fail to relate aspects of online 'virtual communities' with those of place-based urban communities. On and off line (place-based urban and cyber) communities are too readily polarised and explored as separate due to conventional concepts of community requiring a place-based, location-dependent context. Space and place are vital to virtual online communities just as they are to place-based urban 'communities'.

Stone expresses virtual online communities as different fields of interaction:

a new and unexpected kind of 'field' is opening up - incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'. These new spaces instantiate the collapse of the boundaries between the social and technological, biology and machine, natural and artificial that are part of the postmodern imaginary. They are part of the growing imbrication of humans and machines in new social forms that I call *virtual systems*.<sup>126</sup>

Whereas Rheingold suggests more loosely that,

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<sup>122</sup> See S Graham & A Aurigi (1997b) 'Virtual cities, social polarisation, and the crisis in urban public space' *Journal of Urban Technology*, 4 :1, 19-52 for more informed imaginings.

<sup>123</sup> Webster (1995), 208

<sup>124</sup> Castells (1997b), 10

<sup>125</sup> For example, the over-cited work by Rheingold (1994)

<sup>126</sup> Stone (1991), 85 (emphasis in original)

[V]irtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal *relationships* in cyberspace.<sup>127</sup>

This idea of community as a place for those who share interests is a highly modernist conception, but is one which the private sector has widely adopted. It is also an idea which can be located within a borderless world discourse.

So far, studies of virtual community have emphasised online experiences, although Rheingold touches on the potential permeability of boundaries between on and place-based urban communities. While many 'places' in cyberspace are purely virtual (such as Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) and the related MOOs and Usenet newsgroups), community-ICT initiatives such as community networks are not. However, it cannot be denied that there is a virtual component to any 'community', which Benedict Anderson theorises as 'imagined communities'.<sup>128</sup> Community, 'virtual' online and place-based urban, is a complex notion though and its complexity multiplies in a system where disembodied and embodied selves collide. Castells' hypothesis is that,

two very different populations 'live' in such virtual communities: a tiny minority of electronic villagers 'homesteading in the electronic frontier', and a transient crowd for whom their casual incursions into various network is tantamount to exploring several existences under the mode of the ephemeral.<sup>129</sup>

This is a rather outdated conceptualisation of 'virtual' communities and a rather naïve one. Virtual or online communities are much more diverse and take many more forms than Castells suggests above. Indeed, Castells goes on to suggest that because access to communication through the Internet is economically, culturally and educationally restricted, the most significant cultural impact of virtual communities, and other such cultural expressions of the Internet, is 'the reinforcement of the culturally dominant social networks, as well as the increase of their cosmopolitanism and globalisation'.<sup>130</sup>

### ***Commercialising community?***

The Internet is very clearly represented in powerful ways as an integrally social and economic part of the global information society which is radically altering (or indeed is being radically altered by) social relations at the start of a new century. Within this

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<sup>127</sup> Rheingold (1994), 5

<sup>128</sup> B R Anderson (1991) *Imagined Communities* (Rev. ed.) (London: Verso)

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, 362

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, 363



representation of the Internet, it is accepted that new forms of associations known as virtual or online communities are forming, as described above. Cyberspace is hence represented as supporting different spaces and places where people can 'meet', again repeating Stone, in 'incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face to face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face'.<sup>131</sup> The metaphor of 'community' is often applied to represent these sets of social relations in cyberspace. These anthropological, historical, sociological and geographical conceptualisations of 'community' from Tonnies, to Sennett to Etzioni to indeed Rheingold were touched upon earlier. The prevailing idea associated with virtual online communities is that of a socially constructed 'imagined community' much like Benedikt Anderson's notion, above. The online community is imagined in the sense that associations and ties are formed round shared interests rather than shared geography. This aspect is heralded as positive as it offers a form of community and shared public space that is apparently missing in the place-based urban metropolis.

The private sector in particular has grasped this idea wholeheartedly as a way of conceptualising and organising communities of consumers, although, it could be argued that there is a problem with such a conceptualisation. For instance, Ian Pearson – Futurologist for British Telecommunications (BT)<sup>132</sup> - imagines cyberspace allowing for the formation of 'communities' in which those with apparently 'like-minds' can gather - in other words, one will no longer have to 'tolerate' the person or people who share one's physical 'community' or space.

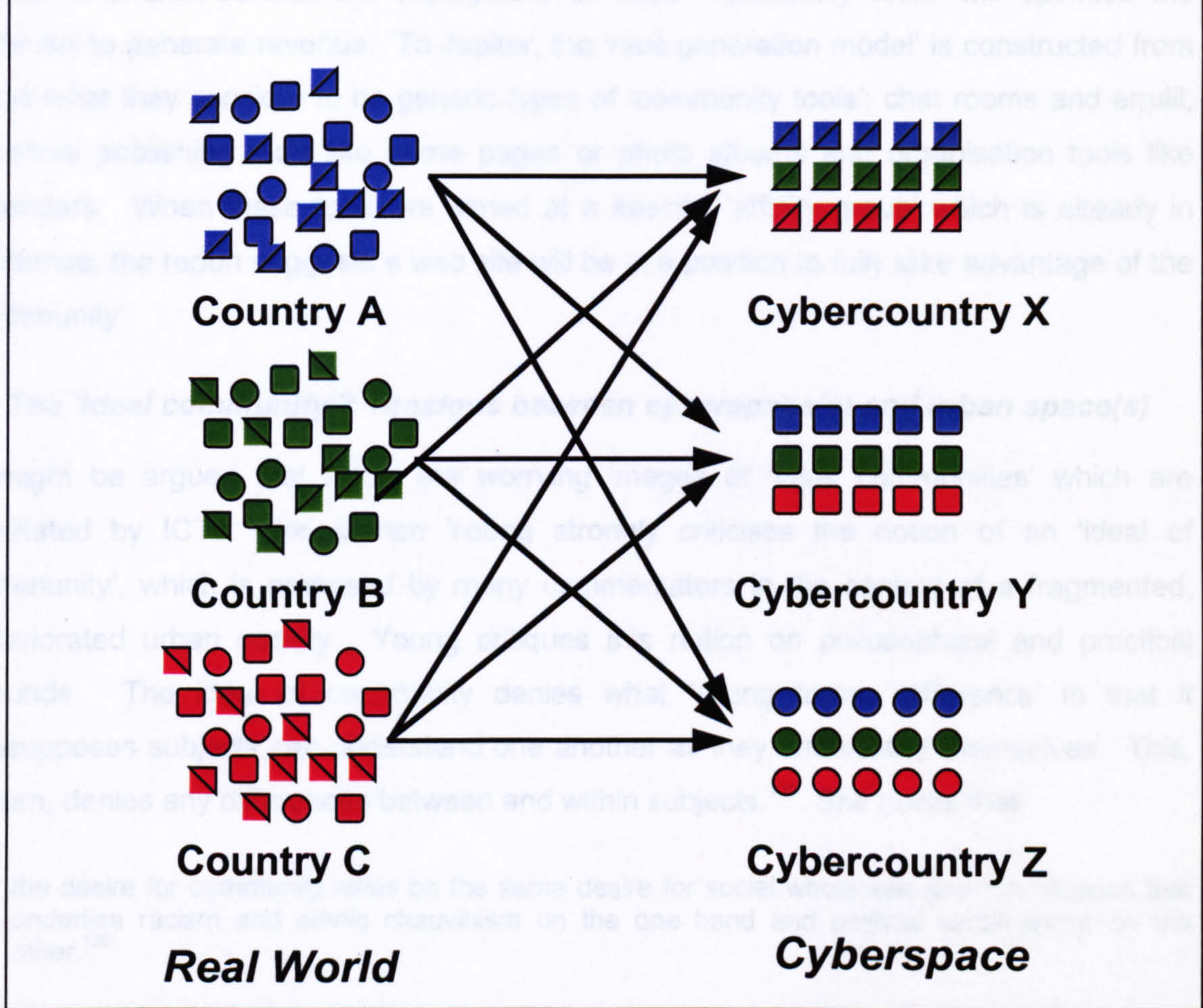
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<sup>131</sup> Stone (1991)

<sup>132</sup> At the time of writing

FIGURE 3.03  
CYBERNATIONS?  
SOURCE: BARNES, CHALMERS & PEARSON (1994)

Current nations consist of people with varying interests and abilities united by geography and heritage. Cybernations could consist of people with shared interests and abilities drawn from a variety of geographical and cultural backgrounds.<sup>133</sup>



Although Pearson does hint that these 'cybercountries' would consist of those from a variety of geographical and cultural backgrounds, this is not always the case with many communities of interest. A further example comes from Jupiter Communications who suggest in their recent Report that,

the key to creating successful community is interaction (i.e. communication or collaboration) with a common intent and the reciprocal exchange of information or ideas.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Barnes et al. (1994)

<sup>134</sup> Jupiter Communications (1999) *Next Generations Communities: from Retention to Revenue*. See URL: [http://www.nua.ie/surveys/?f=VS&art\\_id=905354601&rel=true](http://www.nua.ie/surveys/?f=VS&art_id=905354601&rel=true)

In the report, *Next Generation Community: From Retention to Revenue*, Jupiter suggest that 'community-building' can be taken further from the type of 'first generation' model represented in Pearson's diagram to a next 'generation' where interaction is enhanced and maximised, as the quote above illustrates. This is achieved through certain ICT tools and strategies. When these are combined with content which is tailored to a particular 'affinity' group, it is claimed that the deployment of three 'community tools' will optimise the potential to generate revenue. To Jupiter, the 'next-generation model' is constructed from three what they consider to be generic types of 'community tools': chat rooms and email, personal publishing tools like home pages or photo albums and organisation tools like calendars. When these tools are aimed at a specific 'affinity group' which is already in existence, the report suggests a web site will be in a position to fully take advantage of the 'community'.

### ***The 'ideal community'? Tensions between cyberspace(s) and urban space(s)***

It might be argued that these are worrying images of 'ideal communities' which are facilitated by ICTs. Iris Marion Young strongly criticises the notion of an 'ideal of community', which is proposed by many commentators in the context of a fragmented, deteriorated urban society. Young critiques this notion on philosophical and practical grounds. The ideal of community denies what Young terms 'difference' in that it presupposes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves. This, in turn, denies any differences between and within subjects.<sup>135</sup> She posits that

the desire for community relies on the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other.<sup>136</sup>

In the ideal of community, unity is privileged over difference whilst immediacy - face-to-face interaction - is privileged over mediation. People who are not identified with a community will be excluded.<sup>137</sup> Rather than the ideal of community, then, Young proposes the idea of the unoppressive city where there is an understanding of social relations and difference. The notion of an unoppressive city is bound up with a politics of difference. In the unoppressive city, there exists an openness to 'unassimilated otherness'.<sup>138</sup> Individuals

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<sup>135</sup> Young (1990a), 300-323. See also Young (1990b)

<sup>136</sup> Young (1990a), 302

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, 305-307

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, 319

reside in relations of mediation with strangers with whom they do not share 'community'.<sup>139</sup> However, some commentators couch this idea in less positive terms. Sennett considers what he views as a contradiction in urban life. Urban living can be an anonymous experience which makes individuals anomic experiencing visual contact but less social contact. This means, according to Sennett, that individuals with no common associations of community are juxtaposed.<sup>140</sup> It is interesting to compare this approach with that of Young who views this experience as constructive, a way of understanding 'difference'. Do community-ICT initiatives reinforce difference? Do they make for an 'unoppressive city? Do they encourage increased social contact?

Communities of interest are not considered to foster strong ties like geographical communities, and indeed ties forged in virtual online communities, are often represented negatively. As Wellman and Gulia assert:

Pundits worry that virtual community may not truly be community. These worriers are confusing the pastoralist myth of community for the reality. Community ties are already geographically dispersed, sparsely knit, connected heavily by telecommunications (phone and fax), and specialised in content. There is so little community life in most neighbourhoods in western cities that it is more useful to think of each person as having a personal community: an individual's social networks of informal interpersonal ties, ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties. Just as the Net supports neighbourhood-like group communities of densely knit ties, it also supports personal communities, wherever in social or geographical space these ties are located and however sparsely knit they might be.<sup>141</sup>

It is suggested that the 'urban condition' at the end of this century no longer supports 'communities' and that the fabric of the urban realm is littered with pockets of 'social exclusions' and deprivation. Even in less deprived urban areas, people are leading increasingly private, protected and individualised lives. The 'postmodern' debates about the city discussed above reveal this. Such debates also reveal the supposed nature of contemporary city life which is characterised by fragmentation and isolation.<sup>142</sup>

Many have, however, commented on the 'cyberbole' which has accompanied ideas about the Internet and cyberspace. The idea that in the context of the increasing privatisation of everyday lives, people are gathering in 'communities' on the Internet making the 'global' the next door neighbour, is contested. Sefton-Green argues that in such discussions, the

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<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, 303

<sup>140</sup> Sennett (1970) cited in Amin & Graham, 418

<sup>141</sup> B Wellman & M Gulia (1999) 'Virtual communities as communities: net surfers don't ride alone' Smith & Kollock, 187

<sup>142</sup> See Castells (1989)

range of evidence necessary for claims is inadequate and is often based on researchers' personal accounts and experiences.<sup>143</sup>

### Bringing the theories together

Throughout **Section I**, ideas about the global information society, the city in this information society, as well as off-line community and online community have been visited. Drawing out a theoretical perspective, one can see some common ways of understanding what the discourses explored in this section are about. One can think of the information society in terms of increased *connectedness* and *interconnectedness*, globally, for instance. This has been facilitated through the increased embeddedness of ICTs in everyday, mainly commercial, lives.

This increased connectedness has consequences for the ways in which people build *relationships*, with other people as well as with places. In turn, these relationships impact the ways in which people understand and negotiate *difference*. Ideas of 'community' seem to be about relationships and connections too. Young critiques the notion of 'ideal communities' which denies difference and prefers face to face contact. Instead, she advocates an unoppressive city where differences are celebrated and conflict is creative. However, it is evident as one community development worker suggests, that

[Y]ou have to make your community coherent, if it isn't already... So, in Grimethorpe, say, that was a doddle - you've got that inbuilt coherence in the culture. If you went to other places, it would be harder. So that's the community work, making the community coherent, and then you build in the connections with the outer world, and these will... I mean, I'm always fascinated with the, by the way the Bangladesh EVH in Manchester, although I've never been there, I understand they built up these links with Bangladesh, and it was a factory for lots of other informal communication ... but you know, that's about connections.<sup>144</sup>

Sennett has suggested that notions of community have shifted from one of *Gemeinschaft*, where public relationships are linked to social status in a context of cultural homogeneity and public community toward one of *Gesellschaft*. Community as *Gesellschaft* suggests that relationships become more individualistic and impersonal, a private community. Sennett argues that with the rise of industrialisation and the concept of mass society, people became atomised and social order was characterised by anomie.<sup>145</sup> Sennett claims public culture declined as individuals exhibited nostalgic desire for a romanticised notion of

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<sup>143</sup> J Sefton-Green (1998) 'Introduction: being young in the digital age' in J Sefton-Green (ed.) (1998) *Digital Diversions: youth culture in the age of multimedia* (London: UCL Press), 8

<sup>144</sup> Interview with KH, 1999

<sup>145</sup> Sennett (1977)

community as 'like-minded individuals' rather than the notion of community as a bounded, local territory. This kind of thinking is reflected in what is happening in many areas of UK and US society, where there is an increase in privatised, gated homes. Senses of community are expressed around interests, such as the sports club, rather than the physical neighbourhood. As one community development worker points out:

The other thing I'm interested in is the disequilibrium between ... communities and the wider society, so the ... relatively affluent community, may not have strong community ties, may not have high levels of facial recognition, you with high gates, and people just going everywhere by car, and you don't know your neighbours, face to face, they're doing all right, why are they doing all right? Because of their connections into wider society - economic, political, social - those connections are very very firm and reliable; they don't have any trouble with the electricity, with water, influencing the politics, you know, controlling their environment by not allowing a bypass through their woods or whatever...they have no problems with that because their connections are so rich. A poor community doesn't have those connections so there's a disequilibrium between that community, that locality and the wider society...<sup>146</sup>

This kind of thinking is also reflected in the way that commentators write about virtual or online communities. Cyberspace is heralded too simplistically as enabling 'like-minded individuals' access to each other. The 'reality' is very different.

## **Section II: Structural 'Technocultural Discourse' & Reflections on ICTs**

The four discourses discussed in **Section I** parallel the ideologies of a 'global information age', the ideological crisis of the 'urban condition', and the ideological hopes of a reinstatement of community through virtual communities.<sup>147</sup> Integral to all these processes described in the discourses are ICTs. To take the ideas in these discourses further, it might be argued that the theoretical notion which elucidates these ways of thinking is what Robins terms the 'technocultural discourse':

The perspective of 'technological revolution' makes it possible to occlude the disturbing realities of contemporary change, and even to believe that what is occurring might actually be contributing to social and political amelioration. In political manifestos now, the harsher realities of division and conflict are being dissolved in the soft-focus rhetoric of social consensus and cohesion. The advocacy of technological culture is linked to ideals of communication and community - the restoration of community through the enhancement of communication - promising an ordered refuge from the disorders of change in the real world.<sup>148</sup>

There are two important issues for this stage of the research which Robins reveals above. The first is the idea that the political agenda of community regeneration and social inclusion is obscuring the more apparently serious urban crises. The second issue is that

<sup>146</sup> Interview with KH, 1999

<sup>147</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the use of 'ideology' see T Eagleton (1991) *Ideology: an introduction* (London: Verso)

<sup>148</sup> Robins (1999), 44

the promotion of ICTs in 'deprived communities' for the regeneration of 'community' and development of a 'sense of place' by private, public and third sectors is driven by an ideal of enhanced communication bringing about more understanding and thus social harmony. What this serves to do, Robins argues, is render difference and 'conflict' less visible.<sup>149</sup>

A critical question to be approached is presented by Robins: does the notion of 'virtual community' focus, as he suggests, on the 'escape from the real world of difference and disorder into a mythic realm of stability and order'? Yet, before this question is approached it is vital to further explore the representations of technoculture that Robins in particular understands. These representations are then and located in the context of public, private and third sector ideas about community-ICT relations.<sup>150</sup>

### **Locating and critiquing the 'technocultural landscape'**

As discussed above, it might be argued that the technocultural discourse describes prevalent ideas about the ideology of a 'global information age', the ideological crisis of the 'urban condition', and the ideological hopes of a reinstatement of community through virtual communities. These ideas feed into an imagining of a '*technocultural landscape*'. The idea of a 'technocultural landscape' needs to be unpacked though in order to reveal how it might be a useful concept with which to understand the empirical evidence. The technocultural landscape can also be used to explain how public, private and third sectors are contributing to the construction of such a context in the UK.

Kevin Robins has suggested that the idea of an informational or virtual city is being actively fostered by not only corporate private sector, but also by public political interests.<sup>151</sup> It is a particularly powerful notion, as has been shown in Section I, which suggests that as the sovereignty of national governments become undermined cities are assuming a new prominence as hubs of corporate networks. This sits in opposition to the idea that cities are losing prominence. Part of this political agenda seeks to revivify the ideal of communication, an ideal which understood communications media as tools through which a sense of community and a participative democratic landscape could be realised.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*, 34-59

<sup>150</sup> Throughout the section references are made where relevant to primary interview material with various actors which form an empirical context to the research. The interviews were conducted with key actors from the third, public and private sectors. This will provide a useful illustrative context prior to the concentration on specific examples of the case studies.

<sup>151</sup> Robins (1999), 34-59

<sup>152</sup> *ibid.*, 34-59

Interestingly, Robins suggests that the technocultural urban landscape, one which actively seeks to encourage community-ICT relations, is an attempt to distance disorder. Constructing a technocultural landscape is part of an endeavour to arrive at an 'ideal community'. This concept of an 'ideal community', one which is criticised by Young, is represented as coherent and ordered returning to an older European ideal of urbanism. So is a socially inclusive information society comprised of ideal communities of this kind?

### **Locating community-ICT relations in the 'technocultural landscape'**

Where can concepts of community-ICT relations be located within an apparent technocultural landscape? Ideas about community and community-ICT relations emerge from varying perspectives, but perhaps the key difference between the perspectives has to do with where power and control is situated. This can only be understood when the narratives embedded within discourses of technologies are explored. For instance, a political economy perspective considers technologies to be embedded within society. According to Sussman, societies function within boundaries governed or mediated by institutions of organised power.<sup>153</sup> Within this context, communication in a capitalist society is consistently infiltrated by money and market considerations. If, as Sussman suggests, 'communication is continually being reinvented by the marketplace',<sup>154</sup> then it is vital to understand which agents play which power roles within this context, although some theoreticians like Jean Baudrillard would suggest that mass media are inevitably repressive no matter who owns or controls them.

### ***Understanding human-society-technology perspectives***

There are other, more useful perspectives on the ways in which technologies are thought about in relation to humans.<sup>155</sup> One perspective, which is key to the discourses evident in public policy for community regeneration and ICTs, is utopianism and futurism. This perspective posits that future societies will be shaped by technological innovation. The general ideology is that most of the problems currently facing humans - ethical, cultural, political, economical - can and will be answered and by technologies.<sup>156</sup> There are two common utopianist visions: reversionist and technophile. The first imagines future

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<sup>153</sup> G Sussman (1997) 'Ideology and discourse on the 'Information Society'' *Communication, Technology, and Politics in the Information Age* (New York, London, New Delhi: Sage), 4

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, 5

<sup>155</sup> See Graham & Marvin (1996), 78-122 for a useful explanation of different perspectives on technologies and cities.

<sup>156</sup> *ibid.*, 78-122



societies operating within a pre-industrial framework influenced by ideas of a communal living, economics and politics. The second relies on urban-industrial models of society where science and technology dominate and determine social relations. Kitchin suggests that within the context of cyberspace, utopianist imaginings construct a vision of future society where reversionist and technophile elements interweave. So, technologies like cyberspace are placed within an organic and communitarian political context where community groupings are brought together. Within these visions, there are threads which suggest that the notion of materiality will be dramatically disfigured. Materiality and the body are viewed as superfluous in these visions. Ultimately, the common ground within utopian and futurist imaginings is that technologies will be used for the progression of the human condition. There are criticisms of this perspective.

Robins and Hepworth critique this 'infantile utopia' and suggest instead that information societies can only be understood within a political economy framework.<sup>157</sup> Within this framework there is space for the questions of agency and political policy intervention. This kind of approach denies the autonomy of technologies that technological determinists identify. Technologies are represented within this approach as inscribed into the political, economic and social relations of capitalism.<sup>158</sup> ICTs are not considered to be determinants of urban form and change. Nor are ICTs viewed as the quick fix technological solutions to urban problems. Thus cities and ICTs are bound together and influenced by the same economics, politics and cultures.<sup>159</sup> Political economists argue that forms of ICTs only serve to underpin and support the restructuring of cities as well as reshape the time-space limits which confine capitalist economic development.<sup>160</sup> The result of this is that economic development is shaped in order to favour hegemonic economic and political interests. Graham and Marvin suggest that this means capitalist economies are globalised further, reducing the power that cities have over their own futures thus reinforcing marginalisation of already excluded social groups.

So, it is becoming clear that social, economic and political interests are embodied within ICTs. A related and revealing perspective of technologies engages significantly with some of the arguments presented in this research. This perspective locates ICTs within a pan-

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<sup>157</sup> K Robins & M Hepworth (1988) 'Electronic spaces: new technologies and the future of cities' *Futures* April 155-176

<sup>158</sup> Graham & Marvin (1996), 94

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*, 99

<sup>160</sup> *ibid.*, 100

capitalist theory of neoliberalism.<sup>161</sup> Armitage explores this neoliberal discourse of technology, which is intricately bound with notions of free enterprise, economic globalisation and multi-national corporatism:

[W]hat is more, this discourse is principally concerned with legitimating the political and cultural control of individuals, groups, and new social movements through the material and ideological production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of self-styled 'virtual' technologies like virtual reality and cyberspace.<sup>162</sup>

However, the neoliberal discourse of technologies is also about the evolution of the relations of 'virtual class'. Members of this virtual class, it could be argued, include Tony Blair, Bill Gates and Newt Gingrich. Thus, Armitage suggests, it is vital to equip the 'digitally dispossessed' with active political strategies and voices.<sup>163</sup> Without advancing such resistance strategies for groups and individuals - community groups of the third sector perhaps - the increasingly institutionalised neoliberal discourse of ICTs posited by private and public sectors - those in the virtual class - will become an immensely hegemonic means of social control.

A further perspective, which is commonly referred to when conceptualising human-ICT relations, is social construction of technology (SCOT). SCOT derives from a reaction against the arguments made by technological determinists, specifically in relation to aspects of culture and community.<sup>164</sup> Through this perspective it is contended that technologies, like the Internet and the social spaces of cyberspace, are mediated and understood only by and through culture as a social process. SCOT approach asserts that human agency and socio-political processes shape the ways in which ICTs are used and implemented in societies. As John Armitage, referring to cybercultural technologies suggests, technologies are innately political:

Technologies like VR [virtual reality] do not appear - like rainfall - as heavenly gifts. They have to be willed into existence, they have to be produced by real human beings. Information and communications technologies, for instance, both contain and signify the cultural and political values of particular human societies. Accordingly, these technologies are always expressions of socio-economic, geographical, and political interests, partialities, alignments and commitments. In brief, the will to technical knowledge is the will to technical power.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> See A Kroker & M Weinstein (1994) *Data Trash: the theory of the virtual class* (New York: St. Martin's Press)

<sup>162</sup> Armitage (1999)

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> See Bijker & Law (1992)

<sup>165</sup> Armitage (1999)

Within this perspective, the micro-level processes of human agency are examined. It is thus expected that the ways in which ICTs are used in various contexts will be diverse. This is a vital argument when positioned against the ideas that private and public sectors, in particular, adopt about ICTs and communities. It is especially poignant when political considerations of social inclusion in the global information society are activated. Social relations and the articulation of those relations play a vital part in the understandings and articulations of technologies. A crucial aspect of the SCOT perspective is that structures of capitalism and the hegemony of political economy do not determine how the Internet, for instance, will develop. Human agency at multiple levels is a major influence in the way that technologies are articulated within cultural and social contexts. The SCOT approach seeks to understand and explain the causal relationships between social, institutional and political factors in the ways in which ICTs are constructed in different contexts.<sup>166</sup> So, this understanding goes some way to explain multiple impacts that technologies like the Internet might have on cultures and identities, societies, across different times and different places.

### ***Techno-remnants of 'modernity'?***

Some of the arguments within the rhetoric of 'technoculture' can be very much associated with an ideology of modernity, that which was characteristic of Enlightenment thinking. Cyberspace, in particular, has been prone to narratives of 'progress'. What Kevin Robins, for example, terms the 'technological imagination' insists that cyberspace will mean an,

electronic reinstatement of a lost order, a lost way of life, and lost values and ideals ... The imagination of electronic *Gemeinschaft* evokes a world of shared meanings and values, a world in which social interaction has the transparent simplicity associated with face-to-face encounter.<sup>167</sup>

This visions of cyberspace is set against the environmental, social, political, economic and cultural landscape of the place-based, urban realm which is characterised by environmental, social, political, economic and cultural degradation. Indeed, as Robins further suggests, ICTs can 'in fact insulate us from being touched by the other' - the other, the unconnected, left in the apparently degraded environmental, social, political, economic and cultural landscape. Winner further explains:

The 'Magna Carta', for example, looks forward to 'the creation of 'electronic neighbourhoods' bound together not by geography but by shared interests'. Its authors believe that this holds out

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<sup>166</sup> Graham & Marvin (1996), 105

<sup>167</sup> K Robins (1997) 'The new communications geography and the politics of optimism' *Soundings* 5 Spring, 194

the promise of a rich diversity in social life. But what will be the exact content of this diversity? An important feature of life in cyberspace is that it will 'allow people to live further away from crowded or dangerous urban areas, and expand family time.' Exploring this idea, the Magna Carta quotes cyberspace guru Phil Salin who argues that 'Contrary to naive views, ... cyberspaces [of the coming century] will not all be the same, and they will not all be open to the general public...Just as access to homes, offices, churches and department stores is controlled by their owners or managers, most virtual locations will exist as distinct places of private property.' (Magna Carta) A wonderful aspect of this arrangement, in Salin's account, is that inexpensive innovations in software can create barriers so that "what happens in one cyberspace can be kept from affecting other cyberspaces."<sup>168</sup>

Without doubt, this research situates ICTs and cyberspace in particular as cultural technologies. In doing so, this work tries to follow what Graham and Marvin suggest. They assert that a more integrated approach to explaining human-city-ICTs relations should be formed.<sup>169</sup> This means blending together the ideas of social constructivists and political economists. This blended perspective will be returned to in later chapters, particularly in relation to the micro-level examples that will be examined in a wider socio-political context.

Robins warns that the rhetoric of the 'technocultural agenda' bears no relation to 'what is at issue in contemporary urban culture and urbanism'.<sup>170</sup> What, then, *is* at issue?

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### Section III: Structural Policy Discourses

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#### Constructing socially inclusive technologies

What is at issue is social exclusion in the current condition/crisis of urbanism. Social exclusion is a term which encompasses many of the issues which policies aimed at urban regeneration seek to alleviate. The concern for those who preside predominantly in what are considered to be 'deprived' urban areas and who are represented as socially excluded from the 'Information Age' is a small but significant part of the present UK government's overall strategy for urban renewal.<sup>171</sup> The government's approach proposes that:

In the information age, the many must benefit, not just the few. A society of 'information have-nots' would not just be unfair - it would also be inefficient. The last industrial revolution may have been built on the inventions and enterprise of a few, but today, competitiveness depends on the

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<sup>168</sup> Winner (1997)

<sup>169</sup> Graham & Marvin (1996), 112

<sup>170</sup> Robins (1999), 35

<sup>171</sup> See Graham & Speak (2000), 1985-2001 for an interrogation of the systematic marginalisation of people living in low income neighbourhoods from networks of utilities and power.

skills and creativity of the whole workforce. The more people who have the skills and opportunity to use these new networks, at work or at home, the richer those networks will become.<sup>172</sup>

Ostensibly, the current concern for the social, political and economic inequalities in many present societies - particularly cities - is admirable. There is a sense that there is now a need to re-create a lost 'community' and foster social and cultural interaction as well as bridge the gap between global commerce and local business. Embedded in this last point is the perceived need to overcome social exclusions and deprivation in order to regenerate urban communities. This is apparently achieved by bringing together public and private partnerships and facilitating local business. As revealed by the quote above, the way in which community development, regeneration and inclusion can be realised is through developing the skills and economic competitiveness of the workforce. The thinking about cities in the UK is guided and shaped by ideas about the city and community living, especially in the context of globalisation. However, to what extent is the 're-creation' of community desirable? Are these ideas proposed by policy makers, who *assume* community needs to be recreated at a time when global capitalism seems to be widening the divide between rich and poor?

### ***Reconfiguring landscapes in 'crisis'***

The structural policy discourses draw on the wider ideas about the presumed 'power' of globalisation, shrinking the globe and the rapid transfer of virtual funds through the global network of technologies. They also draw on the idea that commerce and capitalism is the key to a successful 'nation'. There is awareness however, that as these processes are fanned by policy which facilitates this global economy, there are increasingly those who are *not* 'knowledge workers'. As jobs created around global capitalism overtake traditional industry and as the need for unskilled manual workers declines, there is concern for those who previously built their lives and communities on such work. In the global information society, people lead increasingly individual yet networked lives. These networks extend beyond their neighbourhood. Indeed, some argue that society has moved from community formations around *Gesellschaft* to community formation around *Gemeinschaft*. The anomie of everyday life, of which Sennett talks, is being played out across networks of online spaces and the sports club. The main theme in public policy discourse is about how the same ICTs used to facilitate global capitalism and the 'knowledge workers' can be used in low -income communities for regeneration.

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<sup>172</sup> T Blair (1998) *Forward: Our Information Age: the Government's vision*

### *ICTs and 'social exclusion'*

A term which has received increasing attention in the last decade, is 'social exclusion'. Tony Blair and his 'New Labour' government lay heavy emphasis on social exclusions and urban deprivation and part of the cure for this urban condition is said to be the same ICTs of the global information society. Indeed, ICTs and Internet access in particular are represented in private, public and third sector discourses as part of the way of re-building and fostering lost urban communities and sense of place, a way to reconfigure social relations. It might be argued, however, that 'social exclusion' is understood as a problem which can be overcome by improved techniques of governance and service delivery. This encourages a narrow focus on issues such as the appropriate mechanisms for agencies to work together, 'joined up' and in partnership.

One EU Green Paper suggests that ICT access to configurations of social relations, which are said to exist in online communities, can encourage social integration and democracy which will 'combat exclusion and isolation in all its forms':

ICTs will permit more people to work from, or near, home for at least some of the time, opening the way for more communities to become alive during the working day, and will allow more services - especially education and community services - to be delivered at local level ... Such changes could help to reinvigorate whole communities and lead to stronger social networks and a sense of place.<sup>173</sup>

It is not clear in this type of statement how or why working at home means that communities will be reinvigorated. INSINC<sup>174</sup> recognise that the way to include communities in the global information society is through the creation of online communities, but suggest that this is not adequate. They recognise that there needs to be a way of linking online and the place-based urban spaces, overcoming the notion of the placeless global information society.

There are two issues which are relevant to this discussion. The first is the issue of 'social exclusion' and deprivation in physical urban areas which precede any idea of technologies. The second is the so-called 'digital divide', which, as research has highlighted, tends to be

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<sup>173</sup> EU: *People First* (1996) 389

<sup>174</sup> INSINC: UK National Working Party on Social Inclusion in association with IBM and Communities Online URL: <http://www.communities.org.uk/insinc/welcome.html>

iterated and structured by the same sort of language as for 'social exclusions'.<sup>175</sup> Indeed there are increasingly more instances of international cross-pollination and sharing the thinking on these issues. For example, in March 2000 a report by Booz-Allen and Hamilton, an international management and technology consultancy firm which focuses on business strategy and transformation, published a report of research which was conducted for the UK Government on Universal Internet Access.<sup>176</sup> The report pointed to the dangers and steps which could be taken to avoid an increasing 'Digital Divide'. The report summarised its findings as follows:

- The UK is already the largest e-commerce market in Europe, with a value of \$1.9 billion in 1999;
- Penetration (i.e., regular usage of the Internet) is high by European standards at 22% but lags some countries, especially the US;
- universal access—all individuals being able to use the Internet and most doing so on a regular basis—is important in terms of economic development, educational progress and social inclusiveness;
- governments in other leading online economies (such as the US) are addressing the access issue with a range of policy initiatives;
- market forces and existing government initiatives will bring UK penetration to at most 60% by 2003, which is not sufficient ;
- a new government programme should set targets for access and usage. Bringing 70% of the UK population online is ambitious but achievable.<sup>177</sup>

The Report employs the same kind of language which is apparent in the discourse of the global information society. The predominant claim is that access to the Internet, the construction of a technocultural landscape, will lead to social inclusion. E-commerce is said to be key to such an 'information society'. Such reports take a very macro-economic view of the information society and inclusion.

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<sup>175</sup> See for example, a recent US based report J W McConnaughey & W Lader (1997) 'The Digital Divide: a survey of information 'haves' and 'have nots' in 1997. Falling through the net II: new data on the digital divide' *National Telecommunications and Information Administration*. Available URL:

<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/net2/falling.html>

<sup>176</sup> Achieving Universal Access (2000) a report by *Booz-Allen and Hamilton Associates* conducted for the UK Government. URL:

<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/default.asp?PageID=1203>

<sup>177</sup> Booz-Allen & Hamilton report press release. URL:

[http://www.bah.com/press/UK\\_internet\\_access.html](http://www.bah.com/press/UK_internet_access.html)

It could be argued that such papers and reports are tinged with a blend of technological deterministic and futurist-utopian perspectives of ICTs. It is this type of language and perspective that seems to pervade much of public and private sector reporting on the possibly relationship between social exclusion (within the wider approaches of urban regeneration) and ICTs. Below, for example, is a table which is typical in such reports. It outlines the global 'best in class benchmarks' for such aspects of the global information society which are 'hard' and 'soft'.

**FIGURE 3.04**  
**BEST IN CLASS BENCHMARKS FOR 'HARD' AND 'SOFT' ASPECTS OF**  
**THE GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY**

SOURCE: BOOZ-ALLEN & HAMILTON

	ELEMENTS	BEST-IN-CLASS BENCHMARK
<b>'Hard' Infrastructure</b>	• International air links	• US • UK
	• World class communications infrastructure	• Germany
	• Business incubation facilities	• Israel • Netherlands
<b>'Soft' Infrastructure</b>		
<b>Education</b>	• 'Smart' schools • 'Smart' workforce • Education ties to business	• Japan • US • UK, Ireland
<b>Start-ups</b>	• Public/private seed money • Venture capital firms • Exits for investors	• Taiwan • The Netherlands • US
<b>Cyberlaws</b>	• Application specific • Commerce enabling • Societal	• US • UK/EU
<b>Telecoms</b>	• Licensing requirements • Interconnection rules • Convergence provisions	• US • UK • New Zealand
<b>Financial Incentives</b>	• Tax and other incentives • Ownership rules • Funding sources	• Ireland • Singapore • Subic Bay
<b>Institutions</b>	• Supporting institutions • Trade associations	• Singapore
<b>Employment</b>	• Immigration policies • Hiring rules	• Singapore • Subic Bay
<b>Environment</b>	• Environment protection • Urban design regulations	• Japan • US

Concentrating on the 'soft' aspects, such as education, telecommunications and so on, the Report places the UK in second and third place for three elements. UK is placed second for 'cyberlaws', including the implementation of 'commerce-enabling' and 'societal'. UK is placed third for education in terms of 'smart schools and workforce' and second again in telecoms strategies. This includes 'interconnections rules' and 'convergence provisions'. The UK, according to the Report and to the figure has good provisions and rankings in



terms of the elements that create a successful Information Society - a successful technocultural landscape?

In March 2000 the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair presented the Government's targets for e-commerce and Internet interactions for the UK. The speech was imbued, again, with the discourses of the global information society and also the discourse of social inclusion:

Some people will access the Internet, as now, through a PC. Others through a mobile phone or digital television. Some will do so at work, others at home. For those who can't afford any of these technologies, we will ensure there is a nearby *public access point*. Universal Internet access is vital if we are not only to *avoid social divisions* over the new economy but to create a *knowledge economy of the future which is for everyone*. Because it's likely that the Internet will be as ubiquitous and as normal as electricity is today. *We cannot accept a digital divide*. For business. Or for individuals. *Knowledge and skills, creativity and innovation, adaptability and entrepreneurship* are the ways by which the winners will win in the new economy. We all have a responsibility to ensure that we are all equipped to succeed in it. That way we can all prosper. All our people. And all our businesses. For the benefit of Britain.<sup>178</sup> (emphasis added)

The issue seems to be how ICTs in all its forms can possibly be cast into the project of social inclusion and urban regeneration. The point has to be reiterated that the emphasis in much public policy discourse draws on the constructions of the global information society is made up of an notion of 'knowledge workers' and the 'knowledge economy'.

### **Interrogating social exclusions and community regeneration**

Before moving into the next chapter, a deeper explanation of what is understood by 'social exclusion' is required. INSINC (the National Working Party on Social Inclusion) report that social exclusion is a feature of both individuals and communities, usually resulting from unemployment and other changes in the labour market. These are manifested spatially, in that areas with high unemployment become associated with social as well as economic decline.<sup>179</sup> These areas then become identifiable by characteristics such as:

- decaying physical infrastructure;
- withdrawal of local shops and services;
- over-stretched, poor quality public services;
- high levels of crime and vandalism;
- breakdown of traditional family structures;

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<sup>178</sup> T Blair, 07 March 2000, speech made at the Knowledge 2000 Conference. Available at URL: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/news.asp?NewsId=637&SectionId=32>

<sup>179</sup> INSINC, (1996)

- a lack of the social skills and values of employed working class and middle class communities;
- educational under-achievement;
- political marginalisation;
- and the risk of actuality of social disorder.<sup>180</sup>

The European Union points to three further attributes of social exclusion:

1. structural social exclusion;
2. dynamic social exclusion;
3. multi-dimensional social exclusion.

The first feature includes factors like long-term unemployment, changes in the labour market, changes and the weakening of 'value systems', particularly what the EU considers 'traditional' forms of solidarity and social fragmentation. These could be considered as classic symptoms of urban areas perceived to be in 'crisis'. By saying that social exclusion is dynamic, what is inferred is that employment trends, trends in family structures and so on, show no indication of improving in the short term. As such, issues of social exclusion impact policy in many areas. Using these criteria for social exclusion INSINC identify several key questions: primarily, will progress towards an information society enhance or alleviate social exclusions?<sup>181</sup>

### **Interrogating the 'digital divide'**

In North America, attention is increasingly given to the 'digital divide'. This is not strictly the equivalent of 'social exclusion' in UK, as 'social exclusion' is discussed in wider terms that just ICTs. The US seems to be ahead in thinking formerly and from a strong policy perspective about problems of uneven community-ICT relations and access to ICTs. Nonetheless, many of the structural problems raised in the 'digital divide' debates are akin to the issues which are arising in UK. Indeed, as mentioned above, similar emotive and rhetorical language is employed when discussing social exclusions and the digital divide.

The US Digital Divide Report suggests four groups or 'profiles' of the North American

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<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*, 7

<sup>181</sup> See Graham & Speak (2000)

population that are amongst the 'least connected to the 'Information Superhighway' according to 1997 data. In other words, those who are represented as excluded from the 'information society'. Below is a table adapted from the data showing these profiles.

**FIGURE 3.05**  
**FALLING THROUGH THE NET: THOSE MOST LIKELY TO BE EXCLUDED**  
**FROM ICT USE IN NORTH AMERICA**  
**SOURCE: NTIA 1997**

<b>Rural Poor</b>	Those living in rural areas at the lowest income levels are among the least connected. Rural households earning less than \$5,000 per year have the lowest telephone penetration rates (74.4%), followed by central cities (75.2%) and urban areas (76.8%). In 1994, by contrast central city poor were the least connected. Rural households earning between \$5,000-\$10,000 have the lowest PC-ownership rates (7.9%) and on-line access rates (2.3%), followed by urban areas (10.5%, 4.4%) and central cities (11%, 4.6%).
<b>Rural and Central City Minorities</b>	"Other non-Hispanic" households, including Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Eskimos, are least likely to have telephone service in rural areas (82.8%), particularly at low incomes (64.3%). Black and Hispanic households also have low telephone rates in rural areas (83.2% and 85%), especially at low incomes (73.6% and 72.2%). As in 1994, Blacks have the lowest PC-ownership rates in rural areas (14.9%), followed by Blacks and Hispanics in central cities (17.1% and 16.2%, respectively). On-line access is also the lowest for Black households in rural areas (5.5%) and central cities (5.8%), followed by Hispanic households in central cities (7.0%) and rural areas (7.3%).
<b>Young Households</b>	Young households (below age 25) also appear to be particularly burdened. Young, rural, low-income households have telephone penetration rates of only 65.4%, and only 15.5% of these households are likely to own a PC. Similarly, young households with children are also less likely to have phones or PCs: those in central cities have the lowest rates (73.4% for phones, 13.3% for PCs), followed by urban (76% for phones, 14.5% for PCs) and rural locales (79.6% for phones, 21.2% for PCs).
<b>Female-headed Households</b>	Single-parent, female households also lag significantly behind the national average. They trail the telephone rate for married couples with children by ten percentage points (86.3% versus 96%). They are also significantly less likely than dual-parent households to have a PC (25% versus 57.2%) or to have on-line access (9.2% versus 29.4%). Female-headed households in central cities are particularly unlikely to own PCs or have on-line access (20.2%, 6.4%), compared to dual-parent households (52%, 27.3%) or even male-headed households (28%, 11.2%) in the same areas.

The Report concludes that significant segments of the North American population are excluded from telephone and/or computer connections, suggesting that the data demonstrates that the 'have-nots' are located primarily among low-income, minority, young central city and rural dwellers. These pockets of the disconnected are thus excluded from

the apparent benefits of being 'connected', such as electronic access to employment opportunities, housing or other social and welfare services. It concludes:

Because it may take time before these groups become connected at home, it is still essential that schools, libraries, and other community access centres ('CACs') provide computer access in order to connect significant portions of our population.<sup>182</sup>

This is an important issue and one which is proving contentious in UK. There is a lack of holistic formal policy organisation in the provision of ICT access in low-income urban areas which have regularly been represented as non viable and unprofitable market places. As a result, many of the initiatives are operated by third sector organisations with tight and unstable funding channels. These issues shall be discussed more fully in later chapters.

Although the experiences of the US obviously cannot be translated directly and unproblematically to the UK context, reports such as the one above can provide useful indicators to how community-ICTs can be developed. Other useful works for this research are those which discuss and critically assess the impacts of the National Information Infrastructure (NII) instigated by Al Gore, former US Vice-President. The NII is an embodiment of hope invested in the power of ICTs and indeed in the human capacity to exploit ICTs. Many of the issues that the NII hopes to address are obviously very similar to those which the UK government is making steps to explore. These issues include economic development, governance, community development and education. The difference is that in the US, the NII is an attempt to centralise the efforts to make ICTs a part of people's everyday lives in a wide range of areas. The UK on the other hand, seems to be addressing the different areas separately - sometimes including ICTs in their strategies and sometimes not. Millar, discussing the NII, suggests for instance that:

Telecommunications can bring us together. As the telephone ads exhort, we can "reach out and touch someone". It can help create communities out of disorganised neighbourhoods, bring together dispersed people into 'virtual communities' united by common concerns. It can break the isolation of the disabled, the elderly, the sick, and the housebound. ... It can help turn the world into a global village that has personal connections among all types of people.<sup>183</sup>

This indeed is a common articulation of the possibilities of ICTs, and particularly the possibilities of cyberspace for the formation of online communities. However, there is another articulation. Millar continues:

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<sup>182</sup> McConnaughey & Lader (1997)

<sup>183</sup> Millar (1996), 10

On the other hand, the Information Superhighway might flood every corner of the globe with mass-market entertainment, news, and merchandise produced mostly by Western nations. It might overwhelm local culture in this country and abroad by replacing regional diversity with commercial uniformity. It might provide ever more enticing reasons to stay at home, by ourselves, interactively consuming any movie we want, any product we want, any time we want. It might divide us into ever-smaller niche markets, each unaware of and unconnected to the rest, each defined by its lifestyle rather than its values, its fashions rather than its culture.<sup>184</sup>

This is a concern which is rather neglected in balanced discussions of ICTs particularly and perhaps not surprisingly in the public and private sectors. It might be argued that this indeed has already occurred alongside the processes of globalisation which were discussed in earlier chapters. The statement also suggests that the spaces for creativity and the spaces for the creation of different forms of community might be constricted. Whether this is the case or not is part of the remit for this research. It certainly cannot be denied that the private, public and third sectors have competing visions and agendas for ICTs. These visions and agendas are in competition with those of the people living in the 'local' places and cultures which Millar mentions.

### Synopsis

Through three sections, this chapter has addressed the broad structuring discourses which shape thinking about ICTs and society. **Section I** discussed four dominant discourses which have informed and shaped much of the thinking on human-ICT relations: the global information society, concepts of the city and the decline of urban place. This led onto the final two discourses which offered representations of place-based urban 'community' and the representations of cyberspace. In particular, the discussion turned to ideas about cultural formations called 'virtual' or online communities that exist on the Internet. The section referred to the theorisations of prominent commentators on these topics, such as Castells, Sassen, Etzioni, Graham, Winner, and Young. These commentators explore the idea of global networked economies, spaces of flows, the strategic role of the city within these spaces and the possibilities of thinking about the relational city embedding technologies within its processes. Arguments concerning the place of 'community' within the informational city, as well as the emergence of other cultural formations and representations in cyberspaces, have also been explored through the writings of Etzioni, Jones, Winner and Rheingold.

**Section II** linked the ideas from **Section I** to Robins' critique of what he calls the

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<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*, 11

'technocultural discourse'. Robins suggests that the perspective of a 'technological revolution' occludes the disturbing realities of contemporary change. He also critiques the idea that increased communication can engender a greater 'sense of community', which is the argument evident in advocates of 'virtual communities'. Robins asserts that this is a particularly Enlightenment way of thinking about any ideas of 'community' which distances humans from 'disorder' and conflict.

There are several themes from this discussion which will be threaded through to the next chapter. Taking these themes through the rest of this research will show that there are tensions between the ways in which discourses are structuring the relations between society and ICTs. There is a particular tension between the language used in policy discourses which tends to draw on technological determinism and the idea that processes of globalisation creates a smaller, borderless world where place becomes insignificant. At the same time as the globe is becoming placeless, reachable and controllable, erasing difference, the 'local' is becoming a focal point for the concentration of difference, diversity and creativity. **Section III** illustrated that the policy discourses draw upon the idea that a lost sense of 'community' needs to be regained in order for social inclusion and urban regeneration to be achieved. The idea of social exclusion from the 'information society' and the 'digital divide', a North American articulation of this, has also revealed the ideas and ideals which structure this thinking. ICTs are viewed as the tools through which forms of community can be created, which can be placeless and global. At the same time, Robins argues that within this evolving 'technocultural landscape' and belief in the 'power' of technologies, people are actually becoming distanced from the 'social ills' which exist in their 'communities'. He suggests that the ideal of 'community' is not useful as it denies 'difference' and conflict. This contention will be challenged through the research to follow.

The following chapters will seek to explore the place and form of social relations within communities which exist in the global information society in considerable empirical detail. Within the study of geography, understandings of human experience, identity and politics can only be successful with an examination into the intersections of society, space, people and place. Geographers understand these dynamic intersections by occupying a space in-between. In the same way then the evolving landscape in-between the virtual online and the place-based urban, must be explored and theorised. What is needed is an examination into the,

complex articulations which are emerging between intersections in geographical space and place, and the electronic realms accessible through new technologies.<sup>185</sup>

Critical theorisations about virtual or virtual online communities still remain predominantly American-centric. Perhaps the biggest failure of all the above discussion has been to make links to place-based urban contexts and to critically explore re-negotiations of the meaning of 'community'. As Steve Jones suggests:

None of these all too brief forays into CMC (computer mediated communication) hit the mark. What is missing is the concomitant conceptualisation of space and the social, the inquiry into connections between social relations, spatial practice, values, and beliefs.<sup>186</sup>

This chapter has showed that the idea of the information society, with all it means, is being adopted as a new kind of society which is desirable, and one which is desirable for deprived urban areas. Yet what, in practice, does the global information society facilitated through ICTs, and founded on all the discourses analysed above, offer to those in these neighbourhoods? Is it a quick fix that the Labour Government has embraced for inclusion?

The following chapter takes the themes which have been explored here, and develops them in the context of community-ICT initiatives in practice. The themes which will be developed, are about the ways in which connections are made through ICTs, how on and off-line spaces are connected. They are also about how people form relationships through ICTs and about how 'difference' is negotiated in places through ICTs. The next chapter therefore seeks to explore how ICTs and community-ICT relations are constructed in some specific contexts.

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<sup>185</sup> S Graham & S Marvin (1998) *The Richness of Cities: Urban policy in a new landscape* (London: Comedia in association with Demos)

<sup>186</sup> S G Jones (1995) 'Understanding Community in the Information Age' in S G Jones (Ed.) *CyberSociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community* 23 (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage)

## Chapter Four

### Constructions of Initiatives and Policies in Practice

#### Preamble

Now that the structuring discourses have been explored, the themes that have been drawn out can be situated against an analysis of the constructions of community-ICT relations in practice. These are discussed in a public policy context of ICTs in low-income communities. The previous chapter identified several themes that will structure some analysis in this chapter and the empirical analyses in stage three of the research. The first theme relates to the tension between the language used to think about the ways in which ICTs are impacting society, and the language used in policy about ICTs in society. The language draws upon the everyday discourses of 'informational cities', globalising processes and the 'borderless world'. Yet, the policies which the UK government propose are beginning to use the idea that the 'local' should be the focal point for urban regeneration.

This leads to the second theme. Policy discourse on the information society uses the language of 'social exclusion' and calls for the reinstatement of 'community' as part of the solution. Related to this is the recognition in the public sector that there is growing 'exclusion' from the 'information society'. Again, the ideas about the 'information society' are drawn from the type of discursive discourses that are discussed in **Section I** of chapter three. ICTs are considered to be one tool through which a sense of community in socially excluded urban areas of the UK can be achieved. Again, the public sector ideas draw upon much of the discursive accounts of the potentials for the Internet, e-commerce and community-ICT initiatives.

The final theme is the critique of the idea that Kevin Robins offers. He argues that these ideas of the information society, virtual community and 'virtual urbanity' concentrate on the production of an ideal community through enhanced communication, an ideal of modernity. He asserts that this only dissolves conflict and difference in 'community' and distances people from the 'real' ills of the 'real' places where they live. The work so far has shown that structural policy discourses do indeed draw on the language used in the discourses of globalisation, the reinstatement of community in deprived urban areas and the power of



ICTs in the global information society. The aim of this chapter is to see whether this continues in the practice of constructing and developing community-ICT initiatives.

**Section I** of this chapter considers the complex web of politics and the hegemonic versions of the 'information society' that different institutions and groups construct within the process of community-ICT initiative strategies. In particular, this chapter outlines the development of community networking and other community-ICT initiatives in practice in the UK. It also explores the constructions of the policy discourses which address inclusion in the information society of those who live in low income neighbourhoods.

**Section II** of the chapter provides a short resume of seven community-ICT initiatives that operate in a number of 'socially excluded' urban areas of the UK. To complete these, the researcher accompanied the Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Team 15 on their site visit to these projects which are centred around the Sheffield area.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this chapter, the construction of the community-ICT initiatives in practice through specific language is examined. The language of policy discourses explored in chapter three draws upon the discursive discourses of 'informational cities', globalising processes and the 'borderless world'. The policies which the UK government propose for ICTs in low income communities, however, also use the idea that the 'local' should be the focal point for urban regeneration. Policy discourse on the information society employs the language of 'social exclusion' and calls for the reinstatement of 'community' as part of the solution to inclusion in the information society which will ultimately lead to urban regeneration. The ideas about the 'information society' are drawn from the type of everyday discourses that are discussed in **Section I** of chapter three. The ideas about ICTs as tools for regeneration of community and the role of the Internet in particular play a vital role in the production of policy discourse and the practice of community-ICT initiatives as shall be illustrated.

The chapter will locate this analysis in the context of Robins' critique of the 'technocultural landscape'. This provides a good context for **Part Two** of the work which will look more closely at the construction in practice of 'technocultural lifeworlds' of on and off-line communities.

## Section I: Policy in Practice

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There is a complex web of politics which is woven through the provision of ICT access in low income communities, content development on online community websites, and so on. These are all clearly highly sensitive issues with interested parties exhibiting protectionism in many ways. The ideological characterisation of the medium of cyberspace, where free speech is encouraged, self-publishing is easier, where the 'passive audience' can become the broadcaster, where websites serve as central communication spaces for global protest organisation, for example, means that 'copyright', 'ownership' and 'censorship' are uncomfortable words.

In this context, there are an increasing number of community-ICT initiatives emerging in the UK's urban and indeed rural landscapes. Each initiative differs in agenda, organisation, location, funding and partnerships. However, the goals tend to be similar: community regeneration and participation in that regeneration in terms of decision making, skills training, and job creation. Community regeneration is achieved through physical regeneration. Yet, what is also crucial in the third sector imagination is the regeneration of social relations. This means that part of regeneration is building confidence in individuals and groups. Many of these initiatives were originally modelled on the North American community-ICT projects, most notably, Blacksburg Electronic Village, but have moved out of prescriptive models which are specific to a North American context.<sup>2</sup> For example, 'models' of 'virtual communities' based in a North American context tend to be based on an idea of 'community' which is tied very strongly not only to physical notions of the 'community', 'Main Street', but also theoretical notions and movements such as 'communitarianism'. In the UK, however, both the physical urban landscape and the theoretical notions of 'community' differ. The UK has a different set of strong historical contexts which shape differing notions of community, and indeed which produce different types of 'communities'.

### Community networks (CNs)

The pervasive notion embedded in these emerging UK initiatives is that 'connectivity' through the Internet and community networks will nurture economic, social and political 'ideal communities' for the new millennium. As a consequence, in the last five years, there has been considerable attention to what are known as 'community networks' (CNs) or

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<sup>1</sup> Background to the Policy Action Team, its remit and activities will be also be discussed in this chapter.

'networking communities'. Community networks are both 'virtual', or online, as well as physically grounded, place-based, existing in urban and rural spaces. In a sense, community networks are a response to the inaccessibility of emerging and new ICTs, an attempt to address and overcome the problems of public access, media dominance, and industry authority.

Beamish identifies four types of community networks: Free-Nets, bulletin boards, government sponsored networks, and wired (digital) cities.<sup>3</sup> Cisler defines a community network as,

one or more computers providing services to people using computers and terminals to gain access to those services and to each other ... The information contained in such networks as well as the relationships that form between the participants make up what I call an electronic greenbelt to reinforce and add value to the community.<sup>4</sup>

Cisler suggests that community networks aim to reinforce communities and democratic processes.<sup>5</sup> Schuler claims that community networks can potentially encourage community cohesion and provide access to education and training, which would ideally create 'informed citizens' and enhanced democracy.<sup>6</sup> The most common aim of community networks is community development and regeneration. Included in this is the encouragement of local non-profit organisations, improved delivery of social services, an enhanced 'sense of community' through improved inter-personal communication, and provision of a central source of local information. INSINC go so far as to say that CNs are crucial to the 'global information society', that they offer huge potential for the stimulus and medium of communication and information in local communities, hence:

If this potential is not fulfilled, then it is likely that some form of exclusion from the Information Society will have become entrenched.<sup>7</sup>

There are three important research queries at this point:

- How do community-ICT initiatives vary to ideas about them in structural policy discourses?
- Do community-ICT initiatives celebrate difference or dissolve difference?

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<sup>2</sup> Cohill & Kavanaugh (2000)

<sup>3</sup> Beamish (1995)

<sup>4</sup> S Cisler (1993)

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Tsagarousianou et al (1997)

<sup>6</sup> Schuler (1994), 39-51

- How are the evolving 'communities' in a technocultural landscape articulated?

At present, it is evident through the analysis of various reports and public sector papers that 'community' is only imagined through political and economic enlivening and knowledge creation. Against this though, it could be argued that experiences of 'communities' are related to much more than 'what capital gets up to' and indeed 'knowledge' once gained, has to be given a space for creative expression.<sup>8</sup>

### *Community networking in the UK*

There are many stories about community networking and many of them, as has been touched upon, have originated from a North American context. The UK stories of community networking can be read from a number of differing perspectives and there are increasing numbers of formal as well as informal organisations which aim to offer advice and a sense of 'belonging' through community networking initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

There is one particularly influential third sector body called UK Communities Online and the associated Partnerships Online which have been in operation since 1995.<sup>10</sup> Community networking was emerging before the UKCO body was formed, however, with initiatives forming initially in Coventry, Craigmillar, Highlands and Islands, Bristol, Manchester and Brighton. UKCO's aim was to act as a national networking hub. These community-ICT initiatives sought support from various public and private sectors such as ICL, BT, BURA (British Urban Regeneration Association) and Universities. Primarily, the initiatives aimed to provide information networks for community members and for community regeneration practitioners. At that time, the key to the development of community networking in the UK was the realisation that:

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<sup>7</sup> INSINC, (1996)

<sup>8</sup> Massey (1991)

<sup>9</sup> See for example, the Association for Community Networking URL:  
<http://www.afcn.net/>

Another informal organisation was set up in March 2000, Making The Net Work URL:  
<http://www.makingthenetwork.org>

<sup>10</sup> The 'stories' of community networking in the UK can be found at *UK Communities Online and Partnerships Online Community networking in the UK 1995-1999* URL:  
<http://www.partnerships.org.uk/stories/main.htm>

Additionally, see D Wilcox & M Mulquin (1999) 'Communities Online and the European Association for Community Networking in S Pantry (ed.) (1999) *Building Community Information Network: strategies and experiences* (London: Library Association Press) 145-157

the bottom-up vision of community networking could mesh with some of the commercial scenarios for telecommunications in the Information Age.<sup>11</sup>

Hosted by private sector (British Telecommunications) servers, the Communities Online Forum Website was initiated and plans were developed to produce a logo and publicity: an identity. Funds for this came from BT laboratories and from the government's IT For All Initiative.<sup>12</sup> Kevin Harris, an Information Officer from the Community Development Foundation, became a key actor in the further development of the group as secretary to the IBM working party on social inclusion in the Information Society (INSINC). The INSINC report *The Net Result* was published in 1997 and offered strong support for community resource centres and networks.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, in order to develop advisory material and seminars, funds were secured with Harris's help from the Home Office Voluntary Services Unit for a 'Getting Connected' project.<sup>14</sup>

In May 1997, the same month the new Labour government came to power, the group met with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) proposing,

Communities Online can help develop 'local IT for All' - a new dimension to the campaign will show the social and economic benefits of information and communication technologies in towns, cities and rural areas, and its relevance to people's day to day lives.<sup>15</sup>

So, how has this idea been embedded within UK government thinking on community regeneration, if at all?

### Policy (re) action

The UK government has been relatively slow in funding or even formally acknowledging community-ICT initiatives. Many of the initiatives initially provide various levels of training. Indeed this remains their primary purpose as they usually have to have a 'purpose' in order to apply for various streams of funding. These purposes are measured in 'outputs', which must be quantified and communicated to the particular funding body. It must be stressed that there is a large difference between initiatives which concentrate on basic information technology skills and those which seek to foster forms of online communities. The latter

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<sup>11</sup> D Wilcox *UK Communities Online and Partnerships Online Community networking in the UK 1995-1999* URL: <http://www.partnerships.org.uk/stories/main.htm>

<sup>12</sup> See URL:

<http://www.itforall.org.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> See the Report at URL:

<http://www.uk.ibm.com/community/uk117.html>

<sup>14</sup> See URL:

<http://www.partnerships.org.uk/connect/index.html>

<sup>15</sup> Wilcox *UK Communities Online and Partnerships Online Community networking in the UK 1995-1999* URL:

are viewed are often represented as arts based programmes and so have different 'outputs'. The former tend to be viewed as a means through which specific IT skills can be developed and hence the opportunity for employment increased.

In the last two years, however, there has been a flurry of 'interest' from the UK government in the information society or 'knowledge economy' in general. White papers such as the Multimedia Advisory Group, as well as reports such as, among others, *Introducing ISI* (Information Society Initiative) (February 1996), *Technology Foresight: Progress Through Partnership - IT and Electronics*, (April 1995); *Creating the Superhighways of the Future: Developing Broadband Communications in the UK* (November 1994); *Modernising Government* White Paper, have all served to raise the potential for ICTs in the UK.<sup>16</sup> All reproduce the same sort of narratives that originate from the powerful type of thinking shaped by the four discourses discussed in chapter three. Some carry strongly utopianist tones which concentrate on a narrow conceptualisation of ICTs as tools. This leaves little space for ideas of empowerment and control over ICTs for the user. Little space is left for thinking about the micro-level impacts of ICTs that a SCOT approach would elicit.

There is clear evidence that these reports and policies reproduce the discourse of the informational city and the global economy which Castells discusses. The narratives of the governmental papers, not surprisingly, reproduce the idea of economic competitiveness, service delivery, and 'empowerment for the consumer'. These are predominantly economic-driven aspects of the information society and much of the government research and advice on the information society indeed originates from the Department of Trade and Industry. It is difficult to find any evidence of an institutional concern about *how* ICTs may benefit social justice and social relations within the global information society, particularly for those who reside in low income communities and who are encompassed within the economically unproductive markets. Another criticism which could be made of the papers and policy directions, is that there is an overriding assumption that the technologies themselves are autonomous. The public sector imagining of the information society, it might be argued, is technologically determinist. For example, the assumption seems to be that providing 'consumers' with technological ways of producing and reproducing social

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<http://www.partnerships.org.uk/stories/main.htm>

<sup>16</sup> *Introducing ISI* (DTI) (February 1996), *Technology Foresight: Progress Through Partnership - IT and Electronics* (Office of Science and Technology) (April 1995); *Creating the Superhighways of the Future: Developing Broadband Communications in the UK* Cm 2734 (HMSO) (November 1994), *Modernising Government* White Paper March 1999. See URL: <http://www.isi.gov.uk/isi/isiiframe.htm>

relations, will mean a more socially just and equal society. The vision for public uses of ICTs can be summarised in Mo Mowlam MP's recent speech:

We are working together to make improved and integrated services a reality. Within the next three years, we want people to electronically:

- look for work and be matched to jobs;
- get information and advice about benefits;
- apply for training loans and student support;
- submit tax returns and VAT returns;
- access health care advice through NHS Direct;
- book driving tests;
- apply for regional business grants;
- be paid by government for goods and services;
- and notify different parts of government of details, such as change of address, in one transaction.

In the last Budget, Gordon Brown allocated an extra half a billion pounds to set up new ICT (Information and Communication Technology) learning centres. Our target is a national network of 1,000 computer learning centres - in schools, colleges, libraries, Internet cafes and drop-in centres on the high street.<sup>17</sup>

Some might argue that this is distancing people from governance and distancing government from the people. In these imaginings, there is little mention of creativity or space for cultural activities using ICTs. The discourse of the global information society is reproduced in other areas of UK government policy. What follows is an exploration into one particular area.

### **The Social Exclusion Unit and PAT 15<sup>18</sup>: connecting deprived urban communities to the global information society?**

As has been discussed, the UK Government seems increasingly concerned with the idea of 'social exclusion'. One way in which social 'inclusion' can be achieved is thought to be through the same ICTs which facilitate the more prosperous global information economy.

As Blair asserts:

In the information age, the many must benefit, not just the few. A society of 'information have-nots' would not just be unfair - it would also be inefficient. The last industrial revolution may have

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for links to these reports as well as other developments and framework for the 'Information Society'.

<sup>17</sup> *Working together to deliver Information Age Government* Speech by Rt Hon Mo Mowlam MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office at the LGA/IDeA Information Age Government Conference, 24 November 1999

<sup>18</sup> See URL:

<http://www.pat15.org.uk>

been built on the inventions and enterprise of a few, but today, competitiveness depends on the skills and creativity of the whole workforce. The more people who have the skills and opportunity to use these new networks, at work or at home, the richer those networks will become.<sup>19</sup>

An inclusive information society according to public policy discourse is one which fosters increased skills and thus increased prosperity for all, one that is efficient and creative. However, as Graham and Marvin have suggested, it is usually those who are conventionally marginalised from mainstream society who are excluded from any other kind of society, including an information society.<sup>20</sup> 'Social exclusion' is an emotive and generalising term. It has been adopted as a way of describing those who live in areas of physical and infrastructural decay, as was highlighted in chapter three. Attempts at regeneration of these areas through physical regeneration of buildings have not always been successful. Thus, other approaches, such as ones that concentrate on infrastructural regeneration and inclusion have been advanced. An example of the infrastructural approach to promoting ICTs in marginalised urban places is through the 'wiring' up of schools. The *National Grid for Learning* initiative aims by 2002 to connect all schools, colleges and libraries.<sup>21</sup> The Learning Grid also aims to provide IT training for teachers so that pupils leave school with a good knowledge of ICTs and their applications. Another example of the physical infrastructural approach is the *ICT Learning Centres* Initiative proposed in the March 1999 *Computers for All* announcement. The initiative aims to have created 700 ICT Learning Centres in UK by 2002. The key step though came in 1998 when the ideology of an inclusive information society was woven into the broader agenda of social inclusion and urban regeneration, as evidenced by the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) Report *Bringing Britain Together*.<sup>22</sup>

The Social Exclusion Unit was initiated by UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in December 1997 and is staffed by civil servants as well as a selection of 'experts' external to the cabinet office. The Head of the Unit was Moira Wallace, at the time of writing. The members of the unit,

come from a number of Government departments and from organisations with experience of tackling social exclusion - the probation service, housing, police, local authorities, the voluntary sector and business. The Unit has the remit to produce 'joined up solutions to joined up

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<sup>19</sup> Blair (1998)

<sup>20</sup> Graham & Marvin (1996)

<sup>21</sup> Department for Education & Employment (1997) *Connecting the Learning Society: National Grid for Learning*, DfEE London

<sup>22</sup> Social Exclusion Unit (1998) *Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*



problems'. It is tasked with analysing the web of problems that make up social exclusion, and then improving the mechanisms to prevent them happening.<sup>23</sup>

The Unit functions as part of the Cabinet Office, reporting directly to the Prime Minister. The eighteen Policy Action Teams were initiated as part of a strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal and are overseen by the Minister for Local Government and Housing, Hilary Armstrong.<sup>24</sup>

### *The PAT remit and activities*

Undoubtedly, it must at least initially be recognised that there are multiple types and kinds of exclusions and inclusions in on *and* off line landscapes. This is why eighteen Policy Action Teams were initiated. These exclusions are all closely connected to uneven power relations.

social exclusion creates pockets of dereliction with various entry points, but hardly any exits. It may be long-term unemployment, illness, functional illiteracy, illegal status, poverty, family disruption, psychological crisis, homelessness, drugs, crime, incarceration, etc. Once in this underworld, processes of exclusion reinforce each other, requiring a heroic effort to pull out from what I call the black holes of informational capitalism, that often have a territorial expression.<sup>25</sup>

The Social Exclusion Unit Report *Bringing UK together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal* outlined the aims of one of the eighteen 'policy action teams' which was to tackle specific social 'problems' - Policy Action Team 15. Policy Action Team 15 (PAT15) was responsible for exploring how ICTs could be provided, accessed, implemented in 'communities' in order to:

develop a strategy to increase the availability and take-up of communications and information technology for people living in poor neighbourhoods.<sup>26</sup>

Again, the perception seemed to be that providing access, training and skills to ICTs was desirable and would be a way to overcome social inequalities and produce social inclusion. Indeed, the SEU Report stated that the action team led by the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) would report by December 1999 on:

- best practice in providing access to IT, and IT skills, for people living in poor neighbourhoods;

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<sup>23</sup> A Patel (1999) 'The Social Exclusion Unit' *The Source Public Management Journal* URL: <http://www.thesourcepublishing.co.uk/articles/a00052.html>

<sup>24</sup> Hilary Armstrong at time of writing.

<sup>25</sup> Castells (1997b), 10

<sup>26</sup> Social Exclusion Unit (1998), 5.41

- lessons learnt about the effectiveness of shared access points, such as kiosks in community centres, libraries and Post Offices, and greater access to the Internet etc.;
- the best models for improving access to communications networks as a means of strengthening community ties<sup>27</sup>

The SEU Report states that in some housing estates, under 50 per cent of households have a telephone compared to the national average of 90 per cent.<sup>28</sup> Concurrently, ownership and access to personal computers is much lower than the national average.

The PAT 15 team consequently carried out fifteen site visits, which encompassed over fifty different community-ICT initiatives. The purpose of these visits, according to John Humphreys the PAT 15 secretary, have been to consolidate previous research, identify 'good practice' and to meet with 'special interest groups'. Local focus groups were conducted in 'representative' areas as well as 'before' and 'after' technology awareness days in areas such as Scotswood in Newcastle and other such 'areas of urban deprivation' with which all the PATs are concerned. From such awareness days and site visits, PAT 15 identified several areas of interest for people living in these areas, and specifically why ICTs would be 'appreciated':

- jobs;
- children: keeping up to date with children's computer awareness;
- curiosity;
- communication.<sup>29</sup>

Communication is a vital interest and, according to PAT 15, increased communication produces enhanced processes of globalisation, increased choice and competition, cheaper, quicker and more efficient services and enhanced personalisation of services. This would, it is surmised, mean that what are known as 'early adapters' to ICTs would benefit most. It also means that there would be economic as well as social benefits, increasing power at the individual scale. This would increase collaboration in communities between small business and local councils for instance, which is seen as a positive aspect of community life. It is evident then that the PAT 15 is reproducing many of the ideas about ICTs, community and globalising processes that chapter three critiqued. ICTs are

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* At the time of writing, February 2000 PAT15 had failed to report.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

evidently perceived as tools through which increased communication can be achieved, enabling participation in the 'global information society'. The belief is that participation in this global information society means lower costs, more access to services and more choice for people. Does this constitute urban regeneration though?

The Internet is clearly believed to have the potential to offer humans a type of empowerment and voice. This voice can be extended from their local neighbourhood into the 'global information society'. There are many examples of how the Internet has offered a space for individuals and groups and their voices in marginalised urban areas. This can be through building websites which act as a focal point of information for groups within a community. Empowerment is perceived to be achieved by giving groups and individuals choice of what information they wish to access.<sup>30</sup> So, empowerment is deemed as important to urban regeneration by the UK government but regeneration is not only about improving the physical infrastructure of places, but creating the spaces for social and cultural economies. It could indeed be argued that ICTs like the Internet can be used in many different ways to create and sustain a social and cultural economy. Through online communities, for example, creativity can be encouraged and communication as well as computing skills can be developed. Often there is no space for people to experiment and explore their creative potential. Online communities and website creation can offer this space. ICTs are much more than just the Internet. Technological convergence means that the boundaries between ICTs and their uses are dissolving. Multimedia content achieved through ICTs, and small businesses which form around such content, are important channels for regeneration. These businesses and organisations may offer support to initiatives which attempt to construct a sustainable social economy.

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## **Section II: Community-ICT Initiatives in Practice: a brief analysis**

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### **PAT 15 in practice: the discursive construction**

In April 1999 the researcher accompanied the PAT15 on one of their 15 field visits.<sup>31</sup> Seven different community-ICT initiatives were visited in and around Sheffield. A brief summary of the researcher's observations follow. The aim of the brief summary of the

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<sup>29</sup> PAT 15 presentation at the 1999 UKCO Annual Conference

<sup>30</sup> A good example of this is Black Information Link BLINK URL:  
<http://www.blink.org.uk/>

<sup>31</sup> 15 field visits at the time of writing. Interestingly, 13 out of the 15 visits were in England. It was claimed that the PAT15 team were directed by the Prime minister to concentrate on England only.

projects is to offer some context for the types of community-ICT initiatives which are considered to be 'successful' and pioneering. This will be useful before exploring the case studies in stage three of this research in detail. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer on the visits and the material was recorded through fieldnotes.

## 1. Electronic Community Magazine: Rotherham Library

PAT15 met with a group who identified themselves the 'editors' of the Community Magazine which is web-based. The group was accompanied by library staff consisting of two white women aged approximately 35-45, and one Information Officer, A, aged 30. The Editors consisted of three vocal white middle aged-retired men with ex-mining and ex-farming backgrounds: one categorised himself as 'disabled'. The other participants were three younger Asian men with ages ranging from 20-35. Three female editors were not present.

Each seemed to have their own roles: for example, M, a former farmer who is long-termed disabled, was interested in sci-fi art and stories and had experimented with this using images from TV programmes available on the Internet. A second editor, J, stressed that the library was a good environment to have a 'hands on training experience' which was one to one. He had bought the computer for his children who had since moved on and wished to learn how to use the computer, so responded to door-to-door leafleting advertising the initiative. He had previously been a regular library user.

The other editors included Z who is an outreach worker to Urdu speakers in the 'community' and deals with posting Urdu scripts and writing on the website and A, a part-time youth worker who tries to encourage young people to get involved with the initiative from the youth centre. Y was the main artistic talent who organised an exhibition of Asian art which was exhibited in the main space of the library. He is intending to expand this art into a commercial business dealing with Asian art cards.

The third white man stressed that this initiative was very much about re-creating some lost community, 'putting photos etc. on the web, births, etc.' and indeed, 'getting back to old community - village community, making it really local'. The key to achieving this was seen to be putting terminals in the post office. There was recognition of the barriers to this however, such as the expense involved and the size of kiosks currently available. Another factor which was seen as vital was to identify an individual or group of individuals who could 'interface with the local'. The overall objectives of the initiative were:

- **Work:** there was a realisation that ICTs are vital to new work practices and wanted to be part of those skills
- **Crime:** targeting 'youth' and keeping them occupied was seen as vital.
- More **recognition** was needed that the project and objectives are more than just about employment training etc.
- **Outputs:** there was general frustration with the SRB (Single Regeneration Budget) output forms, their requirements and their failure to recognise what is actually happening as a result of such projects: problem of quantifying how an individual might become more confident or expressive using ICTs.

- There was recognition, therefore, that there is a need to find a way to address 'outputs' *qualitatively* rather than quantitatively.

## 2. ACE Resource Centre

This very small resource centre has one terminal which is the most popular place to access the magazine and online community resources, for example, jobs and voluntary opportunities and so on. The physical job centre building is located one mile away whereas the resource centre is in the middle of a low-income and ethnically diverse residential area.

M the middle aged white woman who is the main employee at the centre stressed that it was very much the content and not the technology itself that attracted the people. ICTs are viewed as another method of reaching and engaging people and M stressed that a key was 'fun' and making people feel confident about themselves and partaking in a 'fun' activity like surfing the Internet encouraged this.

## 3. Challenge Office & Spring Suite: at Clifton Comprehensive School

The centre is a school IT room during the day and an IT resource centre for 'the community' at night, a private sector initiative and houses eighteen terminals. It was stressed that historically there has been a distinct distrust of schools as institutions and that this idea had to be overcome. There was a recognition that there is a need to place computer access in an area of most need in the 'community'. The aim was to encourage families to come along to the centres and they do this through fostering links with community groups who would then inform their 'clients' of the resources available, thus creating and utilising networks and connections.

There is apparently a 'totally open-door policy' at the centre and the centre stresses 'individualised training'. Their 'community development officer' distributes leaflets about the centre on visits and the ACE resource centre also refers clients on to the centre. D, the manager, suggested that there were two keys to the success of their outreach approach as opposed to using newspaper adverts and so on:

- funding from community group involvement from local TEC;
- placing an individual with specific roles within the 'community' for referrals etc.

The centre has been so successful, according to the manager, that they are considering extending the opening hours. At the second site, in Threiber, there have been certain problems which seems to contradict their apparent 'open-door policy'. The local police became involved with the Threiber site - policing and

surveillance as the police station was located nearby. This was not seen as problematic in any way. The long term goal is to have Threiber as the business site ('... now it is safe...') and the school site as the community centre site. The centres are also getting involved with Individual Learning Accounts and the Life Long Learning team at the TEC.

#### **4. Barnsley College Priory Campus**

The centre is a very modern brick building which is reminiscent of American-style malls inside with a large hall, glass covered walkways, partitioned rooms, a library with Internet access for 50 pence per hour, and training rooms which are fairly small and which are kept locked. The building is utterly out of character with the surrounding area. It serves many functions but does not appear to be 'owned' or appropriated by the local community. The building was built from SRB funding but the function was not decided upon at the time. Thus the building has been placed into the community and neighbourhood to do some 'good' for the community.

F who is a former miner and one of founding members of Grimethorpe EVH (Electronic Village Hall) told the group about his divorce and drink problem after his redundancy. Apparently there was a call for Internet education in the area so a Management Development Fund was made available which meant that £2000 was secured in order to increase business. There was an emphasis on involving young people for example, in email use, contacting global penpals and so on. The young people are able to access their emails from other places and this was encouraged. There is an emphasis on 'hands-on' training and guidance and 'going out' into the community. The largest group who use the centre are 30-50 year olds. There was also a noticeable increase in the number of people who are already in employment, but who required computer training. The centre has 45-50 networked computers with fixed lease line.

It was claimed that the next phase was to aim at working with community groups and do further work with 14-16 year olds in providing interview skills and computer skills. All the courses except the business courses are free. F estimated that Priory were reaching 1.2 per cent of the community and that 'a lot are frightened of these buildings'. F is known as an individual in the surrounding 'community' thus can physically merge in the neighbourhood and talk to people and 'getting them talking' and he suggests 'people think that it [the building] is council owned and if it's council owned it is a bad word'.

#### **5. Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall (GEVH)**

Grimethorpe EVH originally occupied a very small room in the centre which was built. The room had been set aside for computers and eventually expanded. Originally GEVH had no funding whatsoever, and three years ago the centre had

the only Internet access points in Yorkshire outside of the Universities. The EVH was set up as a self-help centre the started providing informal training for community groups and the community in general: as A states 'a lot of what we do is raising confidence'. The workers at GEVH propose that the EVH provides an environment in which to just sit and chat so it is 'not just about the technology'.

In December 1997 GEVH received Lottery funding amounting to £113,000 which provided for the expansion of the room, but not for the payment of the staff. The main problem was that in order to get funding and so on, one had to be able to measure outputs, but the staff stressed, how does one measure such outputs that the GEVH produce, such as training and confidence building? The GEVH now has £500,000 but this amount is still not sufficient.

With regard to how the staff involved the surrounding 'community' in the activities of the project, they stressed that they already knew people in the community and so talked to people. They are all former miners so a lot of older people - other former miners, for example - visit the GEVH. They suggest that people do not want to do NVQs and 'qualifications' (which are counted as outputs) as they are not relevant to their lives. What they like to do is build their family trees, scanning photos and so on, but these things are difficult to measure.

Yet, what is the gender and ethnic participation in the GEVH? The 'gender' question was addressed by suggesting that children under 16 have to be accompanied by their parents. An example was given of a group of women who requested women only training but A and the other staff - all male - wanted integration in the community, not segregation so this request would not be accommodated. There also seems to be a division between dirty/clean and technical/word processing skills. For instance, one woman was told by her husband that she was 'stupid' but now she scans photos and has learned new skills: she was originally attracted to GEVH originally because she knew the people. So, the keys to the success of GEVH are:

- strong community partnerships;
- strong existing community groups;
- strong neighbourhood watch organisations: i.e. the group used the GEVH as a place to meet and discuss the issues.

## **6. MATREC: Manor Resource and Training Centre**

MATREC is located very close and in fact within the Manor housing estate which is the most deprived and physically deteriorating housing estate in Sheffield. The housing stock is wartime and deteriorating. It has been described in the past as the worst housing estate in The UK and the area has experienced a lack of communication with the Council. S, the manager, emphasised that the Manor 'community' wanted the dignity of solving their own problems, as indeed there are a lot of self-help groups already existing in Manor. Various employment projects have failed in the past however due to a lack of training. S stresses that their success is due to the fact that, 'we are actually people from the community



encouraging other people' and the recognition that 'IT is just one of the tools that people use'. S emphasises that the point of initiatives such as MATREC is to offer people a choice in their lives. It is not about people getting certificates: that is not regeneration: 'we are people who enable people to learn'.

Initially, S was very territorial and concerned about who the jobs went to, but claims he has 'mellowed' and so they do now offer courses to those who live outwith the geographical area of Manor. Yet, 80-95 per cent of those on the MATREC courses are local. The key is to engage with the local community and identifying the people in the community who need help and so support is needed to let the community work for themselves. 60-70 per cent of those who use MATREC are female. MATREC has a very good partnership with Sheffield College who offer guidance for key skills teaching but they understand however that they cannot take control of the project. MATREC do not consider themselves 'entrepreneurs' or managers, but 'community development workers'. The people who they help are not viewed as 'customers', but as 'friends' and people who are *known* to the MATREC staff. Entrepreneurs on the other hand cater for 'outputs' and so on, for the 'customer'. This problem of 'outputs' is difficult: 'how do you quantify what's happened to Lindsey?', Lindsey came to MATREC for training with no qualifications and is now a staff member. There are eighteen members of the MATREC staff, all of whom have been through the 'MATREC system'.

MATREC has seven outreach centres. The IT equipment needs to be updated every 18 months: where does the money come from if outputs cannot be quantified? IT courses are provided as parents feel the need to 'keep up' with their children and additionally to hone IT skills to improve job prospects, but there is the recognition that the jobs have to exist in the first instance. Again, one to one talking through approach to training is emphasised. Feedback suggests that people are getting jobs as a result which are not necessarily IT based/related due to increase in confidence. Confidence-building is indeed perceived to be a key goal. A community information network has been set up which means there now exists a reason for people to talk which might not have necessarily existed previously. It is vital to encourage individuals to understand that there is a reason for people to talk, but this is a difficult task.

MATREC now relies mainly on word of mouth, networking and advertising. Does this mean, however, that the diversity of people hearing about the centre is restricted? For example, what about male 'customers'? Does this mean MATREC has cultivated an static image that it is a place for older people and women? One of the positive aspects is that is readily recognised by the individuals involved with the project is that people are being drawn together in the same place. For instance, a Head teacher will sit with a young person in the same room and listen to what the young person has to say. Another positive aspect is that MATREC is about disseminating information to the 'community' so those within the wider area have more choices. As the manager asserted 'we want to get on with it: we can't wait for the Council to solve our problems, for Government to solve our problems'. There are several keys to the success:

- **territorial locality:** trust in the local people and belief in them is vital; finding ways of creating teams of 'community workers' who are able and willing to pass experience and knowledge on to others;

- **no empire building:** what is intensely disliked is professionals coming in from the 'outside' and being patronising. They have a perception of socially excluded areas as dilapidated areas with skillless populations and this is considered to be patronising;
- **visions are vital:** people need a vision and individuals need to develop and understand this vision. It needs to be a shared vision. People also need basic skills for example, filling in forms. MATREC have one worker down at the local school who has this type of vision but where does he go in order to find out what to do with that vision? Who is going to fund this community development team?;
- **environment:** it is crucial to provide the right type of environment and indeed one query was: 'how do we take this environment we have created to somewhere else?';
- **timing:** having the ability to know how fast to run and when to move on to the next challenge. How does one learn that?

What was made clear was that there is a need to fail. For example, some of the outreach work was not working. If that was a consideration for funding in terms of the list of 'outputs' for the project, it would mean that the outreach work would have ceased. However, failing is an investment for the future, as S suggests, 'If you fail yourself, you learn: if someone else fails for you, you don't learn'.

## 7. City School

The City School project is located in an inner-city comprehensive school. The team was met by the Deputy Headmaster and the IT teacher who was an ex-miner and also had involvement in GEVH. We meet in a large IT room with tables in the centre of the room and the computers (around 20-30) located around the room.

The project was initiated as it was felt that there was a need to justify the expense of the equipment provided in the IT suite, thus it was decided to open the room after school hours. A company was created in order to generate funds so that the running costs of the building to open after hours and to other schools could be covered. The facilities have to be used widely in order to counter the depreciating value of the equipment. The schools are perceived as centres of the community. There is a charge for the sessions: £10 for a 5 week training session, as the company is not allowed to pay for 'community activity'. There is also the realisation that they cannot sustain their activities on a volunteering basis, although they have had support from Sheffield TEC. One of their activities is building machines. Parents pay to build them and then they can be sold to other schools and individuals. There is also a Hardware Library which allows people to take computers home for the weekend (with Internet access). They have a CLB (Community Learning Broker) whose job is to take the spare capacity and community groups to the provider. They are not concerned with accreditation but with social interaction.

### Spot the difference

Each of the initiatives visited differed in operation and management. What was missing, however, was difference. Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall, for example, seemed to reproduce the traditional structures of community. The landscape of computing in the initiative was male-dominated and appeared as if it was replicating the 'pit' culture above ground but with new clean technologies instead. This raises the question of whether 'difference' is desirable. If there is no evidence of something 'different' from old structures and power relations, new forms of social groupings around the landscapes of computing is this necessarily a negative issue? The social groups around the Rotherham Library Magazine, too, did not seem to be many 'different' from what would have existed without ICTs. The individuals who represented the initiative formed two distinct groups who did not talk to each other. One group consisted of the middle aged white former miners. The other group consisted of the Urdu artists and speakers. Both groups evidently had different agendas and uses for the technologies.

A further element to arise from the field visit was that much of the emphasis for the initiatives was on skills training. There was little room for 'play' or creativity and constructing places online, apart from in the case of the Rotherham Library Magazine initiative. The MATREC initiative, prided itself on the skills and training that it offered through the ICTs. There was little evidence though that this kind of training was any different from training and skills training that have been offered in low income urban areas throughout the past two decades. The only difference is that new technologies and faster computers are involved. Those who have found employment through being involved with the initiatives have predominantly found employment in conventional service industries as opposed to New Media industries which characterise the global information society. The only exception might be those who have found employment in call centres, the emerging back bones of such a society.<sup>32</sup> Again, the exception was Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall where the core founders of the initiative, all former miners, have started their own free Internet Service Provider company. This does not generate a great deal of other employment opportunities yet, but may do so in the future. So, the initiatives tended to reproduce the economically driven, top down ideas about inclusion in a 'global information society' that will automatically bring about benefits for people living in low income

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<sup>32</sup> Call Centre working has been critiqued for serving as the new 21st Century 'sweatshops'. See V Belt, R Richardson & J Webster (2000) 'Women's work in the information economy: the case of telephone call centres' *Information, Communication and Society*, 3: 3, 366-385

'communities'. These ideas emphasise the training of people using ICTs in order to provide them with the skills perceived to be needed in order to participate in the economy and labour market which is being produced as a result of the 'global information society'. However, it does not produce the idea of an empowering technocultural landscape. So, how are these initiatives represented and interpreted by public policy?

The Policy Action Team 15 did not interpret these initiatives in the way that the researcher did. The Government launched the long awaited report PAT15 in March 2000.<sup>33</sup> What the report illustrates is what was already known in relation to community-ICT relations: there are many different ways in which ICTs are and can be used in marginalised communities. The PAT 15 Report did however highlight the many barriers to ICT use, including age and cultural differences and funding complications:

- lack of joined-up approach;
- poor promotion;
- unattractive or unsuitable content;
- access problems: centres, facilities and equipment;
- lack of appropriately skilled staff;
- fragmented funding;
- costs.<sup>34</sup>

The report identified ways of overcoming these various barriers, such as developing local content on websites that is relevant to the local context and reducing infrastructure costs:

- joining up policies at national/local level;
- developing better means of promoting benefits of ICTs to those who are alienated from ICTs;
- develop relevant content locally;
- providing access to ICTs where people feel comfortable and at times they can attend;
- simplified access to funding;

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<sup>33</sup> The Report can be downloaded at URL:  
<http://www.pat15.org.uk>

<sup>34</sup> DTI (2000) *Closing The Digital Divide: information and communication technologies in deprived areas* Report by Policy Action Team 15 (SEU)

- more relevant targets;
- reducing cost of infrastructure & equipment.<sup>35</sup>

Community-ICT initiatives, such as the examples described above, can be critiqued for being driven by funding regimes and ideas about training that the Government embraces for social inclusiveness. There seems to be little space for free creativity, autonomy and online community formation. There is no attempt to create online space for interaction and connection making. There is no attempt to relate the online social spaces and the off-line. New ICTs are perceived to be mere tools for the reproduction of conventional social relations, not the production of new forms of relationships and interaction. The landscapes of computing which are constructed around these initiatives seem to be homogenous with little evidence of integrating the landscapes into people's everyday lives.

### Synopsis

This chapter has focused the key themes explored in the previous chapter in order to relate the main ideas to the concept of a 'technocultural landscape'. The 'technocultural landscape' is proposed by Robins as being an ideal of modernity. His critiques provide a useful backdrop for thinking about the UK public and third sector policy contexts for the advocacy of community-ICT initiatives. The chapter also explored the way in which the UK public sector is embedding certain technologically determining and economically driven discourses of the global information society. There is little evidence of space being made for formal support for creative uses of ICTs within urban communities - uses which increase personal confidence for example. There is also scarce space for a blended perspective of political economy and SCOT. Such a blend would recognise the micro-level examples of community-ICT relations and would expect that there are complex relationships between ICTs, cities, and the ways in which ICTs are shaped and used in different contexts. This would illustrate more fully the contingency on place and agency that specific formations of ICTs, like such community-ICT initiatives, have. There needs to be a closer examination into the micro-level functionings of community-ICT initiatives in specific places. The chapter also illustrated how the UK government is employing the emotive and highly rhetorical term 'social exclusion' in its attempt to address the 'urban crisis' within UK's most marginalised communities and urban areas. One aspect of this involves the implementation and use of ICTs, but again, within a very narrowly focused

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

way: information provision and improved service delivery. So, what kind of 'information society' will this vision encourage? What spaces are there for the powerful shaping forces of human agency?

This chapter concludes **Part One**. The following chapters explore the way in which these ideas and themes explored and illustrated in **Part One** are re-produced in practice in a particular context. **Part Two** is concerned with the ways in which the particular group of young people in Newham, as described above, construct their 'everyday technocultural worlds' in practice, through landscapes of computing. It also focuses more on the construction of a 'technocultural lifeworld' and the critique that Robins has of 'virtual urbanity'. The term 'technocultural lifeworld' is used throughout to describe the processes, practices, production and re-production which construct something 'in-between' on and off-line experiences and social relations. The 'technocultural lifeworld' is the product of this in-betweenness. This term is reclaimed from Robins' critiques of technoculture to explain the empirical evidence.

The issues covered in this chapter will be helpful in the analysis of the case study, but prior to that a further understanding of young peoples' everyday and technocultural lifeworlds is required. The research strategy, which encompasses methods, rationale, ethics, practical difficulties and ways of thinking through the empirical work, is examined in more detail in the chapter preceding the main analysis of the case study.

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**PART TWO**

**CONSTRUCTING EVERYDAY  
LIFEWORLDS IN A  
TECHNOCULTURAL LANDSCAPE:  
THE CASE OF NEWHAM YOUNG  
PEOPLE ONLINE**

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## INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

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**Part One** has served to highlight the key structural discourses which shape thinking and practice about the potentials for creative ICT-mediated communities in a 'global information society'. Chapter two of **Part One** considered some of the methodological issues which are implicated in the analysis of structuring discourses and how they shape the construction of community-ICT thinking and initiatives. It revealed that social construction plays an important part in the ways in which ICTs are understood and their potentials represented. These constructions are mediated and reproduced through social and cultural processes. Elements of globalisation and representations of the 'global information society' are part of these processes. Chapter three discussed a set of dominant discourses which have informed and constructed much of the thinking on human-ICT relations: the global information society and concepts of the city were the first two discourses. The other two showed how concepts of place-based urban 'community' and ideas about cyber-spatial social relations are represented. What is most salient for this research is how cultural formations called 'virtual' or online communities are forming and being constructed on the Internet.

Chapter four of **Part One** emphasised that these discourses have a heavy influence on the ways in which community-ICT initiatives are constructed in practice by the public and third sectors in particular. The chapter highlighted some experiences of community-ICT initiatives. These types of initiatives have been examined by the Labour Government, as part of its construction of policy on community-ICTs initiatives for an inclusive society. It showed that many of the initiatives do not reveal different ways of making connections and relationships. Nor do they have a focus on constructing a 'technocultural lifeworld'. Many of them replicate old social groupings and interactions which already exist. The emphasis for many of the initiatives is on skills training and confidence building for those who are excluded from 'mainstream society'.

The research now moves on to explore whether the community-ICT relations constructed in practice and through policy discourse are replicated in a particular initiative in East London. Throughout **Part One**, these ideas are linked and analysed in the context of Robins' critique of what he calls the 'technocultural discourse'. Robins suggests that the perspective of a 'technological revolution' occludes the disturbing realities of contemporary



change. He also critiques the idea that increased communication can engender a greater 'sense of community', which is the argument used by advocates of 'virtual communities'.

The role of **Part Two** is to take these themes further, particularly concentrating on Robins' critique of the technocultural landscape and 'virtual urbanity'. These themes will be used to understand the issues raised in **Part Two**. This part will generally consider the everyday practices of how communities construct their lifeworlds within a technocultural landscape, both on and off-line in the context of a specific community-ICT initiative. The term 'technocultural lifeworld' is introduced to describe the processes, practices, production and reproduction which construct something 'in-between' on and off-line experiences and social relations. The 'technocultural lifeworld' is the product of this in-betweenness. This term is reclaimed from Robins' critiques of technoculture to explain the empirical evidence in chapter eight. Chapter five first discusses the context for the main case study of this research, Newham, NeOn and NYPO.

Chapter six discusses how young peoples' lifeworlds are structured institutionally, as the group concerned is a group of young people. In particular, the experiences and construction of young peoples' lifeworlds, on and off-line, are considered. Chapter seven outlines the second part of the research strategy, covering practical elements of the case studies as well as some of the methods of analysis utilised such as narrative analysis. Chapter eight then presents the substantive empirical material from the case study. The arguments about the technocultural landscape that Robins presents are challenged through the analysis in the chapter.

## Chapter Five

### The Context of Newham and Newham Young People Online

#### Preamble

**Section I** of this chapter elaborates on the context for the main case study. This section first provides some information about cultural diversity and deprivation in order to gain an understanding of how Newham is represented in official statistics. It also outlines the ways in which Newham is creating a vision for the future, and this includes visions for the role of ICTs in this future.

**Section II** introduces Newham Young People Online, a particular community-ICT initiative based in Newham.

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#### Section I: Newham & NeOn

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##### Introducing Newham

In order to appreciate the empirical work and the context for this project's main case study, it is vital to understand the context and configuration of the socio-demographics of Newham. This might seem ironic when the research is engaging with ideas about ICTs and online communities and how processes of globalisation and the decline of the 'urban' are re-drawing concepts of 'geography'. Yet, it is one of the contention of this research that 'geography still matters', as Massey stated,<sup>1</sup> and that the composition of the social, economic, political, cultural landscape of Newham deeply impacts the ways in which ICTs and online spaces are used and shaped by residents of Newham. These socio-demographic indicators serve to contextualise to some extent the representation of Newham by the UK Government as an area of 'social exclusion'. Although the term 'social exclusion' is a highly politicised rhetorical device, these indicators hint (albeit incompletely as is characteristic of much quantitative data) at the ethnic, age, gender, employment and 'deprivation' elements which affect Newham.

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<sup>1</sup> Massey & Allen (1984)

Newham is a place that is juxtaposed acutely with the powerfully iconographic Canary Wharf and the surrounding Docklands development. The Docklands is complexly woven into the fabric of the networked global information society. The borough of Newham therefore is very much at once global and local in Massey's sense.<sup>2</sup> It is global visually in a strong sense because of the high ethnic and cultural diversity: Newham is a diverse ethnic conglomeration. As one moves through Newham, a very large borough, one does not know the origins of the products which decorate the streetscapes. The imagery changes every block, as do the sensory experiences, like smells: vegetables mixed with chips, curry and spices. The multiplicity of colours in the various fabric and local clothes shops, render the conventional high street chain stores conspicuously incongruous. Castells asserts that spaces are not reflections of societies, but are expressions of those societies.<sup>3</sup> This, it could be argued, is a truism for Newham.

#### **Newham in context<sup>4</sup>**

The London Borough of Newham is a predominantly disadvantaged area in the East End of London, UK. Although the population fell during the 1960s and 1970s, it increased significantly in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>5</sup> According to the UK Government's 1997 Mid-Year Estimate, the population was estimated at approximately 228,500 with 86,300 households.<sup>6</sup> Both Newham and the neighbouring Tower Hamlets have the greatest rate of projected population growth of any area of England in the next five years. The borough additionally has a relatively young population profile, indeed having the highest proportion of children under ten in the 1991 census and it is ethnically very diverse.

Newham's economic base since the 1960s has been in steady decline. The industrial structure of Newham is very different from that of London as a whole, and indeed from London as a 'global city', as defined by Sassen, Massey and Cooke.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***Cultural diversity in Newham***

In 1991 people of African, Caribbean and Asian origin constituted 42 per cent of the borough's population, a proportion which has increased subsequently.<sup>8</sup> Newham is

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<sup>2</sup> Massey (1994)

<sup>3</sup> Castells (1996), 410

<sup>4</sup> Town And Country Planning (Development Plan) Regulations 1991 London Borough Of Newham Proposed Alterations To The Unitary Development Plan Deposit Draft

<sup>5</sup> OFSTED 'The context of the LEA: Socio-economic Context' *Ofsted Inspection of Newham Local Education Authority*

<sup>6</sup> Office of National Statistics (1998)

<sup>7</sup> Massey (1994); Sassen (1997); P Cooke (ed.) (1989) *Localities* (London: Unwin Hyman)

recognised as the most ethnically diverse local authority in UK and sixty different languages are spoken in the borough. The diversity of ethnicities and cultures can mainly be attributed to the growth of African, Asian, Caribbean and other 'minority' groups and the continuing growth of these groups is predicted.<sup>9</sup> In 1991 43 per cent of Newham's population identified themselves as part of an 'ethnic minority' group and by 2006 it is projected that 55 per cent of the borough's population will be from an 'ethnic minority' group.<sup>10</sup> According to the 1981 census the populations of ethnic groups totalled approximately 57,000 and had grown to nearly 94,000 by 1991.<sup>11</sup> The profile of Newham's ethnic groups show that it is a relatively young population with 57 per cent of people under 30 years of age and indeed only 3 per cent of the 'ethnic minority' population were over retirement age in 1991.

According to the Unitary Development Plan (UDP), Newham's African and Caribbean populations are mainly located in the north-western wards of New Town, Park, Forest Gate, West Ham and Stratford. The Indian, Bangladesh and Pakistani populations live predominately in the north-eastern wards of Newham in Kensington, Central, Monega, Upton, Park and St Stephens. Specialist shops, community meeting places and places of entertainment are subsequently located in these areas.

### *Deprivation in Newham*

The 1998 Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' (DETR) Index of Local Deprivation lists Newham as one of the most deprived local authorities in England.<sup>12</sup> The Index combines various indicators such as economic, social, housing and environmental concerns.

Newham is characterised by widespread and high levels of economic, health and social deprivation. For instance, unemployment is high and economic activity rates are low and indeed local earnings are much lower than the Greater London averages. In 1996 nearly half of all households were receiving Housing Benefit and one in three of the population aged 16 or over was a beneficiary of Income Support.<sup>13</sup> In June 1998, 11,192 individuals

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<sup>8</sup> OFSTED

<sup>9</sup> The Borough's categories of 'ethnic diversity' are based on the proportions of the residential population in each of the 10 Census ethnic groups.

<sup>10</sup> London Research Centre 1998

<sup>11</sup> Town And Country Planning (Development Plan) Regulations 1991

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> ONS (1998)

were registered as unemployed which meant an unemployment rate of 11.9 per cent which is the fifth highest in Greater London.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, the 20 to 24 age group experiences the highest unemployment rates.<sup>15</sup> This is partly because Newham is negotiating significant changes to its economic structure. For example, the decline of the traditional manufacturing base has not been replaced by the increase in service sector employment nor the increased focus on high productivity services that has occurred in the UK in general.<sup>16</sup> As a result, employment prospects are poor and have been for a number of years. Hence, one priority aim of the UDP is to construct a more solid basis for a more robust and diversified economy which is more equipped to resist the impacts of potential economic recessions and to create long term employment opportunities for the population of Newham. A further objective suggested by the UDP is to encourage the young sections of the minority ethnic populations to remain in Newham after education. The authors of the UDP assert that this would make an enormous and positive difference to the economic landscape of Newham. So, the UDP suggests, it is therefore important that the new housing and economic opportunities in what they term the borough's 'arc of opportunity' are made fully accessible to the borough's African, Asian, Caribbean and other ethnic minority populations.<sup>17</sup>

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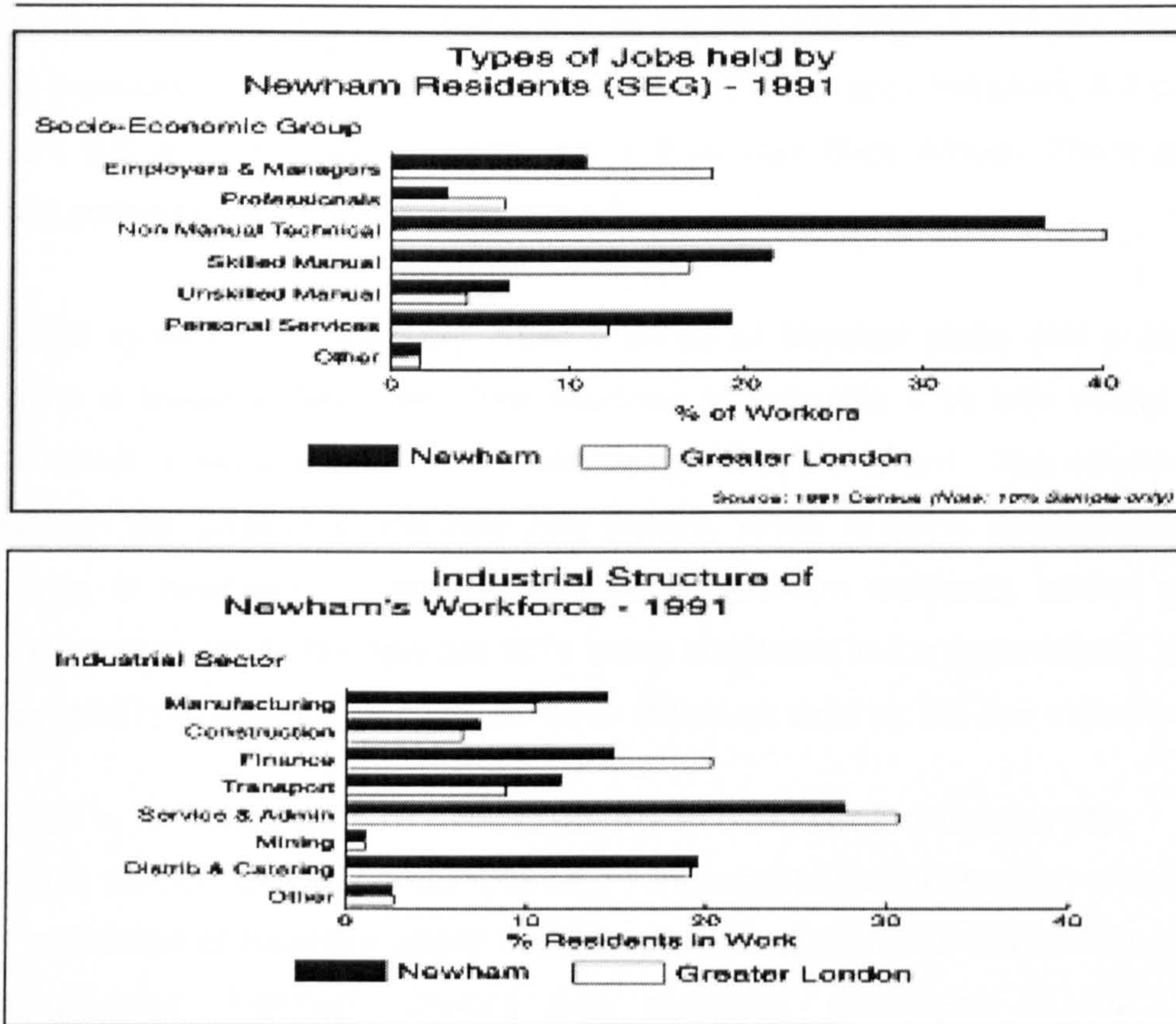
<sup>14</sup> LRC (1998)

<sup>15</sup> LRC (1998)

<sup>16</sup> Town And Country Planning (Development Plan) Regulations 1991

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

FIGURE 5.01  
WORFORCE BREAKDOWNS  
SOURCE: LRC



### *Young people in Newham*

As has been mentioned above, Newham significantly has a predominantly young population and has the highest percentage of children aged under five in the UK. Approximately 47 per cent of the population are aged under 30 years which is a higher than average proportion for England.<sup>18</sup> According to 1991 census data, 21 per cent of young people in Newham were cared for in lone-parent households which is the tenth highest in England. Additionally, 44.5 per cent of pupils of primary age compared to a national figure of 22.8 per cent and 41.4 per cent of pupils of secondary age, again compared to a national figure of 18.2 per cent, were eligible for free school meals in 1997. According to the Ofsted report, in this context, young people of school age encounter

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

problems of both poor health and of poor or no facilities for study. Young people also suffer frequent disturbances to schooling as parents move between rented houses or flats and, often, have little or no English when they enter school: in 1997, 57 per cent of all pupils in Newham schools were from 'minority ethnic groups'.<sup>19</sup> Approximately 53 per cent of Newham pupils are bilingual and some require support with English. 41 per cent of the school age population is white, 18.7 per cent Indian, 10.6 per cent Pakistani, 8.3 per cent Bangladeshi, 6.9 per cent Black Caribbean and 5.0 per cent Black African. There are over 400 refugee young people in Newham schools.

Young people in Newham, obviously, have a sense of physical place and a sense of identity which is linked to Newham. The interview in Appendix II by one young NYPO member, Frankie, reveals a concern and knowledge about Newham. The interview was conducted with the Director of the new Arts Centre, which is being constructed in the Stratford area of Newham. It aims to include all Newham residents, across gender, ethnicity, age and ability.<sup>20</sup> But how are ICTs being integrated in the regenerative strategy for Newham and how will they complement other initiatives such as the one above?

### **ICTs in Newham (or, reclaiming infrastructural power)**

The preceding part of this section has offered a somewhat statistical account of the socio-economic landscape of Newham where the case study is located. As a response to these socio-demographics, Newham Council has proposed alterations to the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) a ten-year strategy which was put in place in 1991. Much of the data, hence, is taken from the Census 1991 and the proposed UDP. The UDP attempts to provide a framework for the sustainable socio-economic, environmental and physical regeneration of Newham. A particular concern in Newham is whether inclusiveness in the 'information society' would build a more prosperous Newham. For instance, would inclusiveness in the information society enhance or alleviate existing inequalities and could ICTs be used to provide more services cheaply?

[the UDP] incorporates the objectives of the Council's Urban Regeneration Strategy, which aims to work towards achieving, by 2010, a borough that will be a major business location and a place where people will choose to live and stay. The Council, by harnessing regeneration and partnership resources seeks to strengthen and diversify Newham's economy, create a high quality environment, improve access to jobs, and improve the image of the borough.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> OFSTED

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix II

<sup>21</sup> Town And Country Planning (Development Plan) Regulations 1991

Newham has already created a borough-wide Intranet with a Gateway which means that residents can easily access basic information about local services and information. There is also a Newham extranet which provides limited but safe, fast and secure access to certain resources on the Internet. In this way, ICTs are used in order to achieve some of the proposals of the UDP above. The UDP goes on to claim,

Through raised development aspirations the Council is seeking a future that benefits the borough's *potential within the European market-place*. The regeneration of the area as a major growth pole for London will stimulate the revival of the region whilst *enabling local people to share in these benefits*.<sup>22</sup> (emphasis added)

It is clear that the borough's aspirations purport to be in a global as well as local landscape.

Many of the community-ICT initiatives in UK are located in urban areas which have a similar landscape. The key characteristics of such areas are identified by low employment opportunities due to the withdrawal of traditional manufacturing based industries and unskilled workforce. As a result, many community-ICT initiatives adopt key words and phrases to describe what they are attempting to engender through the use of new ICT as tools. Words and phrases such as 'creativity', 'collaborations', 'participation', 'partnership', 'culture' and 'inclusion' are common. Such language is generic in government policy as well as in third sector thinking and is mainly concerned with the ways in which local economies and employment opportunities can be revived in such areas.

Newham Online (NeOn) is a community-ICT initiative that has been very successful in terms of delivering services and communication to the residents in Newham. There are five aims of the NeOn strategy:

1. Building partnership and supporting local organisations to use the Internet to secure local benefit.
2. Harnessing resources and expertise to enable NeOn to promote cyberspace development.
3. Creating a Newham extranet which links together the computer networks ... enabling them ... to create a fast and secure cyber-environment in which to deploy broadband

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*



applications, share resources, offer public access to integrated online services and promote personal, communal, commercial, creative and educational use of the Internet.

4. Creating a Newham Internet Gateway or portal that will provide easy access to Newham related information on the WWW.

5. Establishing Newham.net.Ltd. to operate the extranet and gateway and become a Public Telecommunications Operator (PTO).<sup>23</sup>

Key to regeneration and inclusion in Newham is breaking the cycle of young migration away from Newham to the 'city' or other areas once they have gained skills for employment. This is because there are few highly paid jobs in Newham. The vision for Newham is that people will choose it as an area in which to stay and live. So a crucial way to encourage this is for Newham to position itself in the 'information society':

If the regeneration of East London is premised on the *information economy*, then in addition to land development and economic development there needs to be *cyberspace development*. An abundance of bandwidth is the equivalent of transport networks opening up a new site. New industries will have no interest in physical locations that aren't *wired into the cyberworld*.<sup>24</sup>

It could also be argued that Newham's population is also ideal for a global information society as it is young and many different languages are spoken in Newham:

you can say that ... having a very large minority population and a very young population is a liability, but in terms of the information age it's in fact a very big positive because you've got a huge range of cultural backgrounds, and languages ... young people are more likely to be a lead in this technology than others ...<sup>25</sup>

So the key regenerative strategy for Newham.net is *networking*: through offline and online spaces. The profits of Newham.net will be channelled back into projects and initiatives which focus on networking multimedia and local urban regeneration. This includes networking local services, linking the network to major projects within the area and also to attract, create and link together *multimedia expertise* which may exist in the borough. Eventually, the vision is to produce and distribute interactive programming for websites and digital television. Newham.net also aims to support local content production by local people and to develop an international market for that service and content. Crucial to this vision are the links that have been established with the Three Mills television and film studios in Newham. Just as crucial is realisation of the potential for skills and job creation.

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<sup>23</sup> NeOn (Newham Online) *Annual Report* (1999)

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Interview with RS, Newham Online co-ordinator, 1999

NeOn also works hard on partnerships with other sectors, not working for them, but with them.

you've got to look at what the statistical and economic projections are for what the effects of the ICTs are going to be ... 80,000 new jobs in the digital media sector, for instance, ... we wouldn't mind having 10 per cent of them... if you make a bid and say look we've got film studios, we've got leading edge art centres, we've got local broad band networks... then you can start being the test area where people will try it. They're not mucking up their markets because they weren't going to make money in the area anyway ... it's not as if they're losing anything ...<sup>26</sup>

The emphasis for NeOn is additionally on achieving connectivity for people who would otherwise be excluded from this connectivity.

my major [emphasis] is effectively freedom of speech and right for people to have their *own say in the affairs of their community* ... But also, the work that I'd like to see prioritised is about *getting connectivity out of the community centres and people that would not otherwise be an obvious target for it*. ... once you've got a strategy that is agreed by the key organisations and they are all putting their bits to it, it becomes easy. The money that we're talking about is enormous: the Council alone spends £1.6 million a year on it's infrastructure, that's on telecoms infrastructure... but things become quite easy within the context of that kind of amount of money, to roll out the little bits here and there, I mean, what's the marginal cost of having a community centre with a DSL line which is going to cost you I don't know, £550 a year running cost which the community centre could probably meet, I'm sure it could meet and the one off capital cost of say a couple of grand - negligible, isn't it... So, once there's enough local content for people to see if it's worth connecting, you get a ... an identity... I suppose, OK, so for me it's to build up an area which had the reputation of being a place which people wanted to move out of into an area where people are proud of it and when they can actually see themselves taking a part in controlling what is happening and using ICT as a way of actually achieving that, ... *And, if you can make it work in say in one of the most poorest parts of the country, you can make it work - it'd be wrong to say you could make it work anywhere actually because the situation we've got here is quite exceptional because of the leading edge Council IT department ...*<sup>27</sup> [emphasis added]

This is so that the agenda for Newham and its future can be controlled *locally*. There is also an emphasis on ensuring that all those sectors with their individual commitments to achieving goals work together in order to create synergies and avoiding the danger of creating separate networks for separate interests. Anything NeOn achieves is through partners and partnerships. This means, according to the Newham Online co-ordinator, that control and power are decentralised. So how has NeOn's strategy contributed to a creative city and cultural economy?

Jo Foord, in reference to the Demos and Comedia report on the *Richness of Cities* contends:

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

the authors of the 'creative city' suggest that the full economic potential of culture is not solely to be found in its marketable products. Although these are important, they suggest that the *creativity embodied in cultural activity* produces a living reservoir of skills, knowledge, talent and ideas. It is this pool of human resources which potentially offers new ways of working and living, fresh attitudes to economic problems and the mobilisation of rich multicultural urban diversity.<sup>28</sup>  
[emphasis added]

One way of mobilising the rich multicultural urban diversity is through smaller online community-ICTs initiatives and one such initiative is NYPO, which is under the NeOn umbrella. NYPO is very much based on NeOn's premise, that the development and population of Newham's cyberspace should be come out of local creativity and people networking freely. Before going into more detail of NYPO it is crucial to be reminded of the key theoretical question to be answered which is proposed by Robins. Is it so that, as he suggests:

The technoculture is a culture of denial or disavowal of these disorderly possibilities of contemporary urban reality. What it seeks is the continuation, for it is a conservative rather than a dynamic force, of particular historical values - the community of the pre-modern city, combined with the rational order of modern urbanism. And what is apparent now is that these particular values are sustained at the cost of de-realising urban reality.<sup>29</sup>

This statement can be thought about and evaluated through people's experiences of 'virtual' or online communities. The following section introduces the case study located in Newham: Newham Young People Online.

## Section II: Introducing NYPO<sup>30</sup>

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Newham Young People Online (NYPO) is a combination of a cyber magazine, 'virtual' youth club, and on-line community, representing itself as a space and support for self-directed learning and communication for young people. It consists of a network of 11 to 25 year olds living in the London Borough of Newham, which is one of the most deprived urban areas in UK. NYPO is represented as a virtual network of people who are using the Internet 'to take part in a communications revolution'.<sup>31</sup>

NYPO is organised and operates by a 'general assembly', an 'executive committee' and individual contributions of all members. Once a month face to face committee meetings

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<sup>28</sup> J Foord (1999) 'Creative Hackney: reflections on 'hidden art'' *Rising East: the journal of East London Studies* 3:2, 39. The Report to which she refers is Graham & Marvin (1998b)

<sup>29</sup> Robins (1999), 56

<sup>30</sup> See URL:

<http://www.youth.newham.org.uk/>

<sup>31</sup> It is a Newham Community Education and Youth Service (NewCEYS) initiative, and is supported by several agencies including Newham Online, UK Citizens Online Democracy (UK COD) and Computer Access. NYPO grew from the work of a

are held, but on the whole, business and discussion takes place online through mailing lists and bulletin boards. NYPO members are subscribed to a general mailing list and an archive of email discussions is kept permanently on the website. As their publicity material states:

The group is evolving into a real 'online community' who discuss, chat and share information via e-mail and other Internet based tools ... Recently some group members have started to use the list to discuss philosophical questions such as 'Why are We Here' and 'What makes us Human'.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, a vital principle of NYPO is encouraging members to take control of the direction of the group and to take control of resources: electronic and physical. The mailing lists and bulletin boards along with the website enables this sense of control and provides a 'place' for the expression and discussion of ideas and thinking.

What we're trying to do with NYPO is for something...I like to call an 'online community'. That means people share things using the Internet and using email... ah... not all of you are that much into it at the moment, but some of you are...<sup>33</sup>

There are many different narratives that one could highlight in the wider body of the research that has been conducted. These narratives are stories from members of NYPO. Each individual has a different story to tell which represents their personal experiences of school, groups in general, living in different parts of Newham, experiences of negotiating on-line and off-line spaces and experiences of being part of a particular ethnicity, age, gender and so on. These shall be explored in more detail in chapters eight and nine.

### Synopsis

**Section I** offered some background information to Newham as a geographical area. It has used statistics which can be dry and mis-leading at times to describe the ethnic, age, and economic profile of the borough. This is by no means an ideal way getting to 'know' an area. What it does do, is provide some context for arguing that Newham is represented as a 'socially excluded' urban area in public sector discourse. The section also focused on the Unitary Development Plan which also employs some of the discourses and language which European and governmental white papers employ. What is highlighted in this section is that Newham's geography is vital to its regeneration. Newham is close to Canary Wharf and is served by excellent transport links as a result. It is also well served

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Youth Leader and former teacher and from the Newham Youth Parliament initiative. Currently NYPO has over 40 active members from a number Newham schools and two members who attend University of East London (UEL)

<sup>32</sup> NYPO, 1997

<sup>33</sup> GS, Focus Group 2, 1999

by other infrastructural elements such as telecommunications. With the creation of Newham.net Ltd., Newham has made a claim of ownership on the physical infrastructure which provides the channel of access into a 'global information society'. In this way, Newham is attempting to overcome exclusion in the global information society whilst simultaneously aiding in the regeneration of its social, cultural and economic landscapes. The regeneration strategy of Newham.net Ltd. proposes to encourage multimedia content development and dissemination of this content locally and globally. In this way, it could be argued that Newham.net Ltd. is striving to re-position and re-imagine Newham as a place of creativity with a vibrant cultural and social economy, with it's own 'glocal' information society.

Crucial to the vision are people. Newham has a very young and culturally diverse population. The key in regenerating Newham, states the UDP, is keeping young people in Newham, making Newham a place where they *choose* to live and work. **Section II** introduced the case study which this research examines, in more detail.

The following chapter elaborates in more detail, the significance of this case study in the wider context of young people and their everyday lives. The chapter specifically examines this context against the criticism levelled at the 'technocultural landscape' by Kevin Robins.

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## Chapter Six

### Everyday Constructions of On and Off-line Community

#### Preamble

As the introduction Part Two suggests, this part of the thesis develops the discourses adopted to construct community-ICT relations, which were discussed in **Part One**. This chapter advances the idea of a technocultural landscape in practice and what it means for deprived urban areas. **Section I** explains what is implicated in the idea of a 'technoculture' and a technological landscape. Most of these ideas are drawn from Robins' critique of technoculture. **Section I** also reviews the critiques that are presented of the advocacy of community-ICT relations by the public and third sectors. **Section II** discusses how particular 'communities' construct their lifeworlds on and off-line. In particular, the section concentrates on how young people's lives and ideas of community are constructed on multiple levels. These sections contextualise the ideas of a technocultural lifeworld. The section additionally discusses the context for the focus on young people, as well as addressing some of the work which has explored similar issues. The section emphasises that previous work on young people and the Internet has failed to achieve an understanding of how young people produce their place-based online communities - those that overlap into physical places.

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#### Section I: Technocultural Lifeworlds?

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##### **What is technoculture? Beyond Robins' and Websters' critique of virtual urbanism**

Robins and Webster suggest that the 'technocultural project',

as it is concerned with information and communication technologies, now embraces a very broad range of issues - from economic policy to virtual popular culture - and consequently mobilises a variety of discourses. Given this range, there has tended to be a fragmentation in the public debate about new technologies - a consequence of the ever more refined intellectual and academic division of labour. Those interested in cyberpunk will have little to say about the information economy. Those who have something to say about virtual community will know little about the military information society. And those who specialise in communications policy will contribute little to debates on education and training in the information society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> K Robins & F Webster (1999) 'Introduction: the changing technoscape' *Times of the Technoculture: from the information society to the virtual life* (London & New York: Routledge), 3

One expression of technoculture and the technocultural vision which is organised through the discourses explored earlier in Part One, is *cyberculture*. David Silver, founder of the Resource Centre for Cyberculture Studies, offers this working definition of cyberculture:

Cyberculture is a collection of cultures and cultural products that exist on and/or are made possible by the Internet, along with the stories told about these cultures and cultural products.<sup>2</sup>

Robins and Webster critique the idea of a technoculture through Pierre Levy's work *Cyberculture*, suggesting that the technocultural agenda is a global logic of the global political economy.<sup>3</sup>

The technocultural discourse is in fact functioning ... to promote and legitimate the prevailing corporate ideology of globalisation ... What is fundamentally at issue is the global political economic logic that is mobilising new information and communications media to create an extraterritorial space of enterprise, in defiance of the cultural and political realities of the actual world most of us are living.<sup>4</sup>

Further, they suggest that cyberspace is a 'sequestered space' which has been divorced from the 'reality' of the 'real' world.<sup>5</sup> This is a highly naïve criticism which suggests 'reality' can only be experienced through physicality. It also ignores the diversity of spaces and places in cyberspace which actually bring the 'world's realities' closer to individuals and groups. They neglect the local logic of social relations. Rather than divorcing some kind of 'reality' from people, this research shall reveal how cyberspace and technocultural lifeworlds can help young people reclaim space and make connections with what is happening outside of their 'local reality'. Many sites on the Internet are aimed specifically at providing young people with information, resources and news events globally and nationally. Far from distancing young people from 'social ills', these kinds of websites can potentially reconnect young people with wider political and social issues.<sup>6</sup> This type of critique of technoculture and cyberspace in particular illustrates the Robins and Webster's lack of empirical experience of technoculture. They fail to actually examine in practice about which they eloquently theorise. This is not to deny that there is an elite capitalist drive behind many aspects of technoculture, but Robins and Webster are not the only people to recognise this. More credit should be given to those individuals who use the

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<sup>2</sup> D Silver (1997) 'Introducing Cyberculture' *Resource Centre for cyberculture Studies* URL: <http://otal.umd.edu/~rccs/>

<sup>3</sup> P Levy (1997) *Cyberculture* (Editions Odile Jacob: Paris)

<sup>4</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 225

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 226

<sup>6</sup> See for example the BBC's Newsround website URL: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround>

Internet and build websites in order to provide information and resources to those who might otherwise be excluded from this information.<sup>7</sup>

Robins has also critiqued the notion of enhanced communication bringing about enhanced sense of community. It is certainly a simplistic association to be made, but it is not one which should be disregarded as readily as Robins does:

Communication has been associated with transparency, and thereby with understanding, and consequently with social harmony: the utopia or ideology of communication is about 'bringing people together', and this bringing together, it is assumed, will consolidate the bonds of community ... Far from being inherently emancipatory, this ideology, or religion, of communication - which has perhaps even taken over from the ideology of progress - has, for 200 years, functioned as a means of promoting social order and control.<sup>8</sup>

'Bringing people together' certainly does not create 'community', but this highlights the ambiguity of the term 'community', which was discussed in chapter three. If one examines the practice of community-ICT initiatives, one can see that they are much more about communication. 'Community' is a word which holds multiple meanings. It is also one which can be critiqued for denoting an exclusionary group. The overall theoretical perspective that this research develops starts with the idea that what is needed in current thinking about ICTs and society is an examination into the 'complex articulations which are emerging between intersections in geographical space and place, and the electronic realms accessible through new technologies'.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned in chapter one, the biggest failure of past research has been to link the online with the off-line and to critically explore re-negotiations of the meaning of 'community'. Jones suggests that research on ICT-society relations must examine the connections between social relations, spatial practice, values and beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

One way of understanding community-ICT relations is through understanding the ways in which people construct relationships with the Internet and between each other. One can also think about the ways in which cyberspace opens up the opportunity to make connections and interconnections. Also crucial to this way of thinking is the negotiation and exposure to differences. Contrary to Robins' critique, which suggests that

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the Black Information Link (BLINK) provides links to policy documents which deal with 'racism' of ethnicity for those who are affected by such policy making. URL:

<http://www.blink.org.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 228

<sup>9</sup> S Graham (1998a) 'Towards the fifth utility? On the extension and normalisation of public CCTV' in C Norris, J Moran & G Armstrong (eds.) (1998) *Surveillance, Closed Television and Social Control* (Aldershot: Ashgate)



technoculture is a denial of difference and an escape from conflict, this research develops the notion that technoculture can be constructed to support the re-production of relationships, interconnections and difference. In this way, then, communication is vital to the construction of connections, relationships and the understanding of differences, as well as the articulation of identity.

### Technoculture of inclusions?

At this stage, it is important to recap on some of the most important ideas, which have been raised throughout the previous chapters. ICTs like the Internet have the potential to offer humans a type of empowerment and voice. This voice can be extended from their local neighbourhood into global spaces, into the 'global information society'. Yet, there are many kinds of exclusions in the UK which act on individuals as well as on groups. These exclusions have conventionally stifled possibilities of empowerment. The factors of exclusion which impact human lives are familiar: chronic unemployment, decaying physical infrastructure, decayed housing stock, withdrawal of services, decline of traditional industries and so on. ICTs and the Internet in particular, receive a great deal of attention as tools through which social *inclusion* can be achieved. Some argue that the focus on the 'power' of technologies, which is lauded in media reports as well as much of the public sector writing, actually distracts humans from what is at issue in marginalised urban areas. It is argued that focusing on how ICTs can be used for interaction online, for example, means that humans are distanced from the physical decaying urban fabric and the social problems that exist.

It is evident that the language which is used in many of the white papers and proposals draw on discourses of the global information society, the perceived 'urban crisis' and 'community'. For instance, a European Union initiative called *eEurope: an information society for all*<sup>11</sup> asserts the following visions:

- Bringing every citizen, home and school every business and administration into the digital age and online.
- Creating a digitally literate Europe supported by an entrepreneurial culture ready to finance and develop new ideas.

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<sup>10</sup> S G Jones (1995) 'Understanding Community in the Information Age' in S G Jones (Ed.) *CyberSociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community* 23 (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage)

<sup>11</sup> An Information Society For All Communication on a Commission Initiative for the Special European Council of Lisbon, 23 and 24 March 2000

- Ensuring the whole process is socially inclusive builds consumer trust and strengthens social cohesion.

eEurope is intended to accelerate positive change in the Union. It aims at ensuring this change towards the Information Society is cohesive, not divisive. Integrating, not fragmenting. An opportunity not a threat. In essence, eEurope aims at bringing the benefits of the Information Society to the reach of all Europeans.

These claims are common and the language focus on 'inclusiveness' in an 'information age', but through consumerism, education and e-commerce it seems.

There are many examples of how the Internet has offered a space for individuals and groups in marginalised urban areas. This can be through building websites, which act as a focal point of information for groups within a community. Empowerment is achieved by giving groups and individuals choice of what information they wish to access and is considered to be key to urban regeneration.<sup>12</sup> Regeneration is not only about improving the physical infrastructure of places, but creating the spaces for social and cultural economies. ICTs like the Internet can be used in many different ways to create and sustain a social and cultural economy. Through online communities, for example, creativity can be encouraged and communication as well as computing skills can be developed. Often there is no space for people to experiment and explore their creative potential. Online communities and website creation can offer this space, as is recognized by Newham and NeOn.

Technological convergence means that the boundaries between ICTs and their uses are dissolving. Multimedia content achieved through ICTs and small businesses which form around such content are important channels for creative communities. These businesses and organisations may offer support to initiatives which attempt to construct a sustainable social economy. In the UK, there is no overall national policy to promote the idea of a social economy. The *New Deal for Communities* programme, New Labour's *Third Way* and policy proposals from the Social Exclusion Unit and the *Local Government White Paper* clearly suggest a move in that direction. Additionally, many local and regional authorities as well as national anti-poverty and regeneration charities throughout UK are developing social economy programmes. It might be argued that these policies need to be developed to include the potential that the Internet has for the construction of social

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<sup>12</sup> A good example of this is Black Information Link (BLINK) URL:  
<http://www.blink.org.uk/>

economies. It could also be suggested that there is a need though how the Internet can be used to build a social economy.

Claire Shearman in a discussion paper for UK Communities Online asks:

Does the so-called 'Information Society' offer ways in which local communities can recapture an element of economic autonomy? Can local communities use new and emerging ICTs as tools for sustainable economic and social empowerment, as a base for local economic development and regeneration?<sup>13</sup>

The private, public and third sectors are, as has been illustrated, increasingly encouraging new ICTs as tools for community regeneration in cities and deprived communities. Catteral has suggested that 'community arts' and cultural industries are increasingly being viewed as the key to regeneration in UK's post-industrial cities and indeed that UK has shifted from a manufacturing, to informational to a cultural economy. What Catteral suggests is a refocusing of 'culture' if, as the Joseph Rowntree report suggests, 'culture makes communities'. With this assertion then, what does *techno-culture* make?

If one takes this idea then and examines community-ICT initiatives, one can identify the technocultural discourse in many of the projects. Many of the initiatives adopt key words and phrases to describe what they are attempting to engender through the use of new ICT as tools. Words such as, creativity, collaborations, participation, partnership and culture and inclusion are common in the third sector discourses. Yet, the key theoretical question to be answered is one which is proposed, again, by Robins: is it so that, as he suggests:

The technoculture is a culture of denial or disavowal of these disorderly possibilities of contemporary urban reality. What it seeks is the continuation, for it is a conservative rather than a dynamic force, of particular historical values - the community of the pre-modern city, combined with the rational order of modern urbanism. And what is apparent now is that these particular values are sustained at the cost of de-realising urban reality.<sup>14</sup>

Robins, however, does not seem to allow any kind of the re-production of urbanity and forms of community through the appropriation of ICTs. He inadvertently espouses the discourses which he so vehemently decries, such as continuism, denial of difference and technological determinism. His critiques of technoculture fail to acknowledge that certain groups such as young people are socially constructed in ways which are more restrictive in off-line spaces than in online spaces. The following sections discuss this in more detail.

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<sup>13</sup> C Shearman (1998) 'Promoting economic development and regeneration in local communities: people, place and creativity' discussion paper prepared for the *UKCO Conference*, York 1998

<sup>14</sup> Robins (1999), 56

## Section II: Young People & their Constructed Lifeworlds

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### Landscapes of computing

This research essentially examines the relationship between on and offline community in a particular context. It explores the technocultural lifeworlds of young people living in Newham in East London. This involves looking in-between the practices in offline and online spaces. The aim is to understand how a particular group of young people use online spaces and how they subsequently construct their technocultural lifeworlds. Of course, the ways in which young peoples' everyday lifeworlds are constructed offline have a strong influence on their online experiences and activities. For instance, experiences of community for many young people in inner city areas is experienced and mediated through formal institutions such as schooling. These experiences help shape the ways in which young people think about relationships, how they think about identity, how they think about differences. Thus part of this research addresses the ways in which offline landscapes are experienced by young people.

It should be stressed that this research was never intended to be a study of 'young people' *per se*. It is not meant to provide an anthology of literature about 'youth'. The intention of the research was to examine the relationship between the on and the off-line. The group negotiating on and off-line community in this research is a group of young people, nonetheless, thus there has to be some understanding of the politics of youth and how young people understand 'community' and the 'information society'. It would be amiss for the researcher not to acknowledge that this group is a specifically situated group precisely because they are of their age and relative position in UK society. For this reason it is important to understand how the 'young Internet user' is constructed by wider society, through policy making or commercial discourse. It is also important, then, to situate this understanding in the context of how 'youth' in general are and have been constructed in general popular discourse.

It is useful to remember that 'technocultural lifeworlds' do not exist outside any other experiences and that indeed technocultural lifeworlds can be experiences without direct contact with cyberspace or other new technologies. There are, then, many ways in which one might imagine the idea of a technocultural lifeworld. A useful concept to borrow

comes from Nina Wakeford's work.<sup>15</sup> In her research on the everyday experiences and social structures in a cybercafe, she uses the concept 'landscapes of computing' to describe and understand the practices that went into constructing the everyday lifeworlds of the cybercafe and its users. Wakeford defines the term as 'the overlapping set of material and imaginary geographies which include, but are not restricted to, on-line experiences'. This offers a useful way to imagine how on and the offline experiences form an important and material part of the everyday lives of NYPO members. In order to examine the constructions of the technocultural lifeworlds of the NYPO members through their landscapes of computing, some familiar ideas have to be mobilised. First, however, an understanding of how young people perceive and use cyberspace is required.

### Young people and cyberspace

There is not a great deal of work which concentrates specifically on young people and the Internet, except work which relates to game playing on the Internet.<sup>16</sup> This work tends to be located within psychological and educational discourses. What is written on young people and ICTs, according to Sefton-Green, is presented in terms of the nature of contemporary social change.<sup>17</sup> The two discussions are often theorised together as they both embody technological ideas about growth and progress. At the same time, Sefton-Green argues, commentaries on technologies and western concepts of childhood have often been presented in terms of binary oppositions:

Thus, they are fragmenting contemporary society, yet uniting it; they are destroying education or re-making it; they are transforming culture and communication or merely conferring privilege on a few. Both in the academic disciplines of the sociology of childhood and the newer field of technoculture or cyber theory, these disjunctions and contradictions are being discussed and analysed ... yet rarely are these shared notions of the future analysed together.<sup>18</sup>

Teenagers and children constitute one of the most rapid growing Internet populations. By 2005 it is expected that the population will number some 77 million users under the age of 18.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, according to the NOP Research Group, as of July 1999 there were over three million Internet users aged 17 or under, which was a 12 per cent increase from

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<sup>15</sup> N Wakeford (1999) 'Gender and the landscapes of computing in an Internet café' in M Crang, P Crang & J May (1999) *Virtual Geographies: bodies, space and relations* (London & New York: Routledge), 178-201

<sup>16</sup> For example, D S Bennahum *Extra Life: Coming of Age in Cyberspace* (London: Basic Books) ; S Poole (2001) *Trigger Happy* (London: Fourth Estate); K Orr Verred (1998) 'Blue group boys play Incredible Machine, girls play hopscotch: social discourse and gendered play at the computer in Sefton-Green (1998), 43-61

<sup>17</sup> Sefton-Green (1998), 1

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 2

<sup>19</sup> B Burke (1999) 'Meeting Generation Y' (based on US users) *NUA Internet Surveys* URL: [http://www.nua.ie/surveys/analysis/weekly\\_editorial/archives/issue1no84.html](http://www.nua.ie/surveys/analysis/weekly_editorial/archives/issue1no84.html)

January of the same year.<sup>20</sup> The study also suggests that young people - Internet users and non-Internet users, identify 'Internet users' as 'clever', friendly', 'cool', 'trendy' and 'rich' and 79 per cent claim that the Internet helps them to learn.<sup>21</sup> With estimates that suggest 46 per cent of UK children have shopped online, it is clear that this population has a great deal of consumer power.<sup>22</sup> As well as this, young people constitute the dominant social group which will be living their future everyday working, and leisure lives, with ICTs. Indeed, many young people are actively taking part in and shaping a 'techno-culture' through their various landscapes of computing.<sup>23</sup>

According to a 1999 study which was conducted by Roper Starch for America Online, young people (in the US) claim that the Internet and interaction through cyberspace has a positive influence in their lives.<sup>24</sup> In the study young Americans were asked to evaluate in what ways the Internet has positively benefited their lives. 44 per cent of the young people claimed that the interaction in cyberspace made them more interested in current affairs, with 3 per cent claiming this was not the case. 39 per cent suggested that being online had improved their friendships with 1 per cent claiming that being online had a negative impact on their friendships. Significantly, 36 per cent of the young people said that being online improved their writing and language skills. Finally, 33 per cent of online 9 to 17 year olds suggested that being online made them better students.<sup>25</sup> The figure below presents these results graphically. Educationally, the report suggests that young people value the Internet and would like to have more networked computers in their schools (see figure 6.01 below). The UK government has recently claimed that by all libraries and schools will be connected to the Internet by 2002.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> NOP (1999) URL:  
<http://www.nop.co.uk>

<sup>21</sup> NOP (1999)

<sup>22</sup> Although shopping online when under 18 and not in possession of a credit card is difficult, young people will often shop by proxy through their parents. Thus those with parents who may not have a bank account, debit or credit card will be excluded from this form of shopping.

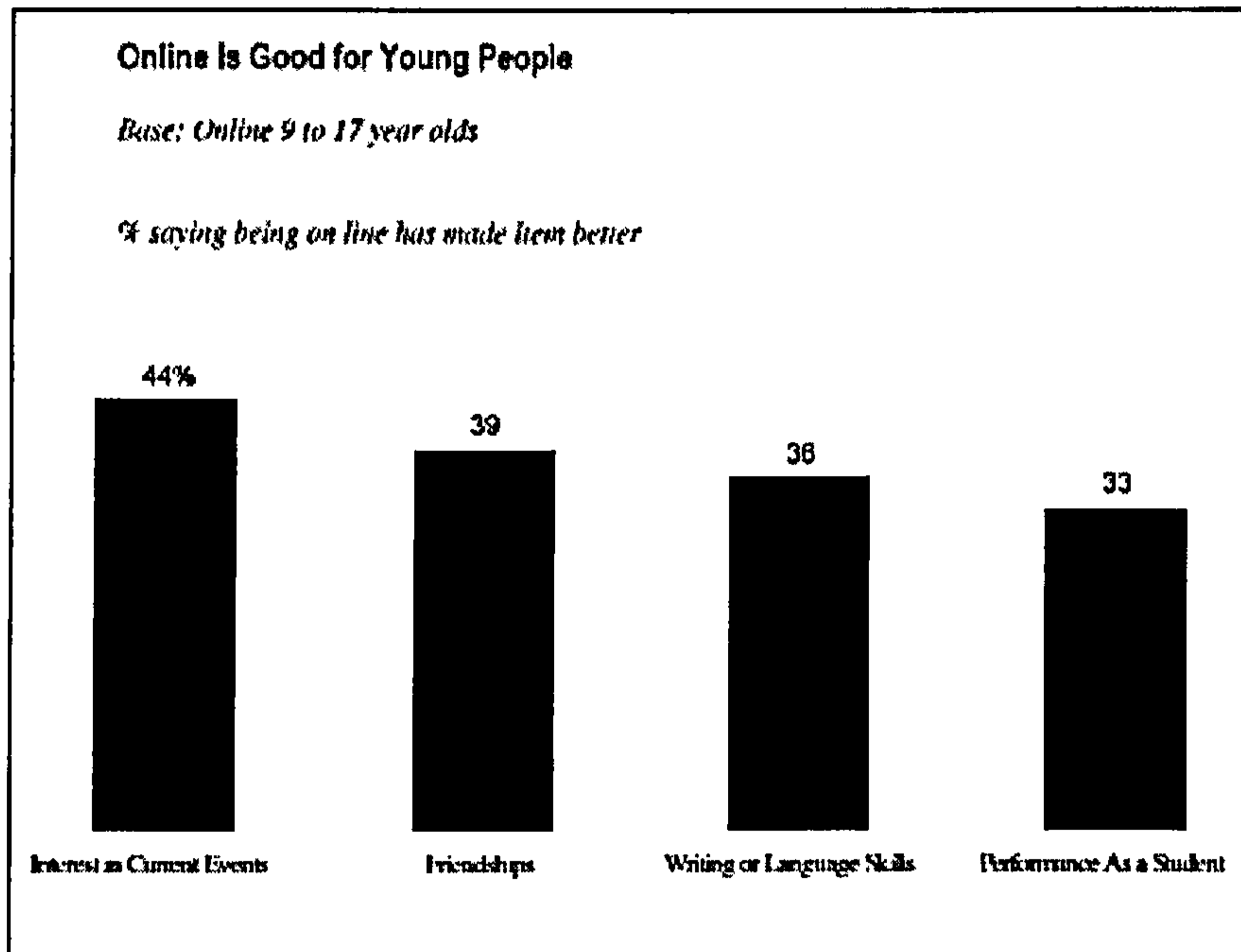
<sup>23</sup> It is acknowledged that much of the research by such groups are for marketing purposes and hence might have a skewed and partial vision of young people's activities in cyberspace and their perceptions of cyberspace.

<sup>24</sup> The study claims: "Roper Starch World-wide conducted this research via telephone among a national sample of 9 to 17 year olds with online or Internet access in their household. The 501 survey participants were recruited through the demographically balanced NFO consumer panel. The NFO Research panel consists of 575,000 Americans. Households with online or Internet access and children between the ages of 9 and 17 were selected and phone calls were made. Interviews were conducted between July 23 and August 1, 1999. The margin of error for the entire sample is +/- 4 percentage points."

<sup>25</sup> The America Online/Roper Starch Youth Cyberstudy (1999) Prepared for America Online November 1999, 29

<sup>26</sup> Blair (1999)

FIGURE 6.01  
 'ONLINE IS GOOD FOR YOUNG PEOPLE'  
 SOURCE: ROPER STARCH YOUTH CYBERSTUDY<sup>27</sup>

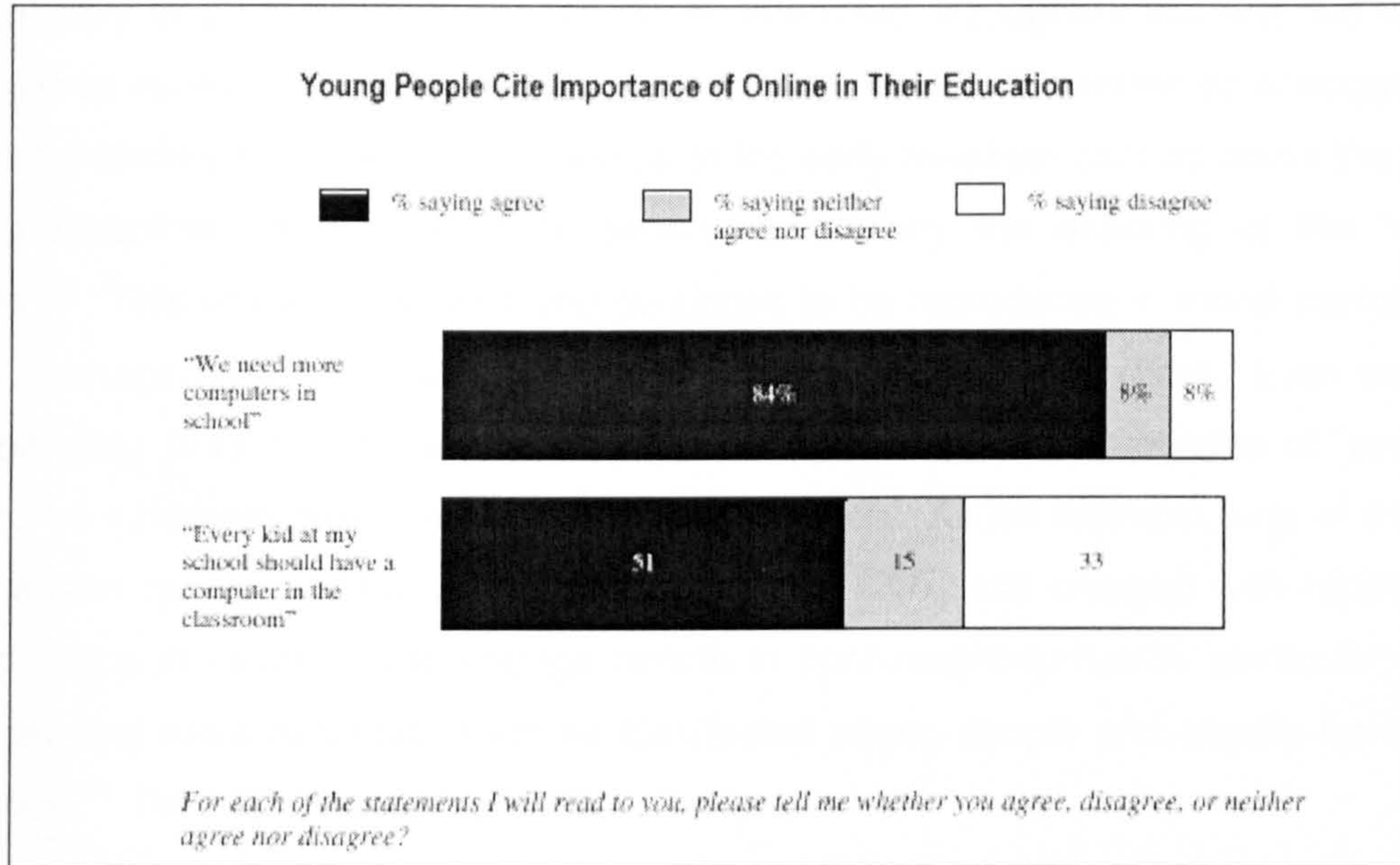


The reason for quoting these mainly market research reports on young people and the Internet is to illustrate how significant young people are in the developing technocultural landscape. Obviously young people have much more leisure time to spare interacting in cyberspace. They also ascribe in more ways to facets of popular culture in ways which adults do not. However, these figures do show that there is a commercial interest in young peoples' uses of the Internet and interactions in cyberspaces. Much of the research however neglects specifically the ways in which young people construct and internalise their landscapes of computing which might be expressed through 'virtual' or online communities. Instead, reports like this show how the 'young Internet user' is constructed in a commercial, profit-driven landscape. 'Young Internet users' are also constructed through public policy discourse. For instance, the *National Grid for Learning* initiative which aims to connect all schools in UK by 2002 and to ensure that pupils leave school with a good basic knowledge of ICTs skills. It could be argued that this kind of institutionalised shaping of the 'young Internet user' is restrictive, and this will be illustrated in later chapters. Robins and Webster hint at the construction of young people as the 'knowledge workers' of the

<sup>27</sup> Starch Youth Cyberstudy (1999), 30

global information society.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the Roper-Starch study shows that young people themselves (84% of those asked) are citing computers in their schools as a good thing and as vital.

FIGURE 6.02  
 'YOUNG PEOPLE CITE IMPORTANCE OF ONLINE IN THEIR EDUCATION'  
 SOURCE: ROPER STARCH YOUTH CYBERSTUDY



Understanding the experiences of these young people and ICTs is vital. They are shaping their landscapes of computing through a mixture of on and off-line activities and interactions. The NYPO group, which is the focus of this research, differs in this respect to the initiatives which the researcher visited with PAT 15. The research addressed if and how the group creatively negotiates on line and off-line spaces, and whether they have created a different kind of social group in between. Part of this is examining how interaction in the online community that has been created impacts the ways in which they see themselves, others and their 'communities'. Yet, what constitutes 'youth'?

### Practising youth

'Youth' is a contradictory and complicated category. Giroux suggests that it is a category which is seldom 'heard' in public discourse and in the public sphere:

<sup>28</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 172



This is not to suggest that youth don't speak; they are simply restricted from speaking in those spheres where public conversation shapes social policy and refused the power to make knowledge consequential with respect to their own individual and collective needs.<sup>29</sup>

'Childhood', 'adolescence', 'youth' are all terms which have been invented to label and control those who are not quite perceived to be 'adults', able to fully partake politically and economically in an 'adult' sphere. Young people have, throughout the last five hundred years, been increasingly distanced as a group from adults. Valentine *et al* suggest that increasing anxiety from the 'middle classes' in the early twentieth century about the 'unruly' and 'undisciplined' nature of young people, particularly the offspring of the 'working classes'.<sup>30</sup> This anxiety has been and continues to be reproduced in moral panics about gangs, teenage pregnancy, subversive youth activities and juvenile crime. Even within the SEU *Bringing Britain Together*, referred to in chapter four, such problems of 'youth' are seen to be inherently tied to issues of social exclusion. As an example, one of the other policy action teams directed in the SEU Report, PAT10, was charged with reporting on 'best practice in using arts to engage people in poor neighbourhoods, particularly those who may feel most excluded, such as disaffected young people and people from ethnic minorities'.<sup>31</sup> PAT 12 was charged with,

- the key costs of youth disaffection and the most effective interventions for preventing it;
- the respective roles of the different agencies including schools, the Careers Service, the Youth Service, TECs and FE colleges, police and probation, health and social services, DATs, and the voluntary sector and business;
- how work to reduce youth disaffection can be planned, targeted and co-ordinated more rigorously;
- what can be done to support families with older children and deal with problems such as conflicts with step-parents, children leaving home prematurely; and
- how the design of services can take greater account of the perspectives of young people.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> H A Giroux (1998) 'Teenage sexuality, body politics, and the pedagogy of display' J S Epstein (ed.) (1998) *Youth Culture: Identity in a postmodern world* (Oxford: Blackwell) 24

<sup>30</sup> G Valentine, T Skelton & D Chambers (1998) 'Cool places: an introduction to youth and youth cultures' G Valentine & T Skelton (eds) (1998) *Cool Places: geographies of youth cultures* (London & New York: Routledge) 4

<sup>31</sup> Social Exclusion Unit (1998), 5.41

<sup>32</sup> National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young People March 2000

The Report identified a number of factors that affect young people, particularly those who reside in low-income neighbourhoods:

- One in five children in Britain are growing up in workless households – a higher figure than in any other OECD country;
- One in 11 16 to 18 year olds are not in education, training or employment.
- One in 16 young people leave school without qualifications each year. Alongside Greece and Portugal, the UK has the lowest number of 18 year olds in education in the EU;
- Unemployment rates are two to three times higher for young people aged 16–24 from ethnic minority backgrounds, regardless of educational attainment);
- Rates of teenage birth are twice that of Germany, three times that of France, and six times that of the Netherlands;
- Each year one in five 14–15 year olds spend a night away from home without parental knowledge or permission;
- The UK has more 15–16 year old drug users than any other EU country;
- One in six 16 to 24 year olds are the victim of a violent offence each year. England and Wales come joint top, with the Netherlands, of 11 industrialised countries for such victimisation.<sup>33</sup>

In North America too, young people are targeted as a concern in low-income communities. The Benton Foundation, for instance, reports that:

Youth initiatives address a special need in low-income communities. Children and young adults in neighbourhoods struggling with persistent poverty have few opportunities for enrichment and positive growth within their immediate neighbourhoods, and their opportunities to explore the world outside those boundaries are limited because they lack transportation, money, and trustworthy guides. Just as adults in these communities are isolated from jobs, kids are isolated from opportunities to grow and develop. Interactive technologies and the resources available on the World Wide Web can offer them new learning experiences. Kids who have been shut out can use online services to visit sites that show museums, cities, and wildlife preserves they otherwise would not get to see, and they can communicate with people who live far beyond neighbourhood boundaries.<sup>34</sup>

It was not until the 1950s when consumer culture produced a certain idea of 'style' and leisure activities such as dancing and listening to music, which in turn spawned magazines,

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> The Benton Foundation (1998) *Losing Ground Bit by Bit: low income communities in the Information Age*, 30

clothing and so on, that the concept of the 'teenager' emerged.<sup>35</sup> Ever since, this concept of the 'teenager' has been a multiple and fluid idea. On the one hand, the 'teenager' has fun and on the other hand the teenager is constructed as difficult and troublesome. The young person is also defined structurally through various legal classifications, such as the age of consent for sexual relations, voting, marriage and so on. These are boundaries which are set by others but which are contested and resisted by young people.<sup>36</sup> Valentine *et al* also find that the concept of 'performativity' is useful when exploring the geographies of young people.<sup>37</sup> For instance, young people might perform their identities in contradiction to their embodied and visible identity. This is an important aspect of identity to bear in mind as the research moves into the analysis of NYPO. Performances of identity are mediated through a set of online spaces where others cannot see what the individual looks like. This is an important strategy for some of the NYPO members and permits a way of expressing and representing themselves, which they deem as more empowering and liberating. This is particularly so for those whose visible identities are shaped by gender or attire which is dictated by religious and cultural customs.

It could be argued that there is a youth economy of which fashion, images and music form a vital part. Styles of 'youth' are appropriated and are reproduced commercially to form 'transnational popular cultural youth forms'.<sup>38</sup> As Valentine *et al* suggest, though,

young people then reinterpret those forms, invent new forms from their own productive creativity and conspire to render the commercial forms obsolete, and so the process begins again. The dynamism of such perpetual processes are in need of further research, research which actually recognises the energy young people put into creating their cultures and does not represent them as passive consumers and victims of commercialism.<sup>39</sup>

Processes of globalisation, which were explored in chapter three and which influence broad political-economic changes, also impact cultural production and consumption through television, film, electronic media and products which produce style. Katz suggests that these political-economic and socio-cultural changes have important effects on the everyday lifeworlds of young people.<sup>40</sup> Again, this is a significant point for this research and as revealed by the quote above it is one which deserves more research attention than

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<sup>35</sup> D Hebdidge (1979) 'Subculture: the meanings of style' (London: methuen) cited in Valentine *et al* (1998), 4

<sup>36</sup> A James (1986) 'Learning to belong: the boundaries of adolescence' in AP Cohen (ed.) *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and diversity in British culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press)

<sup>37</sup> Valentine *et al* (1998), 5

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 24

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 24

<sup>40</sup> C Katz (1998) 'Disintegrating developments: global economic restructuring and the eroding of ecologies of youth' in *ibid.*, 130-144

it has received. Although this research will not consider this point as central to the analysis, it forms a vital part of understanding how NYPO members reproduce resources, styles, and various other elements of popular culture to offer a representation of their identities and relationships.

### **Technocultures of exclusions? ICTs & the urban public sphere**

Fundamentally, Robins' arguments suggest that technoculture is part of a logic of exclusion. If one argues that a technoculture is driven by the global capitalist elites, then it could be argued that young people are in many ways, excluded from this landscape. It could be argued though that young peoples' spatialities and performances of diverse identities in certain spaces, particularly public spaces, has been increasingly restricted due to the application of certain technologies and regulatory structures. Young people are increasingly being perceived and essentialised as 'trouble' on the street, in the school, in the shopping centre, in the park. Subsequently, strategies of control such as curfews and surveillance, through technologies and other forms of surveillance, have restricted their performances and activities in multiple ways in these spaces.<sup>41</sup> As Wyn and White suggest, these technologies and 'practices of social control' are visible and invisible across multiple social domains.<sup>42</sup>

Part of the 'sanitisation' of public spaces has been linked to agendas of urban renewal, which in turn reinforce the privatisation of public spaces.<sup>43</sup> In this idea of regeneration, 'commercial' regeneration is the focus. In other words, the CCTV cameras are thought to help displace those 'undesirables' from the shopping experience. The 'undesirables' are those social groups that are not perceived to be benefiting the 'commercial spaces'.<sup>44</sup> Graham uses a quote from the civil liberties group, Liberty to describe the motivation for this type of displacement:

large groups, usually of young single people, simply assemble in places that happen to catch their fancy. Their mere presence is a nuisance to people who want to use the streets and shopping centres in a more conventional way.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See G Valentine (1996) 'Children should be seen and not heard?: the production and transgression of adults' public space' *Urban Geography* 17: 2 205-20 and G Valentine (1996) 'Angels and devils: moral landscapes of childhood' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14: 581-99

<sup>42</sup> Wyn & White (1997), 90

<sup>43</sup> Valentine et al (1998), 7. See also S Graham (1998a) 'Towards the fifth utility? On the extension and normalisation of public CCTV' in Norris et al (1998)

<sup>44</sup> Graham (1998a), 101

<sup>45</sup> Liberty (1989) 'Who's Watching Over You? Video Surveillance in Public Places' Briefing Paper Number 16 (London: Liberty)

Such surveillance technologies are increasingly pervasive and sophisticated. Newham, for instance, was the first council in the UK in October 1998 to combine 'Face Recognition' technologies with their existing closed circuit television infrastructure.<sup>46</sup> Such technology is perceived to be a 'quick technical fix' to crime and 'deviance' which are so often associated with low-income urban areas. It has been highlighted by various commentators that young people, young men in particular, are the main targets of surveillance in public spaces.<sup>47</sup> Often, young people are considered to be potentially deviant and members of 'the underclass', by CCTV operators and police, if they wear certain clothing or walk in a particular manner.<sup>48</sup> Norris and Armstrong suggest that these groups of young people are often labelled as 'yobs', 'scrotes' and 'toerags'.<sup>49</sup> As well as this, other labels are constructed for young men of colour. Terms such as 'Pakis', 'Jungle Bunnies' and 'Sooties' were in common usage amongst the CCTV operators.<sup>50</sup> The following extracts are taken from Norris and Armstrong's observations of CCTV operators and their attitude to young people:

11.50 - A black male aged around sixteen attracts the attention of the operator because of his white cloth cap. Followed and zoomed in on he has no apparent criminality, but as the operator states his attire makes him out to be a 'wide-boy' and therefore worth following. (2 minutes, camera 1)<sup>51</sup>

12.57 - An uneventful morning has produced nothing of interest for the operators in six hours. In between reading the various newspapers and zooming in on attractive women the conversation turned twice to the main targets of the system - black youths. Explaining how the mornings are both boring and a 'waste of time' the operators explain that really their job was one of 'waiting for the kids'. By 'kids' they meant groups of black youths who congregate outside Santana's and any others they happen to see who walk along the two main streets covered. By mid-day, more in an attempt to break the monotony and silence one operator exclaims how 'we haven't seen and of our regulars yet'. The other agrees but explains their absence in the derogatory, 'They're all still in bed after a night out thievin' and mugging'.<sup>52</sup>

It is evident by these extracts that fashion and style which express and construct self-identity for young people, also attract other forms of construction from those who try to regulate their 'behaviour' and their use of public spaces. The elements which young people draw upon and which might identify them as subscribing to certain types of music, for instance, are reproduced within a discourse of criminality, regulation and surveillance.

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<sup>46</sup> The Guardian *In Your Face* February 10, 2000 URL:  
<http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,3961654,00.html>

<sup>47</sup> Norris & Armstrong (1999), 117-151

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 119

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 120. They also point out that young women are not targeted by the cameras and are only 'guilty by association', being seen with such 'yobs', unless they are 'good looking'.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 123

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 121

This in turn means that their use of public spaces are curtailed and regulated in specific ways as part of the sanitisation of public places. This clearly operates for both white and ethnic groups of young people, but there seem to be more modes of behaviour and assumptions associated with 'colour' other than whiteness. Young people, and their activities, are also regulated in 'private' or domestic spaces by adults. Indeed, the use of the term 'private' poses problems in analysis of such spatial activities as there is often very little opportunity in homes for young people to claim 'private' spaces. This is particularly true for those young people who live in areas characterised by low income and urban degeneration, such as Newham.

So, it could be asserted that the everyday lifeworlds for young people are clearly and quite significantly structured in certain ways, through discipline, surveillance technologies and institutions like school. This impacts the ways in which they think about their urban environment, their social groups and even how they think about their 'communities'. Young people clearly do have a 'sense of community' but this operates on multiple levels and through diverse spaces. Public and private spaces, as well as institutional spaces and places regulate and shape the ways in which the young people behave, form groups and use space. This is an important point when such public spaces are suffering from urban decay, as is the case in many low-income urban areas in the UK. Katz, for instance, examining the context of everyday lifeworlds of young people in low-income neighbourhoods of New York, talks about what kind of impact the deterioration of public spaces has on young people:

With public space deteriorated and perceived as unsafe from a variety of perspectives both social and physical, young people have fewer opportunities for autonomous outdoor play or 'hanging out'. This lack has implications for many aspects of their healthy development related to such diverse processes as gross motor development, the building of culture, and the construction of identity. In the absence of safe outdoor spaces young people become prisoners of their homes, often isolated with only the television or worse for companionship... The construction of subjectivity and identity formation are inflected and seriously compromised by these uneven socio-spatial relations in the contemporary urban environment.<sup>53</sup>

This is useful to recognise when thinking about the critiques of technoculture and virtual urbanity that Robins offers. In his critiques, the suggestion is that difference and alterity is made more transparent in cyberspace and through virtual communities. It could be argued against this that in fact in physical spaces, young peoples' ideas of community, their

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 126

<sup>53</sup> Katz (1998), 136

interactions, behaviour and communication are heavily regulated and restricted. The ways in which they might form relationships, make connections with others and understand and encounter 'differences' is significantly affected. In another way, this concern for the ways in which young people construct their technocultural lifeworlds through relationships, connections and negotiations of difference, is similar to the kind of political ecology of youth which Katz identifies. This ecology is a mix of ideas and set material circumstances that 'frame young people and the environment as a pivotal social, political, economic, and cultural relation'.<sup>54</sup> The question is, what kind of environment encourages this ecology which produces self-determination, the development and construction of identity. What kind of environment offers participation in work, 'cultural citizenship' and 'growth and change from the individual to the global scale?'.<sup>55</sup> Katz suggests that,

Young people's growth and development depends upon environments that provide stimulation, allow autonomy, offer possibilities for exploration, and promote independent learning and peer group socialising. These criteria are important in all settings, not just those designed specifically for teens such as schools, leisure environments, and teen centres.<sup>56</sup>

Giroux identifies young people as physically displaced as a result of the decline of 'civil society' which undermines the systems and places which have conventionally offered a space for young people, physically and ideologically.<sup>57</sup> Instead, the street corner and the second hand car are the sites for working class youth, in particular. Giroux goes on to propose that,

In alarming numbers, youth in the 1990s are being distanced from the values, language, and practices necessary to shape a democratic social order and those public terrains that traditionally have been used to promote and embody civic discourse and critical reflection.<sup>58</sup>

Youth, Giroux suggests, are being pushed to the margins of the political landscape in society and are hence being denied the chance for self-definition.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that youth, their voices, and their actions, are shaped by 'discourses and practices'. These discourses and practices subordinate and constrain the language of individual freedom, social power, and critical agency'.<sup>60</sup> Wyn and White argue too that there are more profound and deeper social relations other than age which impact young people's inclusion and participation in society:

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<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 140

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 140

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 141

<sup>57</sup> Giroux (1998), 24-55

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 25

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 25

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, 25

Class differences and social divisions based upon gender and ethnicity still constitute the major defining and structuring influences in cultural and economic life. The objective positioning of young people in relation to these structural features ultimately determines the processes of their cultural formation ... and their relationship to the dominant ideologies and institutions of society.<sup>61</sup>

Can cyberspace and technocultural lifeworlds offer spaces and places for self-definition, political voice and cultural re-production? In a society where public spaces are perceived to be declining, and where youth are increasingly displaced from physical places, where their voices are being stifled, can the construction of a technocultural lifeworld reconnect them to public discourse, politics and physical space? Additionally, can it be argued that the technocultural lifeworld that might be produced is a 'sub-culture', which acts as a means through which young people might resist their social, economic, political and cultural position in which they are 'placed' in society?<sup>62</sup>

In chapter three, Jacobs and Appleyard's interpretation of North American cities was touched upon. In summary, they argue that the city is a place of homogenised social groupings, fear of crime, symbols of inequality, placeless and fragmented. They suggest that goals for urban life should include liveability; identity and control; access to opportunity, imagination, and joy; authenticity and meaning; community and public life; and urban self-reliance.<sup>63</sup> The two goals which are most interesting, in terms of this research, are:

- access to opportunity, imagination, and joy
- community and public life

Jacobs and Appleyard suggest that,

People should find the city a place where they can break from traditional moulds, extend their experience, meet new people, learn other viewpoints, have fun ... A city should have magical places where fantasy is possible, a counter to and an escape from the mundaneness of everyday work and living.<sup>64</sup>

The key point to carry through in the analysis is the idea that people are entitled to have access to 'magical places where fantasy is possible'. Places like this are often missing in

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<sup>61</sup> Wyn & White (1997), 90

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 90-91

<sup>63</sup> Jacobs & Appleyard (1987)

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*



contemporary cities. This is particularly so for young people, as highlighted above. They go on to suggest,

The city has always been a place of excitement; it is a theatre, a stage upon which citizens can display themselves and see others. It has magic, or should have, and that depends on a certain sensuous, hedonistic mood, on signs, on night lights, on fantasy, colour, and other imagery. There can be parts of the city where belief can be suspended, just as in the experience of fiction... There should be a place for community utopias; for historic, natural, and anthropological evocations of the modern city, for encounters with the truly exotic.<sup>65</sup>

One might criticise cyberspace for not accommodating such sensory experiences such as smells and neon lights. However, there are many ways in which places can be created and made magical. Encounters with the truly exotic and experiences of fantasy and so on can and do take place in many online communities in cyberspace.<sup>66</sup> Jacobs and Appleyard suggest that in a city, the citizen should be encouraged to participate in 'community and public life' (although they do not provide a clear explanation of what these terms might imply). They suggest that public life and activities especially those located in public places have been fundamentally eroded by the fragmentation of city life. They quote the 'neighbourhood movement' as a way of encouraging citizens to participate in their 'local communities'. Yet his kind of approach has encouraged defensiveness between and within communities:

A city should be more than a warring collection of interest groups, classes, and neighbourhoods; it should breed a commitment to a larger whole, to tolerance, justice, law, and democracy. The structure of the city should invite and encourage public life, not only through its institutions, but directly and symbolically through its public spaces. The public environment, unlike the neighbourhood, by definition should be open to all members of the community. It is where people of different kinds meet. No one should be excluded unless they threaten the balance of that life.<sup>67</sup>

This chapter shows that young people in particular do not experience the city or urban places in this way. They are often excluded from certain places and constructed as 'undesirables'.

At the same time, processes of globalisation have changed the look and feel of the city. Consumer products and aspects of popular culture have been homogenised to a certain extent as global conglomerates and styles have become increasingly common in major cities around the world. As a reaction, many young people are living in places where there

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> For example, many MUDs take the user on a wholly immersive, magical and sensory experiences. One in particular is Active Worlds, URL: <http://www.activeworlds.com>

is a mixture of styles, cultures, tastes and smells. Additionally, as Wyn and White argue, new media technologies have bought the same consumer market to young people on a global scale. Even though not all young people have access to such consumption, they argue, 'the marketing of 'youth' through products such as music and clothing is widespread, creating a superficial sameness based on age'.<sup>68</sup> Young people in the UK are living in the context of increasing search for and affirmation of local and national identity(ies) - place-identities which are being re-negotiated to accommodate global consumerism and homogenisation. The production and consumption of popular cultures and styles, which delineate aspects of popular culture, are inscribed in urban places as well as embodied by young people. These inscriptions impact the form of an urban area and the forms of identities that young people display and perform.

Chapter eight describes how such an 'environment' can be produced by a particular group of young people. The environment which offers the growth of the ecology of youth in this case is produced and constructed through cyberspace and through the social relations and interactions which are occurring through the overlapping spaces of the online and off-line.

### Synopsis

The aim of this chapter has been to contextualise the idea and critiques of technoculture and to establish the context for the empirical evidence which is to follow. **Section I** of this chapter unpacked the idea of a 'technoculture' and a technological landscape in more detail. Most of these ideas are drawn from Robins' critique of technoculture. **Section I** then reviewed some common critiques of community-ICT relations. **Section II** then moved on to discuss how young people's lives and ideas of community are constructed on multiple levels.

Young people are clearly a large Internet user group, as the various figures presented in **Section II** illustrate. This section further illustrated that young people are heavily exposed to ICTs and the Internet in particular, through television, school and other areas of popular culture. Previous research on young people and the Internet has located young people predominantly in educational and psychological discourses, argues Sefton-Green. Additionally, much of what is written on young people and the Internet focuses on game playing. What has been neglected is an examination into the ways in which young people

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<sup>67</sup> Jacobs & Appleyard (1987)

share physical geographies and technocultural geographies, particularly those who share geographies of exclusion. What is also neglected is the ways in which the 'young Internet user' is constructed by commercial, media and policy discourse.

The key themes and issues raised in this chapter, and which should be considered in relation to the analysis of the construction of the NYPO technocultural lifeworld in the following chapter, are multiple. The first is the way in which an inclusive technocultural landscape can be produced in socially excluded urban areas. The term 'youth' is also a messily constructed term which is shaped by many discourses such as 'youth as deviant', 'youth as troublemakers' and so on. It must also be recognised that young peoples' everyday lifeworlds and styles are structured and shaped not only by multiple policies, including those addressing social inclusion, but also by strategies of control and regulation. Their everyday lifeworlds are also constructed through various elements of popular cultures which, some have argued, have been brought closer and more accessible to young people through the globalisation of styles, fashions and consumer products and the convergence of ICTs and media. However, little attention is paid to the ways in which young people reproduce styles, popular cultures and how they also might resist the regulation of their everyday lifeworlds through ICTs in the context of a 'global information society'. The ways in which young people consume and reproduce social relations through different spaces, cyberspaces in this case, are explored in chapter eight. The next chapter returns to some practical and methodological issues, which must be explored prior to understanding the substantive empirical evidence.

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<sup>68</sup> Wyn & White (1997), 2

## Chapter Seven

### The Research Strategy for Analysing Everyday Practices

#### Preamble

This chapter develops a strategy for gathering the empirical evidence necessary for analysing the technocultural lifeworlds of NYPO members. The chapter also explores the questions which are pertinent to this research in more depth, and makes links to theories of qualitative methods of inquiry and analysis. Specifically, the chapter argues that only an integrated and varied research strategy engenders revealing ways of thinking about the research. This is a rather long chapter but is necessary in order to understand the nature of exploring a diverse group of young people. The group is situated in a particular time and place and are negotiating and configuring social relations in social spaces which are not necessarily local and physical.

The chapter summarises key arguments for qualitative methodologies as a way of thinking through research and ideas. Certain sections explain why such ways of thinking are deemed appropriate and integral to the theoretical, empirical as well as analytical stages. There are vital methodological and ethical issues to explore. These include exploring the use of approaches which employ methods like discourse analysis, interviewing and observation. As well as these familiar methods, there are other not so familiar methods which are evolving in order to understand social relations in an 'information society'. The chapter also addresses rather reflexively some issues which 'the researcher' experiences. These issues are highlighted when researching in a context which might be 'different' from the cultural, social, economic and indeed physical landscape within which the researcher is usually embedded.

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#### Section I: Practicals

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##### Developing the research strategy

There are several research strategies which can be employed to assess community dynamics and so provide an in-depth examination of the social relationships within those communities, which is an important part of this thesis. Participant observation, focus

groups and in-depth interviews would supply a broad database for an on-going study of how social relations and understanding of 'community' transform as a community network/intranet is embedded.

Hence, this research seeks to utilise an integrated and detailed research strategy. The research focuses on case studies which explore community-ICT initiatives prior to implementation as well as those which have already been established within a community context. Ethnographic perspectives heavily influence the methods employed in the research strategy. It must be stressed that although this research takes an ethnographic approach and is influenced by anthropological perspectives on fieldwork, it cannot possibly claim to be an ethnography.

In order to approach the answers to these questions, an integrated and varied research strategy is constructed in four stages.

### **The research stages**

Stages I and II have been explained fully in **Part One** of the thesis. The key now is to focus more fully on Stage III. This stage further develops the explorations initiated in the first two research stages. Figure 7.01 below offers a summary of the key empirical elements of the research stages.

FIGURE 7.01  
SUMMARY OF RESEARCH STAGES, TIMESCALE AND  
ACTIVITIES/QUESTION

WHEN?	WHOWHAT?	ACTIVITIES/QUESTIONS
<p><b>MARCH - JULY 1999</b> <b>6 IN DEPTH CONTEXT-SETTING INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED</b></p>	<p><b>Richard Stubbs: co-ordinator Newham Online</b> <b>Gavin Sealey: Youth Worker and NYPO Co-ordinator</b> <b>Kevin Harris: Information Officer Community Development Foundation</b> <b>Liz Tout: Community Relations ICL</b> <b>Geoffrey Ocen: (O-Regen) Click Cybercentre Manager</b> <b>Louise Harvey: O-Regen</b></p>	<p><b>what are their understandings of 'community'?</b></p> <p><b>how do on-line and off-line communities differ?</b></p> <p><b>what relationships have been built through on-line community?</b></p> <p><b>can community-ICT initiatives be used as tools for community regeneration and social inclusion?</b></p> <p><b>what is an Information Society?</b></p>
<p><b>APRIL 1999</b> <b>FIELD VISIT TO SHEFFIELD WITH PAT 15 TEAM. PROJECTS VISITED (FIELD NOTES)</b></p>	<p><b>Electronic Community Magazine</b> <b>Rotherham Library</b> <b>ACE Resource Centre</b> <b>Challenge Office &amp; Spring Suite: private sector run: located at Clifton Comprehensive School</b> <b>Barnsley College Priory Campus</b> <b>Grimethorpe EVH</b> <b>MATREC: Manor Resource and Training Centre</b> <b>City School</b></p>	<p><b>(FIELDNOTES)</b></p>
<p><b>FEB 1999-FEB 2000</b> <b>CASE STUDIES</b> <b>FACE TO FACE INTERVIEWS</b> <b>FIELD VISITS/OBSERVATION</b> <b>NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF MAILING LIST (1 YEAR)</b></p>	<p><b>Newham Young People Online (NYPO)</b></p>	<p><b>on and off-line participant observation</b> <b>group interviews with members of NYPO</b></p> <p><b>publicity video production</b> <b>individual interviews with 4 Committee members</b></p> <p><b>narrative/non participant observation of mailing list</b></p> <p><b>group interview with the Beckton Globe/Media Group</b></p> <p><b>what are their understandings of 'community'?</b></p> <p><b>are these understandings impacted by participation in on-line community?</b></p>

Primarily, key questions are related to the specific case study in order to challenge or corroborate dominant thinking about community-ICT relations in a global information society. Along with questions such as: how do community-ICT initiatives like CNs overcome social exclusions; who are socially excluded and what are they 'socially excluded' from, there is the key question of whether the term 'community' needs to be re-evaluated as a result of the institutionalisation of ICTs in urban places. This stage also explores narratives of self-identity, place identity, community identity and understandings of 'difference' in an ethnically diverse, low-income urban place. Ultimately, this stage reveals how a specific group negotiates ideas and uses of online and off-line 'community' and how they shape their own landscapes of technology through different technological practices. In the case study strategy, various methods were employed, some of which are described in more detail below. The methods employed were:

- **observational evidence of physical community**
- **observational evidence of the online spaces of the community**
- **content analysis**
- **interviewing**
- **group interviewing**
- **online interviewing**

Some of these methods are familiar within qualitative and social science research, but some such as online interviewing are not. Again, these ideas are explained below. Observational evidence of the physical or off-line group formations was based on note taking. This was limited, but useful. It was noted however that the opportunities for this type of evidence gathering was valuable in order to understand the group formations within the community. The observational method was also employed on the PAT 15 visit which is detailed in the table and in chapter four. Extensive notes were taken on this visit and involved not only observation of the actors involved in the seven projects visited, but also of the key members of the PAT 15 team, particularly those from the public sector.

Observational evidence from online interactions was interesting and provided an opportunity to feel part of the community in a way which was unexpected. This took the form of mainly non-participant observation on the General Mailing list, of which the researcher is still a member. The period of observation was 12 months. All email traffic on the list is archived on the NYPO website, but the researcher also kept records of all the traffic. These were then sorted to exclude emails where it was clear there would be no revealing data, such as requests for removals from the list or notifications of email address

changes. These sorted mails were then themed in order to elicit the narratives of the types of relationships, connections, negotiations and articulations of differences which form the kind of community in-between that NYPO might be.

Content analysis was necessary in the exploration into the narratives presented on the mailing list as well as for the analysis of the presentation and construction of personal homepages by the individual members. This is an important aspect of the empirical data as it is one of the main ways in which the individual NYPO members can articulate and express their views, interests and creativity. The homepages are their individual creations which embody in some ways, their individual identities. They are also ways in which these identities are extended into the global information society. To understand this evidence, a multi-levelled framework for analysis was borrowed from Hakken. Hakken asserts that there are several key issues in ethnographies which address online social relations. He identifies several levels of analysis which can be considered as a general intellectual context for the study of such mediated social relations. These levels of analysis are explored in more detail in the following section.

The method of interviewing and the problems associated with this is discussed in more detail below. Three main face-to-face interviews were conducted with key members of NYPO, but it was soon very clear that it would be more valuable to interview as a group. Two group or focused interviews were conducted. One was conducted in the Little Ilford Youth Centre where there were eleven respondents and the other was conducted in the Froud Resource Centre with thirteen respondents. On this occasion, the group was filmed as well as recorded with the researcher's dictaphone.

The filming was carried out by students from the University of East London journalism course for the NYPO publicity video. This was relatively intrusive but the young people soon became accustomed to the two cameras. This video was made with the help of a freelance community television producer. It was planned that the video be shown at a teacher's conference which the group were to organise in order to attract new members throughout the Borough. However, the conference has not yet taken place. The video was controlled and directed by key members of the group and is now available on the NYPO website. To be involved in the experience of making the video in order to see what would be most important for the members to present in the work, the researcher offered to



host the second group interview at a time which would be convenient to the filming. This meant that soundbites from the young people could be included in the final video product, which proved extremely effective. As well as this, the researcher acted as chaperone whilst filming in different parts of the Borough as the Youth Leader was unable to do this. In this way, the researcher was able to 'give something back' to the group as opposed to using the evidence gathered for purely academic purposes.

## **Section II: Familiar and Unfamiliar Methods in the Information Society**

### **Ethnographic ways of understanding**

Conventional ethnography has often been viewed as an unproblematic first-hand cultural description and representation of an unfamiliar group of people.<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic account emerges after the ethnographer has spent some time in the field, observed the group of people, taken notes then returned 'home' to create the account. This account is granted a documentary status because the ethnographer is present in the physical spatial 'field'. In fact, to many outwith the practice of ethnography, it is often viewed as a legitimate and institutionalised form of story telling.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnography also occupies a somewhat ambivalent position. Ethnography is partly situated as a legitimate tool within social and cultural research. Indeed, in recent years, with the emphasis on increasingly qualitative methods of inquiry ethnography has found a comfortable place. However, ethnography is also situated alongside criticisms concerning the practice of methodologies.<sup>3</sup> Movements within the political and philosophical landscapes of social and cultural inquiry have emphasised the need to question the more conventional scientific, positivist and quantitative ways of thinking. In addition, there has been an emphasis upon the demand for cultural 'knowledge' which is viewed as practical.

Hammersley locates two main areas to the current criticism of ethnography which, he suggests, need to be addressed by social and cultural researchers. First is the anti-realist trend which concerns itself with the extent to which ethnographic accounts can conceivably

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<sup>1</sup> J Van Maanen (ed.) (1995) *Representation in Ethnography* (Sage: Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi), 1

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 3

<sup>3</sup> M Hammersley (1992) *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* (London & NY: Routledge)

profess to represent an independent social or cultural 'reality'.<sup>4</sup> This criticism stems from previous claims that ethnography was a method which could capture a transparent and simplistic cultural realism. The image of the ethnographer has traditionally been that of a masculine figure whose ethnographic gaze produces a specifically biased account which attempts to 'speak for the other'.<sup>5</sup> This image is now viewed as problematic as the ethnographers' evidence is perceived as a product of the ethnographer's physical participation in the research context, which is inherently gendered. Thus, it is posited that ethnography is both the method and the result of a study of a group of people.<sup>6</sup> In addition, it is appreciated that the ethnographers' evidence is constructed in and through the very process of analysis and presentation of accounts.

The most obvious example of this anti-realist trend is the growing interest in the rhetorical strategies used by the ethnographers, these often being treated as constituting rather than merely representing what they describe.<sup>7</sup>

The second criticism of ethnography that Hammersley posits is the extent to which ethnography is relevant to political, social and cultural practice. This in turn questions the practical relationship between facts and values and between researchers and practitioners.<sup>8</sup> In response to the anti-realist criticisms of ethnography, Hammersley argues for a need to remain committed to realism and so to a 'theory of truth'.<sup>9</sup> To avoid over-relativism, Hammersley suggests a subtle realism as the epistemological basis for social and cultural research which involves shifts in the ways ethnographers think about and do research.

So, what precisely constitutes an 'ethnography'? Currently, particularly within a post-modern framework, ethnography involves substantial narrative variety. Recently, there has been an emphasis on text and semiotics. Subsequently:

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* I use the term 'reality' with caution due to the arguments surrounding the notion in relation to cyberspace and virtual reality, with which this present paper is concerned.

<sup>5</sup> D Bell 'Introduction: the context' in D Bell, P Caplan & J Karim (eds.) (1993) *Gendered Fields: Women, Men and Ethnography* (London & New York: Routledge), 1-2

<sup>6</sup> Van Maanen (1995), 4

<sup>7</sup> Hammersley (1992). See also J Clifford 'On Ethnographic Authority' in *Representation* 1 (1983) 118-146 reprinted in Clifford (1988) *The Predicament of Culture* (MA.: Harvard UP) also Clifford & Marcus (1986)

<sup>8</sup> Hammersley (1992)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

a text is axiomatically an ethnography if it is put forth by its author as a non fiction work intended to represent, interpret, or (perhaps best) translate a culture or selected aspects of a culture for readers who are often but not always unfamiliar with that culture.<sup>10</sup>

Hence, the language which is used in any text is extremely important and could be treated as a series of signs. However, the relations between the signifier (the words employed in the text) and what is being signified (the culture or group) - which constitute the sign - are increasingly viewed as arbitrary. This means that concepts which have been viewed as stable, such as 'self', 'society', 'reality' and 'truth', are now being destabilised.<sup>11</sup> These terms are mere signifiers which may vary culturally, linguistically and contextually. Van Maanen contends there is a recognition of the limited representational ability of ethnography due to this arbitrary relationship and that any claims to represent a transparent, homogenous culture must be countered.<sup>12</sup> Coupled with this is the suspicion concerning the existence of bounded, undisturbed cultures, wholly distinct from 'modern' cultures, which could be subject to the ethnographer's gaze.<sup>13</sup>

### **Ethnographic approaches to cyberspace**

Ethnography is the study of the culture(s) a group of people more or less share.<sup>14</sup>

By this definition alone it seems as if groups within cyberspace who more or less share the same culture or everyday practices of a particular MUD, for example, could be subject to ethnography. An ethnography of a culture based on computer mediated communication would perhaps require a different ethnographic gaze to the conventional type already mentioned. The emphasis with conventional ethnography is on the physical location of the ethnographer. The conventional ethnographer is located in the physical spatial 'field' but an ethnographer of cyberspace would surely be located in an ex-physical spatial 'field'. The question also arises concerning the location of the ethnographer's gaze. Bourdieu suggests there are three biases that blur the researcher's gaze. An important bias is the social and cultural origins of the researcher, such as gender, class, ethnicity, to which this

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<sup>10</sup> Van Maanen (1995), 13-14

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 15

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 18

<sup>13</sup> See C Geertz *Life on the Edge* (New York Review of Books 7 April 1994) cited in *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Van Maanen (1995), 4

thesis will return.<sup>15</sup> Before detailing what an ethnography of a technocultural lifeworld would involve, it may be useful to examine the different ethnographies which are currently emerging.

Out of the methodological introspection of the 1960s and 1970s, several alternatives to ethnographic realism have emerged, one of which is confessional ethnography.<sup>16</sup> This involves a self-reflexive way of writing which shifts emphasis within the account from the signified - the studied culture and everyday life, to the one who signifies - the ethnographer.<sup>17</sup> What becomes the focus of the ethnographic text is the way the ethnographer 'came to know a given social world'.<sup>18</sup>

The possibility of post-modern ethnographies is discussed by Manning.<sup>19</sup> A post-modern ethnography is a self-reflexive text which remains aware of the unpredictability of individual and collective human behaviour and practices of everyday life in different contexts, spaces and times. Tyler suggests that a post-modern text is freed from the 'curse' of representation but is to be conceived as an 'evocation'. A post-modern ethnography is fragmentary which evokes the fragmentary experiences of life in the 'field'.<sup>20</sup> This textual reflexivity requires an understanding of ethnographic accounts as rhetoric performances which rely on literary conventions for plausibility.<sup>21</sup>

Also required is a sensitivity to the location of culture in discourse and in the *image* or model of reality that constitutes the *experience of the other*.<sup>22</sup>

This statement would seem apt if one were to conceive of an ethnography of a technocultural lifeworld. A sensitivity to the discourse of computer-mediated communication and technoculture, to the image of reality in physical space as the model

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<sup>15</sup> P Bourdieu (1992) *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* Trans. L J D Wacquant (Cambridge: Polity Press) 39. The second bias is the position of the researcher in the academic field, with the third being the intellectual bias which entices the researcher into construing the world as a spectacle.

<sup>16</sup> Van Maanen *Representation in Ethnography* 6

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 8

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* This 'coming to know a given social world' is a notion that many may still feel uncomfortable with as it is debatable to what extent a given social world can be fully 'knowable', which seems to echo many of the former criticisms of conventional ethnography. The only difference is that there is an emphasis on the process by which the knowledge of a social world is attempted.

<sup>19</sup> P K Manning (1995) 'The Challenges of Postmodernism' in Van Maanen (1995)

<sup>20</sup> S A Tyler 'Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document' in Clifford & Marcus (1986), 129-131

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

for cyberspace which constitutes the experience of the other/self, is required. Part of post-modern ethnographies, in contrast to conventional ethnographies, may include what Marcus discusses as 'messy texts'.<sup>23</sup> Messy texts conceive of everyday lives in different cultures as contrasting but inherently interconnected, which means that the object of any such text is highly complex. An example of such a messy text would be Kondo's ethnography of a small shop-floor family owned factory in Tokyo. Kondo pays attention to the type of gendered, multiple and crafted 'selves' that emerge within such a context of everyday life.<sup>24</sup> Ethnographies such as this

violate the image of the intrepid traveller who journeys to exotic locales to bring back the news of the native while at the same time they challenge realist codes of representation reflecting prevailing ideas of the 'other' because the other is none other than ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

This is an important admission if a type of post-modern ethnography is to be attempted on text based cultures and everyday practices in cyberspace. Firstly and simply, an ethnographer of such a culture would only have to 'travel' to the nearest computer terminal which provides Internet access. Secondly, and more significantly, whom is the 'other' being studied in cyberspace? If a 'post-modern' perspective is adopted then one could argue that the location of the 'other' to be studied is wholly equivocal. Manning claims that post-modernism, as a perspective rather than a theory, provides an opportunity for a rejuvenation of ethnography.<sup>26</sup> Thirdly, as Kondo's work suggests, there is an acknowledgement of the existence of the 'multiple selves' that emerge in everyday contexts. Turkle describes how she views cyberspace as a post-modern space of simulation which allows for the existence and presentation of these 'multiple selves', created and transformed through language.<sup>27</sup> Once one becomes aware of the possibilities of other 'realities' and different 'selves', one becomes more reflexive about selves and realities, in general. Cohen presents the challenges of this idea quite eloquently:

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<sup>22</sup> Manning (1995), 250 (emphasis in original)

<sup>23</sup> G Marcus (1994) 'What comes (just) after "post"? The case of ethnography' in N Denzin & Y Lincoln (eds.) (1994) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage), 565-82

<sup>24</sup> D Kondo (1990) *Crafting Selves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

<sup>25</sup> Van Maanen (1995), 20

<sup>26</sup> Manning (1995), 246

<sup>27</sup> Turkle (1995)

If I am not necessarily the person that others see, and if I am not necessarily the person who I *imagine* that others see, and if I am not merely the persona whom I present to others (for whatever reason), who am I, and how might I discover the answer?<sup>28</sup>

So what does this mean for ethnographies of technocultural lifeworlds?

Hakken suggests a multi-levelled framework for ethnographers seeking to understand on and offline social relations, and identity-construction.<sup>29</sup> This framework is described below in more detail.

### **Relationships, connections, difference and articulations through six levels of analysis**

It is argued that any understanding of youth must be concerned with how power and authority is exercised over young people by adults. As Giroux suggests,

this is particularly true for those aspects of public space where teens and other youth learn how to define themselves outside of the traditional sites of instruction, such as the home and the school.<sup>30</sup>

For this research, one such aspect of public space is cyberspace, which is outside of the conventional formal institutions. In order to understand how NYPO members construct their technocultural lifeworlds through their landscapes of computing in this particular type of space, it is necessary to understand how they make relationships, how they talk about identity, how they talk about differences and so on. Hakken has identified a six level structure which he argues offers a guide to understanding social relations which are mediated through on and offline landscapes, or landscapes of computing. So using Hakken's guide, one can begin to understand the elements which contribute to the construction of NYPO members' technocultural lifeworlds.

#### ***Introducing the levels of analysis***

The first two levels are about *whom* the NYPO members are, essentially what kinds of identities the members construct for themselves. The first level is about the 'basic characteristics of the entities carrying (proto-) cyberspace'. The second level is about the 'self identities formed by such entities'. These two levels are about how NYPO members present themselves to others in the group. The second level in particular is about how the

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<sup>28</sup> A P Cohen (1992) 'Self-conscious Anthropology' in J Okely & H Callaway (eds.) (1992) *Anthropology and Autobiography* (London & New York: Routledge), 229

<sup>29</sup> D Hakken (1999) *Cyborgs@Cyberspace? An ethnographer looks to the future* (London & New York: Routledge)

members think about the politics of the self and the body. It can be argued that these two levels are principally illustrates how the members think about making relationships and how identity has an impact on relationships.

In a similar way, the third and fourth levels describe how NYPO members make relationships through their landscapes of computing, but these levels introduce a further idea - that of difference. These two levels show how ideas of difference, which might be translated in the online community as conflict, are expressed and negotiated. The third level describes how *micro*, close social relations are constructed between close acquaintances. The fourth level shows how *meso* social relations are constructed - relations with the wider 'community' on a regional scale, for instance, outside of NYPO. These might be concerned with communities of music, religion, game playing or indeed broader aspects of popular culture. Implicated in these levels, particularly the meso-level of social relations is how the members make connections and interconnections with the wider 'communities', whether they be local or global, through the Internet.

The fifth and sixth levels develop this idea of connection-making further, whilst also being concerned with differences. The fifth level describes *macro*-social relations which the members form. Again, this level is concerned with difference and with relationships, but also with the ways in which the NYPO members understand and articulate the connections they make with national and trans-national 'community' of which they are a part. The sixth level explores the ways in which wider political structures and agendas impact the way the group constructs their technocultural lifeworlds. This includes revealing how the structuring discourses, examined in chapter three, shape the constructions of the NYPO technocultural lifeworlds.

So, through this multi-level framework, the ways in which NYPO members make relationships, form connections, think about, and negotiate difference through their landscapes of computing are examined. This kind of ethnographic approach illustrates how technocultural lifeworlds are constructed, in particular contexts, by particular people.

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<sup>30</sup> Giroux (1998), 49

### Implications and criticisms

Ethnographies can reveal more about the self/selves of an ethnographer than the group or culture about which an ethnographer is writing.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Crick emphasises the importance of the ethnographic self as a research instrument. What is required is a regard to the idea that one's 'self' is just as much an object of scrutiny as the 'objects' of other 'selves' to whom the ethnographic gaze is aimed.<sup>32</sup> This fits well with Turkle's work which suggests that cyberspace serves as an 'evocative object' which enables not only a self-reflection on how 'selves' are constructed, but a reflection on the idea of 'difference' between selves.<sup>33</sup> Interactions within cyberspace permit a play with decorporealized subjectivities or selves which may allow for a recognition of other existing plays with subjectivities/selves.<sup>34</sup> In this way, visible categories, such as 'ethnicity' and 'gender' which situate the researcher and the researched, may become immaterial or at least invisible.

This is the first implication of carrying out an ethnography of a group of people participating in a specific technocultural lifeworld. As Bell suggests, one conducts fieldwork by establishing relationships, learning to see, think and be in another culture. One does this as a person of particular age, sexuality, gender, class and ethnicity.<sup>35</sup> However, within any technocultural lifeworld one's identity will not be viewed as 'fixed' and indeed one must concede that the identities of participants may not be fixed. In other words, participants may be 'playing' with those attributes which situate their physical spatial identities, perhaps situating their online identity as 'male' when their physical spatial identity may usually be situated as 'female'. The idea that an ethnographer may not know what physical spatial characteristics are attributed to an individual may be problematic. One can tentatively draw parallels here with the problems conventional ethnographers confront when deciding whether or not a respondent is telling the truth. Stoller collected a substantial language survey only to discover subsequently that his respondents had lied to him.<sup>36</sup> This example would suggest that if semiotics can prove so problematic and complex, then how does one decipher reality or find the truth? Post-modern thought rejects any meta-claims to truth

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<sup>31</sup> M Crick 'Ali and Me: An essay in street corner anthropology' in Okely & Callaway (1992), 175

<sup>33</sup> See Turkle (1995)

<sup>34</sup> See Stone (1991)

<sup>35</sup> Bell (1993), 1-4

<sup>36</sup> Stoller cited in Van Maanen (1995), 265



and refutes the notion that there exists one Platonic reality or identity.<sup>37</sup> Instead, post-modern analyses claim the existence of multiple realities, identities, truths and cultural worlds.

The second implication of ethnographies of technocultural lifeworlds is the ambiguity an ethnographer would experience with the 'insider'/'outsider' divide. In a 'virtual' community, for instance, everyone is an 'outsider' initially - a 'newbie'.<sup>38</sup> One remains a 'newbie' until one learns the phrases and 'netiquette' related and required for interaction within a particular context. Once the language and semiotics are harnessed, one is deemed an 'insider'; one may find a comfortable 'place'.<sup>39</sup> In this way, one may become more implicated in the everyday practices of a culture.<sup>40</sup> Bourdieu's work concerning the epistemological problems of researching one's own environment may provide a useful guide when thinking through such an implication.<sup>41</sup> He recognises the challenges of,

breaking with inside experience and then in reconstituting the knowledge which has been obtained by means of this break.<sup>42</sup>

Bourdieu acknowledges that this is a self-reflexive process and one which may inform an ethnographers perspective on the research.

Cyberspace ethnography could be criticised for not constituting 'true' discourse as computer mediated communication eliminates contextual, physical cues and components of speech acts, such as gesturing, expression and voice quality.<sup>43</sup> In addition, cyberspace ethnography may be criticised as ungrounded, as those interacting within cyberspace do

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<sup>38</sup> L Regan Shade (1996) 'Is There Free Speech on the Net?' in R Shields (ed.) (1996) *Cultures of Internet: Virtual spaces, real histories, living bodies* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage)

also A H Rinaldi *The Net: User Guidelines and Netiquette* available via anonymous from ftp.sura.net in directory pub/nic as filename netiquette.txt:

A MUD (multi user domain) is a text based domain. The idea of MUDs originated in Dungeons and Dragons games and many are still game based. There is no limit to the number of 'players' or participants. Some MUDs require that on entering, one adopt a character name. These names, in more game based MUDs, are connected to characters who relate to the 'game'. Other MUDs allow one to create one's own character, which may be based entirely on one's physical, conventional identity or one which is entirely imagined. People 'meet' in 'virtual bars' or living rooms which have been 'built' textually and talk. Indeed, some MUDs, such as MEDIAMoo are based predominantly on academic discussions about media. Turkle details the complexities in *Life on the Screen*.

<sup>39</sup> This may be an overly simplistic view, but it is one which is quite widely held within CMC based cultures.

<sup>40</sup> For a parallel example see M Macintyre 'Fictive kinship or mistaken identity?' in Bell et al (1993), 46-51

<sup>41</sup> P Bourdieu (1988) *Homo Academicus* Trans. P Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press). Original published 1984.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 1

<sup>43</sup> Mizrach *The Electronic Discourse* 1. However, participants do develop other forms of written expression which denote emotions, such as typing in caps lock to denote shouting.

not have the network of dependencies that 'real' communities have. This implies that the behaviour of those interacting within cyberspace has no significance to their 'real' lives.<sup>44</sup>

There is an argument which suggests that the space of cyberspace, and text based cultures within this space, should not be granted the status of uniqueness or difference that is afforded. Some, like Turkle, suggest that cyberspace is the embodiment of a post-modern space which allows for a multiplicity of fragmented and fluid identities. Others, like Interrogate the Internet, argue that cyberspace is merely an expression of high modernity which promises to achieve the project of the Enlightenment.<sup>45</sup> In addition, they argue that the everyday practices within cyberspace display a pretence of heterogeneity and in fact are explicitly reinforcing existing physical-spatial hegemony and homogeneity. An ethnography of a cyberspace that Interrogate the Internet describes would perhaps, superficially, seem futile. A sophisticated ethnographer could use precisely this type of critique of cyberspace to justify an ethnographic account of a technocultural lifeworld and online community formations.

### Observational methods

In the 'information society', evolving technologies mean that increasingly communication and social relations are being extended into online spaces. This is in part at the centre of the research: the affects that this type of communication might have on ideas about community and so on. NYPO are no exception and their primary means of communication, the central nervous system of the online community in a sense, is the General Mailing List to which every member is subscribed. This method of evidence gathering and analysis is relatively new in qualitative methodologies and within the last two years, there has been some attention by academics as to the ethics and methods by which rigorous analysis can result.<sup>46</sup> This researcher considers this method as completely valid as a way of eliciting narratives and ways in which a particular social group organises itself. However this method is considered to be most useful and illuminating when conducted in conjunction with face-to-face interviews and focus groups, which did take place.

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, 1

<sup>45</sup> Interrogate the Internet (1996) 'Contradictions in Cyberspace: Collective Response' in R Shields (ed.) (1996) *Cultures of Internet: Virtual spaces, real histories, living bodies* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage)

<sup>46</sup> See Wakeford (1999)

### Group (focus) interviewing

The principal research tools which have been available to the qualitative researcher are participant and non-participant observation, in-depth one-to-one interviewing and the documentary or narrative materials. The 'focus group' or the 'focused group interview', has become an additional method of eliciting material from respondents in the social sciences.<sup>47</sup> The focus group method can allow respondents to explore and clarify their views in the context of group dynamics which might not occur on a one to one basis. This is especially true when interviewing young people who are more used to working and thinking in groups rather than on an individual basis as a result of their everyday geographies at school, in the classroom and so on. Talking to young people in groups also might balance the uneven power relations that operate in a researcher-respondent encounter. The benefits of a focus group approach are summarised by Sim below:

- they are an economical way of tapping the views of a number, simply because respondents are interviewed in groups rather than one by one (Krueger 1994);
- they provide information on the 'dynamics' of attitudes and opinions in the context of the interaction that occurs between participants, in contrast to the rather static way in which these phenomena are portrayed in questionnaire studies (Morgan 1988);
- they may encourage a greater degree of spontaneity in the expression of views than alternative methods of data collection (Butler 1996);
- they can provide a 'safe' forum for the expression of views, e.g. respondents do not feel obliged to respond to every question (Vaughn et al. 1996);
- participants may feel supported and empowered by a sense of group membership and cohesiveness (Goldman 1962, Peters 1993).<sup>48</sup>

Like Koch and Harrington, Sim warns of the influence that the 'self' of the researcher can have on the dynamics, reactions and processes of the group under interview. Sim suggests that the 'moderator' or researcher be aware that a particular difficulty is in effecting a balance between passive and active roles. Dialogue must be encouraged as far as possible between group members rather than group members and researcher. Related to this, the researcher has to generate interest in the topic under discussion but at the same time avoid leading a group to 'confirm' prior hypotheses that might be held by the

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<sup>47</sup> J Sim (1997) 'Collecting and analysing qualitative data: issues raised by the focus group' *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 28:2, 345-352

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

researcher. In other words, the researcher should ensure that the respondents realise they are partaking in the group interview in order for the researcher to learn from their experiences.<sup>49</sup>

### **Researching the case studies**

Case study research, as touched on earlier, permits for a research strategy that is divergent. This is necessary considering the neoteric nature of the subject matter - community-ICT relations in the information society. It has been necessary therefore to employ methods such as discourse analysis, participant observation, group interviewing, informal interviewing, in-depth semi-structured interviewing and online discussion groups.

What follows is a discussion of the case study and which methods were employed or proved useful or unenlightening.

### ***NYPO***

The contextual background to NYPO is explored in chapters five and six, so this section will address the ethical, practical and theoretical obstacles which were encountered in the fieldwork.

The principal difficulties that were experienced with NYPO were related to access, communication and motivation. Access did become a problem due to physical distance from Newham, but other issues related to access are to do with how to gain access to young people who are predominantly of school age and dependent. Another problem of access is implicit in the very nature of the groups' activities and 'base' or place existing largely online. NYPO are an 'online community'. Several of the respondents replied to my requests for informal chats (this term was employed in place of 'interview') expressing interest in talking with me, but stating that it was difficult as they lived in an entirely different part of Newham. So, since the group is an online community (technocultural lifeworld), it was considered appropriate to experiment with online 'interviewing'.

There were additional other 'difficulties' which were experienced during the study. As NYPO members were aged 11-25, with the respondents predominantly aged between 13 to 17, there are a number of underlying issues which precede the researcher:

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<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

- age
- class
- ethnicity
- gender
- location

These are simultaneously implicit and explicit and some aspects are rendered more problematic the deeper the research(er) explores. The researcher is a female, white, middle class academic in her middle to late twenties (just outwith the 11-25 year old membership parameters for the group), living in Newcastle but having spent most of her time in Scotland. In revealing this, it does not mean that the researcher performs essentially one specific embodied identity. Indeed, individuals present different 'selves' in different places and at different times: identities are messy. Nonetheless, it is this messiness that underpins many of the research questions, but is an idea which is difficult to communicate. It is particularly problematic to communicate this idea to young people, as their lives are usually heavily structured: they go to school, go home, have no bills to pay and so on (although, not always the case, particularly in deprived areas).

### **Reconciling differences?**

This messiness can also be described as 'difference', and in employing the idea activates thinking about sets of power relations and notions of agency with and between research, researcher and 'the researched'. As this research is concerned with ideas about community and ICT relations in place, these notions of power relations and agency are particularly significant and indeed recur throughout the work.

Power relations and differences are already inscribed throughout the economic, cultural, political and physical landscape of Newham and are represented in the clusterings of 'communities' within the borough as a whole. Walking through one particular area, East Ham, differences are palpable to the researcher, 'me'. I was distinctly made aware that 'I' was different. I carried that difference in the way I negotiated the High Street, in the way I talked, in the way I embodied my identity as a white, middle class female. My embodied differences of which I became increasingly aware also influenced the ways in which I thought about 'community' and indeed ICTs.

The dilemma is whether to attempt to reconcile these differences that I, as researcher,

embody when talking to respondents, online and offline. Shifting the question from whether to 'how' is more helpful and indeed provided me with a way of thinking through the fieldwork itself. Firstly, a way around negotiating these differences is to instead try to find similarities. Secondly, it became increasingly evident that my differences were no 'different' from the differences with which many of my respondents were negotiating in their everyday lives. This becomes clearer and is discussed more fully in chapter eight.

It is useful here to examine what Koch and Harrington advocate, which is a type of reflexivity which demands that the researcher recognise the hermeneutic circle of meaning which means that neither the researcher nor the respondents' texts or narratives are privileged:

In the process of interviewing, stories are told by self-interpreting participants, who have brought to them their pre-understandings. The researcher's situation and background not only influence the interpretation of participants' stories, but they also bring an understanding that always precedes these situations. We understand something by comparing it to something we already know.<sup>50</sup>

So, the resulting research project is a text created through the interests and interpretations of the respondents as well as the interests and interpretations of the researcher: this is the politics of situatedness and positioning. With this in mind, the following section summarises some methods of analysis and ways of making sense of the empirical fieldwork.

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### Section III: Methods of Analysis

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#### Grounded theory

The analytical approach considered to be the most appropriate and valuable for this research is 'grounded theory'. This approach has been discussed at length by Glaser and Strauss, Strauss and Corbin and Turner.<sup>51</sup> Fundamentally, the grounded theory approach means that theories which help to construct a theoretical framework, with which to analyse the research, arise from the research results. The researcher constructs 'categories' which accommodate the fieldwork material. Further research then renders the categories 'saturated' and thus their significance and meanings are made material. More general and thus more abstract categories are then formulated which are able to encompass a broader

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<sup>50</sup> Koch & Harrington (1998), 888

<sup>51</sup> B G Glaser & A L Strauss (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research* (London: Aldine)

spectrum of objects. This means that further theoretical thinking and development is encouraged and interconnections identified between 'categories'. The connections and links are in turn theorised and tested in 'the field'. Bryman and Burgess suggest that a key process in this approach is coding of material. Coding serves to organise, summarise and conceptualise about the research material.<sup>52</sup> Bryman and Burgess suggest further that memo writing is another key aspect of grounded theory approaches. This means that the researcher constantly makes note of links and connections between codes and emerging concepts. The grounded theory approach, therefore, is a continuous process.

Although the grounded theory approach seems to be one of the most thorough ways of organising research material, there are, as Bryman and Burgess suggest, scarce examples of genuine interweaving of research material and theorising. Indeed, it has even been suggested that the approach is used merely as a passport to qualitative kudos.

### Narratives and narrative analysis

Ideas about social construction, which have been discussed in **Part One** offer an exceedingly valuable way to think about the construction and presentation of the 'selves' as human agents of the NYPO members. Each member is born into differing contexts and indeed each individual has very different backgrounds. Their experiences of their own identity, place, community and technological practices are mediated through their prior personal experiences. This is a vital point and impacts deeply on the form and evolution of the community-ICT relations. The question that presents itself however, is how to make sense of these narratives. A narrative is an account of events and experiences that occur over time within the social and cultural matrix.<sup>53</sup> There is considerable disagreement about the definition of 'narrative'.<sup>54</sup> According to Catherine Kohler Riessman, narratives have a sequential beginning, middle and an end. Narratives are situated but one can identify different genres of narratives, such as habitual, hypothetical and topic centred narratives.<sup>55</sup> Telling and re-telling stories is a feature of conversations and the metaphor of the story in understanding what constitutes a narrative is useful as it illustrates the ways in which order

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<sup>52</sup> See Strauss & Corbin (1990), 61 for a more detailed discussion of levels and stages in the coding process.

<sup>53</sup> J Bruner & S Weisser (1999) *Autobiography and the Construction of the Self* (Cambridge MA. & London: Harvard University Press) 6. The 'time' referred to is not abstract clock time, but 'human time': see P Ricour (1984-88) *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, Trans. K Blamey & D Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

<sup>54</sup> C K Riessman (1993) *Narrative analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), 17. For instance, Labov assumes that all narratives are stories about a specific past event.

is created and how texts are constructed in particular contexts and spaces of experience. The story reveals that a respondent may construct a particular order on the flow of experience, and in doing so make sense of events and actions in their everyday lifeworlds.<sup>56</sup> The ways in which individuals tell stories and construct narratives raise valuable questions and interpretative opportunities for a researcher. As Riessman argues, individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to make a claim on identities which construct their everyday lives.<sup>57</sup> Although casting experience into a narrative form is a common way of making sense of experience,

Informants' stories do not mirror a world 'out there'. They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretative.<sup>58</sup>

The role of the researcher is to interpret the informants' interpretations. Moreover, story telling is what one does with one's research materials and what informants do with the researcher.<sup>59</sup>

Self or personal narratives relate to understandings of the self and identity and particularly the stories by which individuals account for their personal histories. This is closely linked to issues of autobiography and autobiographic memory.<sup>60</sup> Narrative approaches to the study of identities and constructions of selves focus on questions such as: whether individuals comprise one or more selves and under what conditions individuals change; ways in which individuals arrive at 'self'-knowledge; to what extent do individuals adapt personal narratives to conform to culturally-derived types of personalities and how is culture integrated into or constitutive of a 'self'.

Narrative analysis is popular amongst critics of the realist assumptions of positivists. Instead of adopting the positivist notion of language as a technical, stable device for constructing meaning, narrative analysts consider language as constitutive of 'reality'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See *ibid.* W Labov & Waletzky (1967) 'Narrative analysis: oral version of personal experience' *J Helm Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press) 12-44

<sup>56</sup> Riessman (1993), 2

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 2

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 5. See J Bruner (1990) *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA. & London: Harvard University Press); J P Gee (1985) 'The narrativisation of experience in the oral style' *Journal of Education* 167:1 9-35; E G Mishler (1986) *Research Interviewing: context and narrative* (Cam., MA: Harvard University Press)

<sup>59</sup> Riessman (1993), 1

<sup>60</sup> See Bruner & Weisser (1999)

<sup>61</sup> Riessman (1993), 4



Narrative analysis is a method for understanding how subjectivities, selves and identities are constructed and presented to others by different individuals in different places and spaces. Narratives can be understood as texts of experiences or versions of experiences in everyday geographical spaces which can be presented in various contexts and spaces, and that can include online spaces. Narrative analysis examines how stories of experiences are constructed from linguistic and cultural resources.

### **Personal narratives in cyberspace**

Poster accurately suggests that when attempting to relate the concept of 'post-modernity' to narratives in cyberspaces, one must be aware of the general critiques of technologies: technology itself is fully complicit with narratives of modernity which involves a general computerisation of societies.<sup>62</sup> Information technologies are thus complicit with new tendencies toward totalitarian control, not toward a decentralised, multiple 'little narrativity' of postmodern culture.<sup>63</sup>

The 'little story' or narrative validates difference in subjectivities, but the question is whether the narrative structure of communication in cyberspace encourages 'little' stories or authoritarian technocracies. Poster argues that cyberspace interaction encourages the construction and performances of narratives which consolidate the 'social bond' of 'community' in cyberspaces.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Poster claims invention and the production of paralogy is central to interactions and communications in cyberspaces. Evidently, there is a contradiction between narratives which suggest that cyberspace is a 'post-modern' space and those which suggest that technologies are complicit with narratives of modernity.

The spaces of cyberspace are constructed as chaotic, characteristic of fragmentary experiences and identities, so the idea that narratives are strategies for organising and making sense of experiences is useful.<sup>65</sup> Narrative analysis is well suited to studies of identity and subjectivity, although subjectivity is regarded with suspicion in mainstream social science.<sup>66</sup> In personal narratives,

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<sup>62</sup> Poster (1995a), 91

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, 92

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 92. See also Rheingold (1994)

<sup>65</sup> Turkle (1995)

<sup>66</sup> Riessman (1993), 5

it is precisely because of their subjectivity - their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, in their perspective-ridden character - that we value them.<sup>67</sup>

What may be most disorientating about communication and interaction in cyberspace is the understanding that those with whom one may be engaged in a conversation may be telling a *story* about who they 'are': presenting a 'self' for communication which is different from the 'self' presented in geographical space in terms of gender, for example. Markers, such as gender, are constructed and embedded within a Western society shaped by the discourse of modernity. Yet, the markers are *not* absent in cyberspace, as some would suggest, but disguised by other markers which are constructed and presented textually and semiotically.

Sherry Turkle has played a vital role in shaping the tone of research on identity formation and constructions of selves in cyberspace. Turkle argues that the projections of 'self' within MUDs, for instance, are engaged in a resolutely post-modern context. There are parallel narratives in the different textual rooms of any MUD and one can move forward or backward in time:

The cultures of Tolkien, Gibson, and Madonna coexist and interact. Authorship is not only displaced from a solitary voice, it is exploded. The MUDs are authored by their players, thousands of people in all, often hundreds of people at a time, all logged on from different places. And the self is not only decentred but multiplied without limit. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to 'tryout' new ones.<sup>68</sup>

Cyberspace, she suggests, as a 'virtual reality' is not 'real' but is situated in relation to the real and so it becomes a space of play for thinking about the geographical 'real world'. It is an exemplary evocative object and when a technology serves as an evocative object old issues are raised in new contexts and there is an opportunity for fresh resolutions. For example, people regularly use experiences in cyberspace to understand and in some cases rework their narratives of personhood, agency, the meaning of the 'I'.<sup>69</sup> So, cyberspace also becomes a collection of spaces to play with narratives of relations between selves and geographical space.

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<sup>67</sup> Personal Narratives Group (1989), 263-264

<sup>68</sup> S Turkle (1994) 'Constructions and reconstructions of the self in virtual reality: playing in the MUDs' *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 1: 3. Available on-line URL: <http://web.mit.edu/sturkle/www/constructions.html>

<sup>69</sup> Turkle (1994) & Turkle (1984) *The Second Self: computers and the human spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster)

### Public/group narratives

Narrative analysis emphasises human agency and imagination, so it could be argued that narrative analysis lends itself to examining identity and subjectivity construction and deconstruction in online communities. Electronic mailboards and bulletin boards in cyberspaces constitute certain spaces of electronic communication and are replete with narratives. Poster suggests that the personal narratives individuals produce and present 'seem to emerge directly from peoples' lives but many no doubt are inventions'.<sup>70</sup> Some suggest that the reason for the popularity of narratives in cyberspaces is because the technology itself provides for communication which is many-to-many as opposed to few-to-many.<sup>71</sup> With advances in technologies which allow for the simultaneous transmission of texts, sounds, images potential 'authors' may create elaborate personal narrative texts.

Reissman makes a notable point with respect to this research that embodying the self/selves in stories can take place in contexts or settings where the self/selves is being disembodied.<sup>72</sup> The issue of 'context' is an important one, it seems. Askam suggests how the behaviour of an 'interviewer' may provide individuals with cues which encourage the telling of stories.<sup>73</sup> This is particularly useful when understanding personal narrative analysis in cyberspace. There is disagreement as to how important a role the conversation/interview context plays in the construction and consequent analysis of the conversation/interview. For example, Labov altogether excludes the relationship dynamics of the teller and the listener in his process of analysis.<sup>74</sup> Yet, the Personal Narratives Group argue that the context of wider societal dynamics is vital to the production of personal narratives. Meaning is interactionally established as there are crucial power relations which operate depending on who asks the questions and why.<sup>75</sup> Contexts are multi-layered and involve not only the historical moment of telling but also ethnicity, class and gender systems, which narrators manipulate and within which their talk is interpreted.<sup>76</sup> Reissman gives the example from her research on divorce narratives. It would have been

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<sup>70</sup> Poster (1995a), 91

<sup>71</sup> J Katz (1994) 'The Tales They Tell in Cyberspace Are a Whole Other Story' *Los Angeles Times* 23 January: A1, A30

<sup>72</sup> Reissman (1993), 3. See also R Stevens (1996) *Understanding the Self* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage)

<sup>73</sup> J Askam (1982) 'Telling stories' *Sociological Review* 30:4, 555-573

<sup>74</sup> Reissman (1993), 20. See Labov (1972) 'The transformation of experience in narrative syntax' in Labov (ed.) *Language in the Inner-City: studies in the black English vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 354-396

<sup>75</sup> Personal Narratives Group (1989), 263-264

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

impossible to interpret the narratives that divorcees offered without reference to the social and cultural discourses and politics of the last one hundred and fifty years:

Women and men made sense of their divorces in narratives that contained assumptions about how marital interactions are supposed to occur in late twentieth-century America. The text is not autonomous of its context.<sup>77</sup>

So, clearly the context should be considered vital to the construction and interpretation of personal narratives. When the context of not only the conversation/interview space but the personal context of the individuals is known, the cultural and linguistic resources which are drawn upon are also revealed.

There are important epistemological and ontological aspects to narrative analysis. Epistemological aspects concern the way individuals attempt to express what they know. In constructing narratives, issues such as how and in what contexts 'knowledges' are produced should be examined. It is vital to be aware that the readings and interpretations through narrative analysis are located and embedded within various discourses, for example feminist, geographical or gender discourses.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, presentation of interpretations by a researcher constitutes specific narratives.

Narrative analysis is not concerned with the 'historical truth' of an account as individuals construct different narrative versions of the same event. In the same way, surely the identity of an individual is not the main concern of the researcher. However, identities provide the context for conversations. The researcher is interested in *how* and in what *context* individuals construct narratives of identities or experiences. Furthermore, individuals exclude experiences in their stories which may undermine the identities they wish to present or claim.

### Synopsis

This chapter has detailed the various qualitative arguments and perspectives that have been taken for this research. It has explained the multiple practical elements which constituted the research methods, as well as the reflexive and theoretical perspectives which have shaped the methodology. Most critical for this research and the empirical evidence, is the use and understanding of narratives and social construction. Having this

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<sup>77</sup> Riessman (1993), 21. See also M White (1992) 'Deconstruction therapy' D Epston & M White (eds.) *Experience, Contradiction, Narrative and Imagination* (Australia: Dulwich Centre), 124

understanding, and reflecting on the messiness of identities on micro levels, gives one a good basis for engaging with post-modern types of ethnography. Such perspectives are required for a rigorous and empathetic conduction of ethnography in cyberspace and for an ethnography of a technocultural lifeworld. Such methods and perspectives are also helpful when such an ethnographic approach to understanding how a technocultural lifeworld is constructed. This is because interactions, communication and identities are more fluid and multiple in a space which is in-between the on and the off-line.

Grounded analysis and narrative analysis were also identified as useful methods of analysis for this particular research. These methods open up spaces for the 'voices' of the respondents to shape the analysis and theoretical points which can be drawn out from the empirical data. The following chapter now presents the empirical evidence and the narratives which have been identified over the period of research.

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## Chapter Eight

# Making the Technocultural Lifeworld: Analysis of Newham Young People Online

On computers, on the Net  
Is where you'll find us - you can bet  
Talking, talking - you can't ignore us  
The Internet - will never bore us  
NYP - my friends and me  
Part of one big Net community<sup>1</sup>

### Preamble

Before proceeding with this vital analytical section, it is necessary to return to the questions, aims and points to be explored which were raised in chapter one. To recap, the remit for the research was as follows:

- to examine the constructions of discourses on community-ICT relations in the 'global information society';
- to offer an alternative way of thinking about the 'virtual' and the 'physical' by exploring the interplay between the two and eliciting an understanding of something 'in-between'.

Chapter one pointed to the increasing significance in urban research and geographical analysis of not only how places and landscapes are represented, but also how powerful meanings which are associated with them are contested.<sup>2</sup> It was further suggested that understandings of human experience, identity and politics could only be successful when one began to understand the dynamic intersections of society, space, people and place.<sup>3</sup> So, the research interests lay in the following areas:

- how the interactions in and between geographical space and place and the electronic realms which are accessible through new ICTs are articulated in complex ways;<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poem by Billie Skeggs, NYPO (2000)

<sup>2</sup> See Aitken & Zonn (1994); McDowell (1994); Jackson (1992), 130-151

<sup>3</sup> Aitken & Zonn (1994)

<sup>4</sup> Graham (1997) 'The end of geography or the explosion of place? Conceptualising space, place, and information technology' *Progress in Human Geography*, 12

- the extent to which electronic spaces be used and integrated effectively within the landscapes of everyday human lives;
- how community-ICT initiatives are articulated by different people in different urban spaces: in other words, constructing a 'geography' of emerging community-ICT relations.

**Part One** revealed that there are powerful ideas about ICTs which have encouraged emotive ways of thinking about the ways in which technologies like the Internet can have different impacts upon society, particularly in the UK. These ideas are evident in disciplinary, policy as well as commercial systems of thought and percolate through various 'levels' of Western society. **Part One** illustrated some ways in which ICTs are becoming embedded or not within urban places and indeed the ways in which ICTs are becoming part of an overall European and UK policy strategy for social inclusion and social development of urban areas, in particular. One of the ways in which this is being done is through community-ICT initiatives such as community networks. Indeed, the final chapter of **Part One** examined in more detail the political discourses which are driving the encouragement of community-ICT relations, namely ICTs and social exclusion in deprived urban communities in UK. These chapters have laid the context for exploring the developing geographies of community-ICT initiatives in urban places. In exploring these geographies, ways of opening up understandings of online and off line 'communities' can be explored. Importantly, the agendas and discourse which guide these geographies, are explored in the process.

**Part Two** took the themes identified in **Part One** to the next level of analysis. The themes identified were as follows:

- the language which constructs ideas about community-ICT relations is driven by economic concerns: many of the community-ICT projects in practice, those examined by the PAT15 team for instance, focus on skills training which fulfil funding 'output' requirements.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although it is recognised that many of those who run the community-ICT feel constrained by these funding outputs. Many of the outputs they identify, such as confidence building, are not quantifiable for the purposes of the funding outputs.

- Ideas about community-ICT initiatives are constructed around discourses about the global information society as a global economy and the desire to reinstate 'community' in socially excluded urban areas.
- Initially, it was understood within the discourse of the global information society, that place no longer mattered and that people now lived in a 'borderless world': this is now being replaced by the idea that it is not a borderless world and that specificities of place matter. This is evident in the community-ICT initiatives which were examined by the PAT15 team. Many of the initiatives reflected the peculiarities of the places in which they were embedded.

**Part Two**, then, focuses in on the specifics of the empirical research. The first chapters in this part engaged more fully and critically with Robins' and Webster and Robins' critique of 'technoculture' and virtual urbanity in particular. A great deal of what was discussed in chapter three makes up the 'technoculture' which Robins critiques. This then led onto a discussion of the ways in which young peoples' everyday lifeworlds are structured and shaped in different and multiple ways. This shows that instead of cyberspace and 'virtual' communities being an escape into some mythic realm of stability and order, as well as 'virtual' communities being a means of distancing people from the 'social ills of reality', in Robins' words, young peoples' lives are already structured in certain ways. Young people are often displaced from public spaces as an attempt to order and stabilise public spaces for consumption. Technologies like CCTV, for instance, serve to restrict and track the movements of young people on the street and in other public places. There are few spaces anymore where young people can express and represent themselves in different and empowering ways. 'Social ills' of 'reality' are being cleansed from the spatialised realm of public spaces. The chapter then reclaimed the idea of a 'technocultural lifeworld' from Robins to explain and understand the emerging 'community' in-between the on and the off-line.

Chapter seven then broke from the substantial theoretical and empirical material to focus in on the methods and analytical perspective taken on the empirical evidence. This included what methods of collection and analysis were used and for what reasons, linking in with the perspectives which were discussed in chapter two. Narrative analysis was identified as the key method to understand stories which were told by the NYPO members and which run through the form and function of the 'community'. This has set the scene



then for this present chapter which addresses the empirical evidence. The primary aim of this chapter is to understand how NYPO construct their technocultural lifeworlds.

The next two chapters take the following form. Firstly the way in which the empirical evidence has been organised is examined. The second section briefly returns to some concepts of the city in a global information society, which were elicited in chapters one and three. This includes ideas about what kinds of places cities can be for humans and what needs city spaces can fill. The final sections explore some of the narratives that can be drawn from the qualitative interview evidence. These are organised around six levels of understanding social relations which form in, through, and around cyberspace. These levels are taken from Hakken's work about ethnography in cyberspace.<sup>6</sup>

The analytical style of this research tries to adopt an ethnographic way of analysis and writing, as was explored more fully in chapter seven. This is because the range of methods utilised in the research strategy and indeed the analytical methods which have been employed such as narrative and discourse analysis, call for such a way of reflecting on the empirical work. The difference between this piece of research and others is that it attempts to approach an understanding of different types of social spaces and the social relations which exist and are shaped within these spaces. Although this itself is not a new phenomenon, constructing understandings, reflections and analysis of social relations within cyberspaces is.

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### **Section I: Organising the Evidence**

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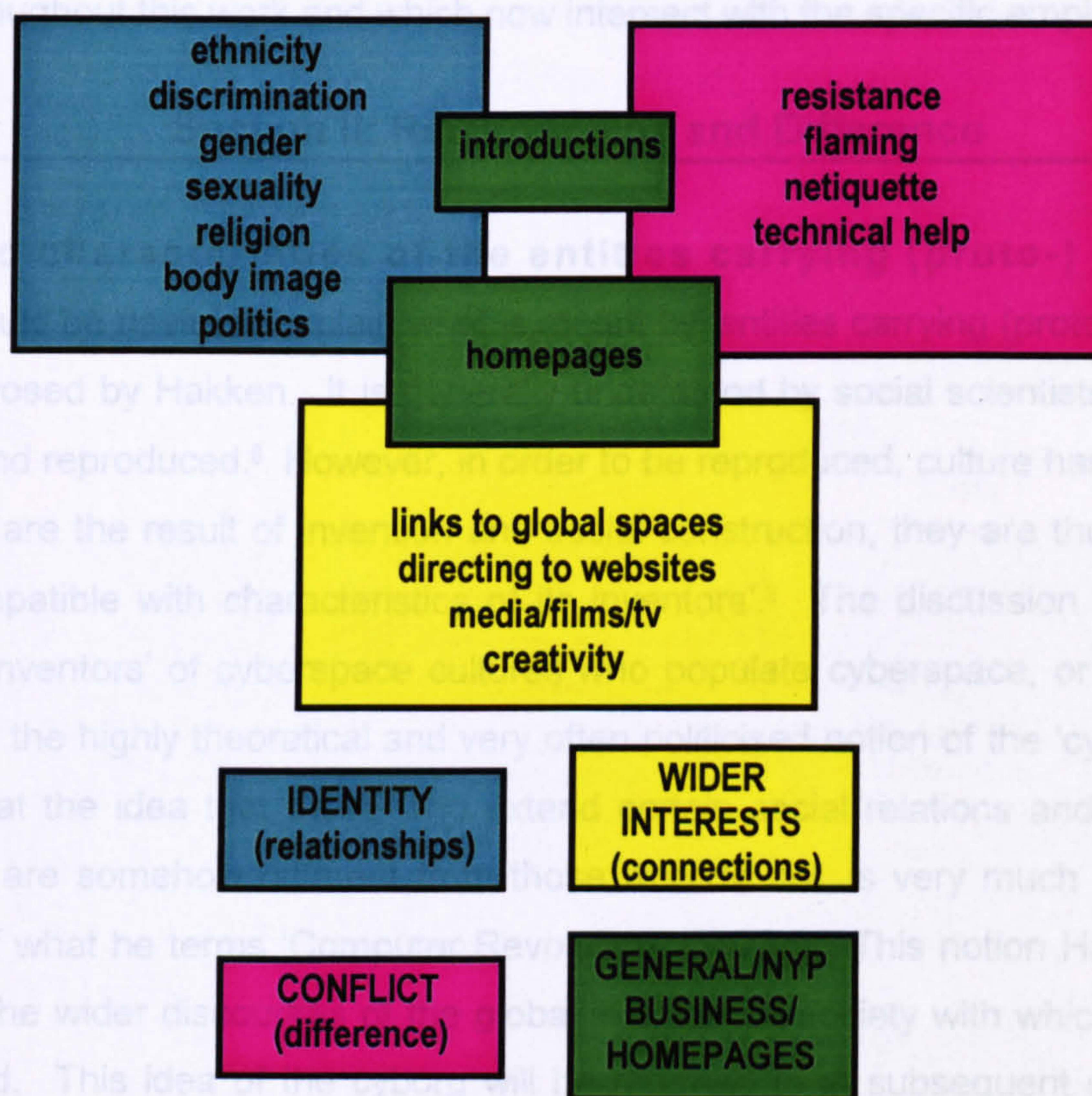
As well as the face-to-face and group interview evidence, a large part of the analysis of the empirical material involves eliciting the public narratives of the group, as was discussed in chapter seven. This was made possible through a combination of participant observation and narrative analysis both on the NYPO General Mailing list. This is an email list which is the main communicative device for the online community the traffic for which averages four to five messages per day. The traffic tends to be heavier after school hours when members are able to access computers either at home or at the two other main places of access, the Froud Centre and the Little Ilford Youth Centre. The figure below is a representation of the themes which were constructed through broad analysis of the email content. They were then grouped into the coloured themes, relating to:

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<sup>6</sup> Hakken's work is one of the first useful commentaries on this type of ethnographic approach. Hakken (1999)

- identity (relationships);
- conflict (difference);
- wider interests (connections).

**FIGURE 8.01**  
**BASIC THEMES ARISING FROM PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION OF THE NYPO MAILING LIST**



The themes originated through thinking about the ways in which 'community' is created and thought about through relationships, connections, differences and articulations. At the same time, the themes were shaped through thinking about the four main discourses which have also influenced contemporary ideas about society and ICTs relations. It also became clear during the research that the ways in which the respondents understood and articulated what they thought community meant to them was through using language such as this. So, the themes have been constructed through three different processes: through understanding what is at issue in the four dominant discourses, through the language the

researcher had to employ when asking respondents about the meanings of community, and through the language which the respondents then used to articulate how they thought about community. The empirical research crosses multiple 'fields': online and off-line. As a result, it was considered methodologically prudent to refer to a guide for the research. One of the most useful was Hakken's work, which is discussed more fully in chapter seven.<sup>7</sup>

Now, though, these levels are focused upon the narratives and themes which have been running throughout this work and which now intersect with the specific empirical evidence.

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## Section II: Relationships and Difference

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**The basic characteristics of the entities carrying (proto-) cyberspace**  
Firstly, it would be useful to explain what is meant by 'entities carrying (proto-) cyberspace', as it is proposed by Hakken. It is generally understood by social scientists that culture is produced and reproduced.<sup>8</sup> However, in order to be reproduced, culture has to be learned. As cultures are the result of invention and social construction, they are thus, in Hakken's words, 'compatible with characteristics of its inventors'.<sup>9</sup> The discussion of the kinds of entities or 'inventors' of cyberspace cultures who populate cyberspace, or online spaces, crosses into the highly theoretical and very often politicised notion of the 'cyborg'. Hakken suggests that the idea that those who extend certain social relations and interactions in cyberspace are somehow different from those who do not, is very much woven into the discourse of what he terms 'Computer Revolution' thinking. This notion Hakken refers to constitutes the wider discourses of the global information society with which this research is concerned. This idea of the cyborg will be returned to in subsequent sections of this work. What is most salient for the purpose of this discussion is that notion of 'cyborg' invokes an understanding of identity as transcending boundaries between human and machine/technology. It is also a position which can be politically powerful in terms of subject positioning. This will become clearer later on in this chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> A good summary of the key issues around the production and re-production of cultures is offered by P Du Gay (1997) *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production* (Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, London: Sage); Also H Lefebvre (1991) *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA., Oxford: Blackwell); H Lefebvre (1992) *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso)

<sup>9</sup> Hakken (1999), 70

Meanwhile, the next section explores the characteristics of the primary entities who are carrying the particular online-offline cultures in NYPO - its members.

### *NYPO members*

There are 40 members of NYPO spanning areas of Newham such as Bekton, East Ham and Forrest Gate. Although there are a significant number of members of NYPO, there is a core group of members who are most vocal and active on and offline.

It is necessary to construct a brief biographical summary of the key 'actors' in NYPO.<sup>10</sup> These are the members who the researcher met and interviewed individually and as a group, but who are also the most active on the website and the mailing list. This is an important part of the analytical process as it gives a clearer idea of how and why the actors involve themselves with cyberspace and indeed a technocultural lifeworld. It is vital to understand who they are and what identities they wish to extend into cyberspace as this subjectivity forms a crucial part of their landscapes of computing.

#### **RIZ**

Riz is a very quiet boy of 15. Riz's Pakistani parents moved from Belgium, where they lived all his life to the UK three years ago so that he and his brother could improve on their English skills. Riz was not involved with any kind of social group or community in Newham initially and indeed felt somewhat lonely. Living in Newham was very different to Belgium for Riz. He suggested that there was much less interaction on the streets and less of a 'community feel'. This he blamed on fear of crime as well as the physical geography of Newham compared to the 'quartiers' physical geography in Belgium.

Riz became involved with NYPO after participating in the summer school in the area. Through this he discovered Gavin the youth worker's web authoring courses and consequently was recruited to the newly formed NYPO community. Riz has developed many new skills and has met people from all over Newham through being a part of NYPO and has a strong sense of NYPO as constituting a 'community'. Riz prefers to talk and interact with people online as opposed to offline as he feels better able to express himself. Although he would not describe himself as being shy, he admits to often being very quiet when he meets new people. Online, Riz says he has a lot more time to think about what he wants to say. He also has the chance to experiment, masquerade and play with different

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<sup>10</sup> Note: Names of respondents have been changed when reference is made to their responses which were elicited from face-to-face contact. Where emails are referred to, names have not been changed. This is because the General Mailing list is archived and available to the public on the NYPO website.

identities when he is online. Indeed, one of his instant messaging<sup>11</sup> personae is a MI5 agent. Riz has quite a deep understanding of the differences between communication online and offline. Riz suggests cogently that when meeting people online, one is able to describe oneself in different ways, which means one can begin to imagine and construct a picture of the other's identity. Riz asserts that offline this is not possible, as the identity of the person with whom one is interacting is set within a physical image of the other. This may be an important point. Physical cues such as age, gender, ability and ethnicity are embodied whereas these cues are not invisible but are less obvious online. This provides a space within which one might interact or communicate without being aware of the embodied identity of the other. For example, Newham and NYPO are highly ethnically and culturally diverse places. Riz explains that in school, which one could understand as a physical institutional 'community' for these young people, people are less familiar with racial differences. Indeed, Riz suggests that it is much easier to be friends with someone of the same colour. Being part of the NYPO group means that ethnicity is not so much of an issue: NYPO, to Riz, is about doing something - learning, communicating, information and knowledge transfer so one 'gets along with people'. Ethnicity, to Riz, is thus not an issue in NYPO.

### KASHAN

Kashan is 13 and, in the period of the research, had been a member of NYPO for just over three months and is Riz's brother. According to Kashan, before joining NYPO his English was not particularly good and he had very limited IT skills. Since his family purchased a computer for their home, Kashan has significantly improved his communication, language and IT skills. Kashan asserts that being part of NYPO has made this improvement possible as he has to communicate and interact with other members of NYPO through typing. Certain activities have aided in his development of communication and language skills, such as content authoring and design for websites as well as having to read the articles and the messages 'posted'<sup>12</sup> on the general mailing list and the NYPO website.

### FRANKIE

Frankie is one of the most articulate and active members of NYPO. He is an ambitious 16 year old who has designs on a career in media. Frankie has lived all his life in Newham with his father who is an unemployed musician. His parents are divorced and his mother lives in North London. Frankie asserts that the main aim of NYPO is to make links and connections between young people in schools

<sup>11</sup> Instant messaging is a form of email but it appears instantaneously on another user's computer screen. America Online and ICQ offer the most popular instant messaging programmes which are free to download from the internet. The programmes usually have added functionality such as the ability to enter a private chatroom and also the ability to SMS text message a mobile phone.

<sup>12</sup> 'Posting' is Internet language for sending a message to an email mailing list, chat room or a message (or Bulletin) board.

across the borough of Newham and to create an online community for those in Newham - to create a 'community feeling'. Frankie seems to sense that there is a need for a kind of space/place/community as NYPO for the young people of Newham. He suggests that NYPO provides people a space in which to 'unleash their creativity' and to 'get to grips with life'. Frankie feels that people are able to talk without so many inhibitions online and indeed he has made many friends and gained a great deal of confidence being part of such a 'community'. He has also learned how to chair and organise meetings for the Executive Committee. The main point, Frankie suggests, is that he has had the opportunity that did not exist before to communicate, connect and form relationships with different people through NYPO. NYPO has not only facilitated this connection in his eyes, but is also the place where such articulations of these relationships, connections, differences and creativity can be reproduced, represented and projected into global spaces.

### **BECKY/BREEZE**

Becky/Breeze, 14, is a slight girl for her age and is extremely creative. She is very interested in music and plays the guitar, but she is also interested in many aspects of popular culture. However, she despises 'coolness' and Boy Bands and these opinions are expressed clearly and quite forcefully on her websites which she has created. Breeze/Becky enjoys creative writing, being a key member of the Brightstar list which is a fantasy world in the form of a mailing list. There are three other members of the list who construct a narrative and characters within the 'world'. At one NYPO Executive Committee Meeting, she was carrying cards with characters names and biographies written out in detail. She carried them around in order to familiarise herself with the 'characters'.

### **IBRAR**

Ibrar, 17, is an extremely motivated and entrepreneurial sixteen year old who lives in East Ham and attends Langdon School. He carried his mobile phone with him constantly and appears more mature than his age. He has been a member of NYPO for nearly a year. Ibrar wanted to get involved with some kind of social group in Newham and saw the advert for NYPO in the Newham Recorder. As he wanted to learn about the Internet, NYPO appeared to be the ideal type of group to join. Ibrar very much enjoys the 'business' side of the Internet and had started his own business building computers from parts which he purchases over the Internet, mainly from auction sites. Ibrar has built his own computer which he uses to access NYPO at home. Ibrar's vision for NYPO is for the expansion of NYPO with members from all over the world. He is keen to point out that there are already people who leave messages on the notice board from different parts of the world, something which he considers to be an extremely positive aspect of NYPO.

**RHAMA**

Rhama, 17, came to live in Newham with relatives after escaping from Somalia. She witnessed the shooting of her best friend in Somalia and has written a moving account of her experiences there. She is a gentle quiet girl who is very concerned for the well-being of other members of NYPO. She has been on the residential trips that the group have had and has found them very helpful. Although a quiet member of NYPO online, she expresses herself through her art and her writing which is evident on the NYPO website. She prefers to meet NYPO members off-line, face-to-face before she can communicate comfortably with them online. However, online communication has helped her with her language and communications skills. She also contends that she has gained more confidence by talking to people online and by being a member of such a group.

**Forming self identities**

The first level provided a brief resume of the characteristics of the entities or individuals who are carrying cyberspace culture. In other words, the characteristics of those involved with NYPO who are producing and reproducing on and offline social relations. This section examines the ways in which these entities form their identities through narratives, story telling and interactions online as well as offline.

Identity formation and the practices and processes through which these identities are constructed as well as the ways in which these senses of selves are presented and represented is an important aspect of identity in general. Yet, the ways in which these aspects are influenced by interaction online or in cyberspace might differ. Hakken asks, for instance, whether entities move from biological to mechanistic metaphors in constructing their identities, or whether the qualities attributed to others in cyberspace change. In general, Hakken asks, are the ways in which identities in cyberspace are constructed different from the constructions offline.<sup>13</sup>

***Introducing selves***

Generally, members of NYPO are recruited by the youth leader and through the web authoring courses which he runs. Everyone who takes part of the course is automatically a member. Other members are recruited through publicity leaflets and through word of mouth in existing member's schools. When new members join, they are encouraged to 'introduce' themselves on the General Mailing list. These usually take the form of a few

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<sup>13</sup> Hakken (1999), 8

lines written in fairly simple language. What is also evident is that each of the new members locate themselves geographically as well as in terms of identity - what they like and do not like. One main way of locating themselves is to state which school or College in the Borough they attend. Even through this, one can gain an idea that the members are from very different parts of Newham. Those introducing themselves online also tend to express which characters in popular culture they like or dislike as a further way of identifying who they are:<sup>14</sup>

hi guys

my name is nadia ahmed. i'm 17 years old and i go to newham college. i like reading writing surfing the net and wathing t.vi enjoy watching dawsons creek.<sup>15</sup>

Hello i am Carlton John-Lewis aged 11 I go Brampton Manor And i like playing football, hockey, cricket. I also like playing on computers.<sup>16</sup>

Hello my name is Bradley Albany I'm 11 years old and in september I'm going to cumberland secondly school. I love wrestling and my favourite wrestler is Stone Cold Steve Austin and I love Britney Spears because I think she is fit and pretty and fine and this girl in my class thinks the undertaker is fine but I think she is dumb.<sup>17</sup>

My name si Naira and i am 11 years old but 12 this December. I go to Lister school and i am in year 7. I like to read and play sports. I also watch Tv and my favourite programmes are Rugrats, Sabrina The Teenage Witch and Buffy The Vampire Slayer. I like to work on my computer that's why after learning how to send an email and HTML (from my brother Rizwan) I made my own webpage which is about my favourite TV programmes. I don't have Buffy yet because i didn't have time, but i will in the future.<sup>18</sup>

hello my name is matthew chan, i'm new to nyp online my hobbies are playing computer cycling swimming and best of all T.V! i live in beckton with my mum and three sisters no brothers!(i'm the only boy) when i grow up i want to be a computer programmer.<sup>19</sup>

Hey,I'm Tehreem,i'v just joined the group last week. I really do NOT know what to talk about.We'll I'll just talk about my hobbies,interest's. First all i'll let you know about my hobbies which are that i love sport.My favourite game's are Baseball,Basketball,Vollyball, ice-skating,Cricket and Mountain climbing etc. I love watching horror movie's,ONLY the one's which are really scary. My interest's are reading book's about the past and especially Islam(my religion).I am also interested in trying to solve out some really weird mystories.<sup>20</sup>

Usually the main actors in the group will then welcome the new members and ask them further questions about themselves. This can be seen as a starting point for the new members from which they can begin to explore ways of communicating in the off-line

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<sup>14</sup> NOTE: all typographic errors in the quotes throughout the next two chapters have been left uncorrected. This is how the participants posted. Additionally, online names are used with the participants' permission.

<sup>15</sup> Nadia *NYPOnline*\* introduction 17 Jun 1999

<sup>16</sup> Carlton *NYPOnline*\* introduction 23 Jun 1999

<sup>17</sup> Bradley, *NYPOnline*\* 14 Jul 1999

<sup>18</sup> naira *NYPOnline*\* Hello Everybody! 18 Nov 1999

<sup>19</sup> matthewchan *NYPOnline*\* introduction 24 Nov 1999

<sup>20</sup> tehreem *NYPOnline*\* introduction 29 Sep 1999



community. If there are any common likes or dislikes, usually the other members will highlight them as a way of reassuring the new member.

Tehreem Aftab <tehreem1984@yahoo.co.uk> wrote:

>Hey,

>I'm Tehreem,i'v just joined the group last week.

Hello and welcome...

>I really do NOT know what to talk about.

You're not the only one!

>We'll I'll just talk about my hobbies,interest's. First all i'll let you know about my hobbies which are that i love sport.My favourite game's are Baseball, Basketball, Vollyball, ice-skating, Cricket and Mountain climbing etc. I love watching horror movie's,ONLY the one's which are really scary.

Which ones are those?

I have never been scared by a horror movie in my life. Maybe I'm watching the wrong films.

>My interest's are reading book's about the past and especially Islam (my religion).I am also interested in trying to solve out some really weird mystories.

What sort of mysteries?<sup>21</sup>

Hoang Truong <hoangtruong87@hotmail.com> wrote:

>Hello!

Hi! I'm Becky, 13...

>my name is Hoang and I am gonna tell you all about me. I am 11 and a half years old and I go to Little Ilford School.

So do a lot of other people on here.

>My favourite wrestler is Goldberg and he says to millennium man Sid Vicious "You're Next Vicious!" and that's on WCW Nitro and Thunder.

>I love drinking Sunny Delight It's the best ever!. Mashed Potatoes make me sick!

Yeah... I like jacket potatoes better.

> But I like Burgers and Chips. My favourite pop star is Jordan Knight

Is he the one from New Kids On The Block?

\*>and favourite pop group Northern Line. Every Wednesday & Thursday I go to Beckton Globe to write webpages

Have you got a website? If so, where?

> and send my e-mails to famous stars of the world.

...like who?

>On Saturday 20th November I am gonna have a birthday party, I will give Invitations to my friends at the Globe

Have a great party then.<sup>22</sup>

In the above example, one can see how Becky tries to engage Hoang in a discussion about his likes and dislikes. One of the problems is that some of the younger members like Hoang have not yet learned to continue a narrative in this different type of medium and communication style, where emails may not be read for a week. There are, though, attempts to ensure that members do not feel intimidated by this communicative style. Below, for example, Becky attempts to encourage Kelly who seems reluctant to write her introductory email. Becky additionally raises a point of 'netiquette' (online etiquette) regarding the use of caps lock. The use of caps lock is considered to be the equivalent of shouting.

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<sup>21</sup> Becky NYPOne\* introduction 29 Sep 1999

<sup>22</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* introduction 30 Sep 1999

Kelly Wall <kellywall7@hotmail.com> wrote:

>hello group my name is kelly I am a new member. I am not a very good writer

So? We have all sorts of people here! Sum peopl cant spel, some people don't seem to know how to do capital letters and some people have their keyboards eternally stuck on CAPS LOCK. It's what you say that matters, not the way you say it.

>but gavin is sitting with me and making me do this.

Well done Gavin, I can't make anyone join NYP Online although I have tried...

>I am 11 years old and my friends say i am a good friend

That \*is\* good.

>and i am funny,

We need some funny people here...

>but i think i am a div. thats all for now. I'll write again next week

>from kelly<sup>23</sup>

Some introductory postings take the form of brief biographies of a member. This provides the rationale for being a member of NYPO, especially as in the example below where the individual had previously lost touch the group.

Hello to everyone at NYP, this is Arti Bhardwaj and I have rejoined NYP. Well I'm 17 years old and I am studying at Epping Forest College, *I wanted to join again because I wanted to learn about what Newhams youth want to achive such as building a good and friendly relationship and making friend through this web site.* Well my interests are creative arts and drama and I am at the moment having second thoughts of leaving college and joining drama school. I am mostly based at Manor Parks Froud Centre in a womens youth project which is held on Tuesday evenings, this is organised by Shaidha and at the moment we are working on a film, we have crurently finish the script if you are interested in taking part why not come in.<sup>24</sup> [emphasis added]

Evidently, particularly in the example above, there is a sense that NYPO does provide a way of 'making friendships' and this is clearly viewed positively. Indeed, it might be suggested that this is why young people who leave the Borough still want to maintain contact through email. Another reason for Arti to re-join the group, (s)he suggests, is because (s)he is keen on using new media as an outlet for his/her creativity. Sometimes however, just a simple reassuring welcome message is extended which encourage the new members to 'join in the community spirit'. Part of this community spirit is viewed as participating in the mailing list and not 'lurking'. In other words, being part of a community, to some members, implies taking part and contributing in some ways in the discussion.

Hello to all of the people who have posted introductions in the last few weeks, this is Becky. Welcome to NYP Online and we hope you join in the community spirit. Hello also to all you people who have been hanging around and reading the emails, but never said anything. Come in and join us, we won't bite your head off ;-) Send a message now!<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* introduction 13 Oct 1999

<sup>24</sup> Arti NYPOne\* Hello 16 Oct 1999

<sup>25</sup> Becky NYPOne\* Newbies and lurkers 2 Jul 1999

Often members will respond to new members postings by directing them to their websites, particularly if there are some common factors which might be shared and appreciated. This also serves as a way of providing new members with a useful and familiar starting point for exploring the global spaces of the Internet. For instance:

Hi I'm Hannah

I really like the Internet and I love the programs F.R.I.E.N.D.S and Buffy the Vampire Slayer I go to Brampton Manor secondary school I really like animals, I like hanging out with my Friends one of my friends is nicola she is great, Me and Nicola are setting up a problems page.<sup>26</sup>

Hi Hannah,

Welcome to NYP Online. There are a lot of Buffy fans on this list (well, me, Naira and Gavin so far) and I've got a website called Buff Stuff (<http://www.buffstuff86.cjb.net>) As for "Friends", Rizwan has a very good and very popular site called Friendstastic (<http://www.friendstastic.cjb.net>). I am not a Friends fan but have to admit his website is great. We are also getting quite a few new members on the list - so you are not alone. Tell me the address of your problem page when you've finished setting it up, and maybe you could even include it in our online magazine...<sup>27</sup>

This not only introduces new members to information sources and the interesting sites they might enjoy, but also of the existing NYPO members' websites. These sites are important for expressing the kind of 'selves' that the individual members wish to present to others. Their websites, it could be argued, are types of advertisements for their 'selves'. Again, it is common for young people to draw on elements of popular culture to construct the 'selves' which they want to present.

Occasionally, messages are posted to the mailing list from members who may have been silent for a while. Usually this is because they have been on holiday or because they have left the Borough. Again this is a way of locating individuals geographically. They still feel it important however to maintain their social networks with the locality of Newham.

Hi everyone it's Shanell,

I'm in Ghana loving the people, the food, the country and everything. I just hope everyone is having a happy and productive summer.<sup>28</sup>

Hi everybody,

I have started going to Queen Mary's and Westfield College (QMW)(University of london). I started on the 22nd September 1999. I am currently on Induction period as my lectures are to be started on the 27th September 1999 where all the nitty gritty stuff starts. Origanally I applied and Imperial College for BSc Computer Science and Mathematics as a combined honours degree but they rejected me as I had quite bad results. My insurance offer was QMW for BSc Computer Science and Mathematics. This course was rejected as well but my application form was forwarded to the mathematics department as my grade to Maths was better than any other subjects. therefore the offered me a place for BSc Mathematics and Computing. I was over the moon that I had at least got a place at a university with a good degree choice.<sup>29</sup>

On Thu, 23 Sep 1999 07:52:05 -0700 (PDT), Arif Ali said:

<sup>26</sup> Hannah NYPOne\* new member 2 Dec 1999

<sup>27</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* new member 3 Dec 1999

<sup>28</sup> Shanell NYPOne\* Greetings from Ghana 25 Aug 1999

<sup>29</sup> Arif NYPOne\* I'm back but where am I 24 Sep 1999

>Hello guys I have started university now therefore I will be able to answer any e-mails I am sorry that I wasn't to answer any queries in the meantime.

Hi Arif. How are you doing? What is university like?<sup>30</sup>

To some extent, it could be argued that 'place' is not important for email contact. Wherever one is located physically, one's email address does not necessarily have to change, particularly if it is a web-based email address. However, place does matter to the individual members in terms of where they are and what they are doing and it is clear they wish to share that and maintain a connection with other members.

### Identity

This is perhaps one of the most significant themes for this research. It encompasses politics of gender, place, age, sexuality, image and ethnicity. Often discussion about such issues overlaps into disagreement and conflict. Typically, discussion on identity is initiated by an issue which has been raised in three different ways:

- from a discussion which has taken place in an chatroom external to the NYPO community;
- from an encounter with someone who is not a member of the NYPO community off-line;
- from an issue which has been raised in another medium e.g. newspaper or magazine article.

In some cases, the issue of identity is raised at random. In one instance below for example, Becky changed her name to Haeli. She wanted to adopt the persona of her 'favourite character' in the online soap that Riz, Gavin, Frankie and herself were writing. This was short-lived however, and she soon changed her name back to Becky or Breeze. She uses the two names Becky and Breeze variously and sometimes whichever she chooses reflects the tone of her posting.<sup>31</sup>

A large part of the attraction for many people of communicating online is identity play.<sup>32</sup> This is evident across ages, genders and sexualities and many have researched this idea,

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<sup>30</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOonline\* Hi I am back 24 Sep 1999

<sup>31</sup> She uses 'Breeze' as her website is called 'Breeze Domain'.

<sup>32</sup> See Turkle (1995)

particularly in the early years of the World Wide Web.<sup>33</sup> Becky is a very creative girl who very much enjoys chatrooms and identity play. She has however experienced some amount of alienation and this in part is due to her reluctance to 'conform' offline. She is a petite, quietly spoken girl off-line and this persona contrasts quite strikingly with her online personae and this is evidenced by her homepages.<sup>34</sup> Online, she usually calls herself 'Breeze' and on AOL instant messaging, she is Silverbeam Australis. Becky (Breeze) writes:

Over a year ago now, I wrote my first website. The best part of it was called the "Anti-Cool Site" - an attack on the "in crowd". Two websites later I decided to delete the old one. But, a few days before it was deleted - I received a message on the NYP Online mailing list. Gavin Sealey (the responsible adult behind NYP Online) told me that someone had seen the old website and written an insulting message on the NYP Online bulletin board. Intrigued, I connected to the Internet and had a look. The message was from someone who called herself Steph. She said, among other things, that I was "encouraging people to act like geeks" and "f\*\*\*ing losers" and that my website was "harmful". The unspoken demand behind the message was "Take it off the internet NOW. Or else." I immediately blasted her with a mixture of insults, arguments and rude comments - I don't like people or-elsing me, even unspokenly - before deciding what to do. I would still delete the old website, Anti-Cool Site and all, but... Provoked, I spent many hours at the keyboard, updating the ancient "Anti-Cool Site" to beam it up to Breeze Domain. The result? The Secrets of Status. The message? Don't provoke me - I'm afraid I have a sweet tooth for revenge...<sup>35</sup>

This 'anti-cool' site was important to Becky, and is shown below.

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<sup>33</sup> See for example, Turkle (1995); Regan Shade (1996); Stone (1991)

<sup>34</sup> See URL:

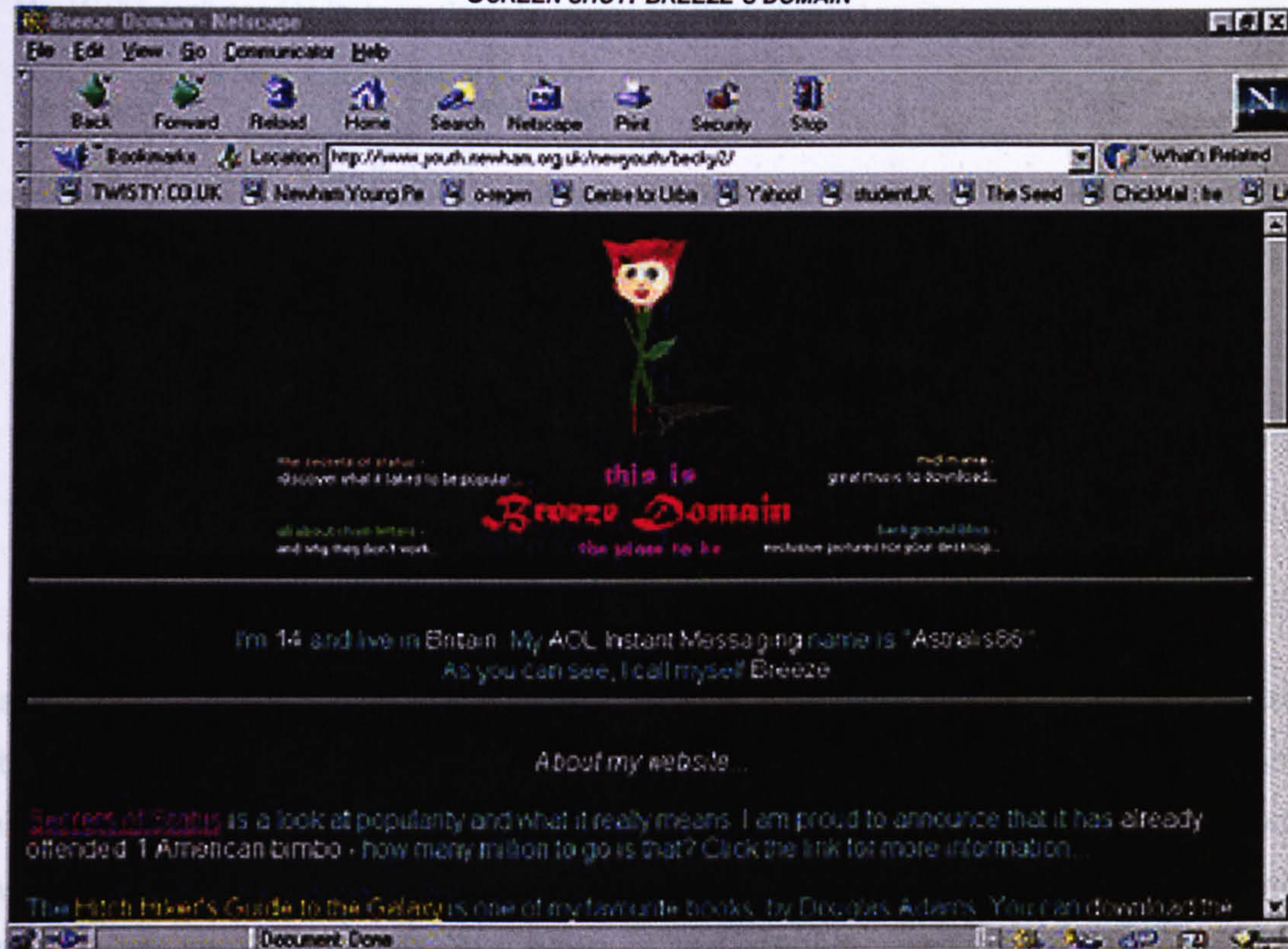
<http://www.youth.newham.org.uk/newyouth/becky2/>

<sup>35</sup> Taken from Breeze (1999) The Secret of Status URL:

<http://www.youth.newham.org.uk/newyouth/becky2/secret.htm>

Just a conversation that I had with a friend, lately. For security reason, I will name my friends Bob.  
 Bob: What's up?  
 Me: Sky's up, birds're up, phones are working.  
 Bob: Don't try to be clever with me.

FIGURE 8.02  
SCREEN SHOT: BREEZE'S DOMAIN



Online and through this website, she was able to express her dislike of conformity in young people's lives and the pressures of peer groups. However she expressed this on her site, it was in a way which would have been more difficult off-line. She has created the space to broadcast her identity and the elements of popular culture and everyday social experiences that she rejects.

Additionally, a valuable lesson was learned when someone outside the NYPO group posted a message on the NYPO message board regarding Becky's site, as the quote above explains. She had to learn how to negotiate this conflict. Although she replied 'with a mixture of insults, arguments and rude comments', she did re-write the site, but in a way which was equally as confrontational.

As it is the most ethnically diverse boroughs in London, there is a high awareness of the Often a member will recount and share a conversation that he or she had off-line in the form of a script for others to comment on. For instance:

Hey!

Just a conversation that i had with a friend, lately: (for security reason, i will name my friends Bob)  
 Bob: What's up?  
 Me: Sky's up, birds're up, planes are sometimes up...  
 Bob: Don't try to be clever with me!  
 Me: Well i don't need to try to be clever because i am clever, hence I am in all top groups.  
 Bob: So you still have that website of yours?  
 Me: Which one? a, b, c, d, y, x??? Which one?  
 Bob: You know... that FRIENDS one?  
 Me: ooh, oooooohh. Yeah that one.  
 Bob: (getting mad now) WELL HOW IS IT DAMN IT!  
 Me: Oh he is fine. How's you brother?  
 Bob: Stop changing the subject, so you have many websites heh?  
 Me: That's nothing compared to my furute plans. I am planning to refurbish my Dragon Ball one, make a new Islam website, make a new Mystery/murder website, finish rashids.co.uk, start & finish my Homepage, help out with the Stratford Circus.... (he cuts me off)  
 Bob: You know KitKat?  
 Me: ...huh? What...?  
 Bob: TAKE A BREAK!!!!!! (he walks off)  
 Me: ...huh? What...?

Stupid, isn't it?<sup>36</sup>

This kind of posting is a type of rhetorical message. The need to express Riz's experience that day and to share the experience is evident but a reply is not necessarily expected. What this kind of posting does is seek a kind of public legitimisation of his online activities. Obviously, some NYPO members experience slander off-line about their online activities. This does not imply that NYPO is a group of 'like-minded community' offering an escape from the realities of off-line life such as slander and criticism. It just suggests that there is a need for identity-affirmation from the group - affirming what one does online is part of what one's identity, part of one's 'self' and a legitimate part of their everyday lives.

In his work, Abbott argues that for many young users the Internet is not so much an alternative postmodern world, as Turkle would assert, but a place where there can be respite and where sensitive issues might be explored in comparative safety, allowing for 'complementarity' and not 'alterity'.<sup>37</sup> NYPO do indeed utilise the technocultural lifeworld which they are producing as a place in which to discuss 'sensitive' issues which they encounter in their everyday lives. Some of these issues are explored below.

### ***"John Smith, Imran Patel and Mr Khan": cultures, ethnicities & identities***

'Race' and ethnicity are important aspects in the everyday lifeworlds of Newham's youth. As it is the most ethnically diverse boroughs in London, there is a high awareness of the

<sup>36</sup> Riz *NYPOonline*\* *Stupid...* 18 Nov 1999

<sup>37</sup> C Abbott (1998) 'Making Connections: young people and the Internet' in Sefton-Green (1998), 97

conflicts and differences that exist between individuals and groups in the borough. One might argue the issue of ethnicity cannot be examined in isolation, outside of other issues. For example, urban deprivation is often unproblematically associated with areas of high-density ethnic populations. This is not necessarily helpful however and there are many other issues which influence whether an urban area experiences racism or poverty. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that there are tensions on the general mailing list regarding such issues of ethnicity. The issue of 'ethnicity' though, tends to be discussed along with other issues of identity politics such as sexuality or religion. Often ethnicity is discussed with reference to sporting events. The question might be asked whether discussion and conflict over ethnicity on NYPO lead to any changes in perception or prejudice about colour and culture.

Dwyer suggests that theorisations about ethnicity are subject to an appreciation of how all identities are articulated out of 'particular places, histories and experiences'.<sup>38</sup> 'New ethnicities' which emerge through the multiple interconnections, through which different cultures are translated, can be represented in different spaces of youth culture.<sup>39</sup>

The cultural construction of new ethnic identities thus becomes a process through which differences are engaged with and new forms of representation are produced.<sup>40</sup>

There is an awareness of not only the differences between 'communities' and cultural or ethnic groups within the borough, but also differences within the NYPO group. However, as one respondent noted, 'NYP... when it comes to race it's not involved in it - just skills, imagination and creativity'.<sup>41</sup> It could be argued that there is awareness among the NYPO members of differences - ethnic and cultural - mainly because of institutionalised experiences of community through schooling, and through their everyday experiences of living in Newham. So, it might be argued that NYPO members are engaging with differences and indeed are producing new forms of representation through their technocultural lifeworld. Part of the construction of ethnicity is in the labelling and ways in which ethnic differences are articulated:

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<sup>38</sup> C Dwyer (1998) 'Contested identities: challenging dominant representations of young British Muslim women' in Valentine & Skelton (1998), 51

<sup>39</sup> Dwyer explains this through Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy's use of the concept 'diasporic cultures' which they use in turn to examine intercultural exchanges and the identities produced from those exchanges.

<sup>40</sup> Dwyer (1998), 51

<sup>41</sup> RR, 1999



I can't really speak about Newham but in Waltham Forest it's 'to each his own' the same goes for college actually. Personally I don't think it's a problem, Asians stick with Asians Blacks stick with Blacks but in the classroom everything is cool. I prefer the company of my own, not just black people or African people but Ghanians. When I want to talk about Ghana Independence day and my celebrations, that's a one-way conversation with John Smith or Imran Patel (Notice the deliberate name stereotypes). But it's cool to mix with other ethnic groups, as long as we can relate to something: a lot of Asian Teenagers listen to 2Pac and Dr.Dre. I think with adults it's the same, when my mum calls someone, it's usually a friend that speaks her home language. But when she goes to the local convenience store (another deliberate stereotype) she has a good old natter with Mr. Khan. Really and truly I move with about 13 people that I went primary and secondary school with all of which I know have got my back if there's trouble. I used to move with an Asian boy from primary but as we got older he started going off with his Asian friends which only left me to do the same (all of the above 13 are Black or part black). However we are still good friends speak over the phone and link up every now and again.<sup>42</sup>

Kalai articulates racial social relations in a way which might be considered as, in some senses, exclusionary. Nonetheless, this is Kalai's everyday experience of ethnic relationships, connections and differences. It is unproblematic in Kalai's eyes, to prefer the company of other Ghanians. This is not related to essentialist notions of ethnicity based on colour, but is an understanding based on culture. Kalai emphasises that what is important is to have something in common which people can relate to and very often this is cultural aspects such as national celebrations and language. Kalai highlights the heterogeneity of ethnic groups in his borough and this contradicts the idea of a 'collective racial identity' which is often promoted by those who live outside low income urban areas, such as Newham.<sup>43</sup> Cultural studies contend that an anti-essentialist approach to ethnicity and indeed other aspects of human identity and social relations such as sexuality, can be achieved through the concept of difference.<sup>44</sup> Although McRobbie suggests that there is a lack of clear understanding of what these different identities look like, how they are lived and experienced in everyday lives through institutional frameworks, Kalai's posting clearly shows how he experiences 'different, youthful subjectivity' across ethnic social relations. Kalai recalls two parties organised at his College on by the group called Another Black Creation (ABC) and the other held by ENVY.<sup>45</sup>

I attended neither so I speak as a neutral but I heard that the Asian governed ENVY party was jam-packed but the Black Governed ABC party was a shambles with a turnout of only the organisers. I suppose you can guess why being as the college's ethnic diversity is 90% Asian

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<sup>42</sup> Kalai Atiga-Atando Re: NYPOne\* *Sectarianism and Racism* 23 May 2000

<sup>43</sup> See the examples given in Wyn & White (1997), 62-64

<sup>44</sup> A McRobbie (1994) 'Different, youthful, subjectivities: towards a cultural sociology of youth' *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London & New York: Routledge) 186

<sup>45</sup> Kalai gives no indication what ENVY stands for.

and 10% Other, quite obviously the college majority isn't interested in Black music which angered a lot of people.<sup>46</sup>

Kalai points to how this highlights the experiences of different subjectivities which are organised around colour and culture. Importantly, though, it also illustrates how vital popular culture like certain styles of music govern many of the experiences of racial identity and 'different, youthful subjectivity' in the UK.

McRobbie makes an interesting reference to Hewitt's study of interracial relationships between male youths in South London.<sup>47</sup> Hewitt's research showed that once friendships and relationships move beyond the institutional concepts of relationships and community, and into the more delineated social spaces of adulthood and employment, such interracial friendships become very strained. Indeed, where white outnumber black young males, their language becomes more overtly racist. When black outnumbers white, racial aggression is constrained.<sup>48</sup> The whole language of racism and race relations is very complex in Newham. Frankie's posting suggests that perhaps the inter-racial social relations Hewitt's observations in 1986 have evolved. In the examples below, Frankie and MissyLix address the issue of language and race. Frankie suggests that young people in Newham would just 'get on with it and bond' if they were not constantly exposed to issues of racism through educational material and that 'the constant reminder of racism forces you to scrutinise any inter-racial friendships or feuds'.<sup>49</sup> However, his view of 'different, youthful subjectivity' across ethnic social relations as a white youth differs from Kalai's experiences as a black youth:

I think it is time now to just forget about racism and the differences between 'black man and white man' and start allowing ourselves to look at people for who they are, as comes naturally. Anti-racism laws and procedures should certainly be followed through where racist incidents exist, but not forced down the throats of everyday people. Most people I know are just bored of the anti-racism thing, it has been done so much. In fact there is even a backlash against this, with racist terms being turned on the head for jokey, friendly meanings (though you have to be careful), as is the trend for youth slang (e.g good/bad).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kalai Atiga-Atando *Re: NYPOne\* Sectarianism and Racism* 23 May 2000

<sup>47</sup> R Hewitt (1986) *White Talk Black Talk: inter-racial friendship and communication amongst adolescents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) cited in McRobbie (1994), 188

<sup>48</sup> Hewitt (1986), 189

<sup>49</sup> Frankie *Re: NYPOne\* Sectarianism and Racism* 08 Jun 2000

<sup>50</sup> Frankie *Re: NYPOne\* Sectarianism and Racism* 08 Jun 2000

MissyLix carries this theme of language further and argues that 'some argue that it is the primitive urge to hate all those which are different or that u can't understand'.<sup>51</sup> She does, however, suggest that this is no excuse for racism since living in a 'multicultural society' means that there is a great deal of knowledge about other cultures. She goes on to problematise the issue of language of racism:

On the use of the word 'nigga' and 'paki', I think that it is degrading all those who have been the victim of racism, and their plights, particularly slavery. The reason it is used is understandable - it is almost to make fun of the original use of the word. People don't seem to realise that racism works both ways: there are a lot of black on white, Asian on black, black on Asian etc problems, with people feeling the need to be overly aggressive towards other races. It is the result of years of racism within this society. The worst, in my opinion is the way races turn against each other: I am Nigerian (black) so I have first hand experience of this. There are all sorts of words to describe someone as "dark-skinned" within the black community: from blick to black attack! It is ridiculous that people who are dark skinned are penalised for the way they look by people continually complaining about racism.<sup>52</sup>

It is clear that differences, ethnic or cultural for instance, are questioned and discussed on the list. MissyLix in the example above identifies the problem of racism which is not only white on black, but black on black. This kind of racism highlights differences as meaning much more than 'different from white'. Differences are multiple and complex. This is illustrated in another thread on the list, seven months previous to the discussion above, which was particularly insightful and pointed to not only the politics of whiteness, but also to the politics of identity more generally:

WHY IS IT that although black people are encouraged to be "proud to be black", when a white person says they're "proud to be white" they are branded a racist?  
Also, women can be "proud to be female" but if men are "proud to be male" they are chauvinist pigs?  
And we have people - mostly women - who are "proud to be fat", but if another woman is "proud to be thin" they are pandering to stereotype?  
Why can't people be proud of whatever they are? IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.  
"Cause what I am is what I am, and what you are, oh what you are..."  
Emma Bunton's new single comes out just @ the right time<sup>53</sup>

Becky's posting here is articulated in a way that might not be possible off-line. As mentioned above, she is a quietly spoken girl who is quite disconnected physically from her NYPO peers, except for when there are organised trips away or committee meetings. No one on the mailing list attends the same school as Becky and her movements and social life is relatively structured by her parents, who are divorced. So, online she can express her thought eloquently to an audience to which she would not have access off-

<sup>51</sup> MissyLix0: Re: NYPOne\* NYP Online article 9 Jun 2000

<sup>52</sup> MissyLix0: Re: NYPOne\* NYP Online article 9 Jun 2000

<sup>53</sup> Becky NYPOne\* Pride - when is it a Deadly Sin? 12 Nov 1999

line. In this way, the NYPO space opens up for her a space for reflection and a type of 'thinking aloud'.

So, it is becoming clear already that conflict, difference and 'otherness' is a key issue for young people within NYPO, particularly when difference is related to ethnicity. Here is where experiences of everyday lifeworlds, which overlap into and are shared online, become evident. These are not 'like-minded' individuals, but youthful, different subjectivities whose experiences of ethnicity and racism in their borough differ quite clearly. Yet, sharing these differences online within NYPO opens up the space for the members to engage with such differences in ways that are restricted in their off-line everyday lifeworlds. Nonetheless, without the experiences off-line, there would be no engagement with these differences online. This is where the subtlety of the technocultural lifeworld which is produced in-between on and off-line spaces and social relations reveals itself. The on and the off-line experiences are mutually contingent.

#### ***"Adam and Steve and Jenny and Jane": sexualities & identities***

Sexuality is as part of the politics of representation as ethnicity. As with ethnicity, there are ways in which sexuality as part of youth identity is represented in essentialist ways. Giroux asserts that it is through sexuality that 'teenagers' are defined:<sup>54</sup>

Within the new representational politics of youth, the body is increasingly being commodified and disciplined through a reactionary, postmodern cultural politics. Within the terrain of such a politics, the struggle over the body and sexuality as a sign becomes as important as the more traditional practices of containing and disciplining the body as a threat to the social order. In part, the new crisis of representation erases the body of youth as a site of resistance, whether expressed through a transgressive sexuality, an appropriation of popular culture, or in the formation of underground cultural formations.<sup>55</sup>

The 'representational politics of youth' of which Giroux talks is about the way in which youth are demonised or criminalised and constructed through representations in popular culture and the media. As an example, Hollywood representations of 'black youth' are tied with class hatred as well as racism in North America.<sup>56</sup> Giroux suggests that a 'crisis' in representations of youth is entrenched in the 'host of complex national and global forces changing the face of the contemporary landscape'.<sup>57</sup> This, of course, echoes the

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<sup>54</sup> Giroux (1998), 32

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 35

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 31

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 30

discourses of the urban and community in the 'global information society' which were discussed in chapter three. This is an important point as it also reverberates in the further forces which serve to exclude and regulate the lifeworlds of young people in a technocultural landscape, discussed in chapter six. Giroux, in his work, tries to offer a progressive representational politics of youth, which allows one to see how 'working class youth' find cultural and social spaces in which to express themselves.<sup>58</sup> This, in a sense, is what the technocultural lifeworld of NYPO attempts. It is a cultural and social space which has been opened up to allow self-expression. It is also a space where the body and embodied identity is fundamentally important, although often unseen. For young people in their everyday lifeworlds, the body is a site of discipline, policing and control across multiple domains, such as school, the street, the shopping centre, as has been discussed in chapter six. In cyberspace, the body is liberated in many senses and spaces are opened up for the politics of the body to be explored. This is particularly salient when what might be considered as delicate or embarrassing issues are raised, particularly those issues which are about the politics of the body. These issues are usually raised in response to the representations of young people which are evident in popular culture and the media, such as the example below.

Sexual orientation is often an issue which young people question, particularly at the age which most of the members are. The difference is the ways in which they ask for opinions online, something which might not be as common off-line due to embarrassment and the problematics of face-to-face communication which some of the members evidently experience. Raising these issues of body politics online is often more comfortable for many of the NYPO members. Some of the members do not have the opportunity to discuss such issues openly off-line, often because of cultural and religious constraints in their everyday lifeworlds. Tolukey opens one discussion on sexuality by referring to an incident which was reported in the tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. Stephen, a much admired pop star from a popular group 'came out' to *The Sun* and its readers. Tolukey asks whether people on the list think his sexuality would contradict his status as a teenage 'heartthrob'. She also asks whether the other NYPO members on the list think that 'being gay is becoming fashionable and so elicits the opinions of other members on this issue.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 34

<sup>59</sup> Benita Adesuyan *NYPOonline\* coming out* 18 Jun 1999

Stephen has been with Boyzone for years and is very close friends with his bandmates. I bet they already knew but decided to keep it secret until Stephen wanted to tell. Even if they didn't know, it shouldn't affect his friendship with the rest of the group. If they kicked him out because he was gay, then millions of teenage worshippers would go off Boyzone. So they wouldn't dare...

**> What do you all think? Do you think he will lose sex appeal, and become less fanciable? Will his sexuality affect the rest of the group?**

It shouldn't...

**> Does it not really matter? Or maybe you think that being gay is becoming fashionable?**

I think it doesn't matter. People should really like pop groups like Boyzone for the music, not because the members are "good looking". If they go off Boyzone because they used to fancy Stephen and don't like him now he's gay, then they were never proper fans anyway.

**> I would like to hear your point of view on gay pop stars.**

Well, they're just like other pop stars, there isn't a special kind of "gay" music or anything. They do have less sex appeal with members of the opposite sex (obviously) but that would mean that they would be judged on the quality of their music instead of on "fanciability". So you could say that gay pop stars are a good thing.<sup>60</sup>

This kind of posting invites the NYPO members to evaluate their opinions in sexuality in general and images of sexuality which they are exposed to through popular culture. The fact that they have more time to express themselves through email communication seems to mean that frivolous comments, which they might make in face-to-face contact, are avoided. As Frankie points out, in school sex education classes, any mention of homosexuality would cause embarrassed laughter. Frankie also suggests that pop music is not about music anymore, but about performing and performers, proposing that appearance and image is highly constructed and fabricated. He notes the visual impacts of performers by bands like 'S Club-7' and the carefully choreographed dance routines that usually accompany these performances. This is an interesting observation in a medium where visual representations are absent - on the general mailing list anyway. He goes on to observe that bands of gay pop stars who 'play' on the camp, gay image are almost conforming to the constructed image of 'gayness' that is prevalent in media representations. He cites Julian Clary, Eddie Izzard as examples and links this to the 'real life' representations in the television docu-soap, Paddington Green. In Paddington Green, one of the 'characters' is a trans-sexual prostitute. He observes that 'it is a strange world out there, but interesting'.<sup>61</sup> So, Frankie clearly exhibits an awareness of 'image construction' in commercial popular music, something that many other NYPO members might not have previously considered. Although many of the members' website content draw on popular culture, this does not mean that these images are consumed passively. On the contrary, they are clearly critiqued and evaluated by the NYPO members.

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<sup>60</sup> Becky Re: NYPOOnline\* coming out 18 Jun 1999

<sup>61</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOOnline\* coming 19 Jun 1999

Interestingly, NYPO are invited to reflect on similar issues by Gavin, the Youth Leader. In this way, they can relate what they have reflectively discussed in the context of popular culture in order to think more deeply about how issues of sexuality are confronted and negotiated in their everyday lives. Even though other members are not participating in the discussion, they may still be 'lurking' and thus being exposed to the discussion of delicate issues. In the next example, Gavin asks for help with his 'homework' as a youth worker. He has been asked to conduct some project work before a training session he has to attend and so asks the NYPO group. He explains the project is about homophobia. He explains what this means and defines heterosexuality, homosexuality and bi-sexuality. Then he proposes some questions for the group to consider, if they wish:

Can you comment on your attitude to the following statements:

- a) "Gay men and a lesbian women have as much right to be respected for their sexual choices as heterosexual men and women"
- b) "The issue of sexuality has been discussed in my school as part of a lesson or lessons"
- c) "The issue of sexuality should not be discussed in schools or youth groups. It should be up to parents to decide whether they want their children to learn about that."
- d) "If a close friend of mine told me that he or she was gay or lesbian I would not want to remain their friend or our friendship would not be so close."
- e) "I don't have anything against gay people but if I heard someone saying something nasty about a gay person I would not object because I wouldn't want people to think I was gay"<sup>62</sup>

This kind of discussion would not be possible or would be highly restricted because of institutionalised context of the classroom. Section 28 states that homosexuality should not be promoted by local authorities thus should not be discussed in schools. Becky/Breeze is the first to reply: she agrees that people have the right to choose their sexuality and that their choices should be 'respected'. Becky responds that this issue was not mentioned at all at her school and that young people should have the right to learn about such issues, whether or not the parents agree. She then cites the example of being in Internet chatrooms and defending gay people. She finds it easier though to do this online as opposed to 'in real life' (IRL).<sup>63</sup> Another response from Tolukey expands on these sentiments, reiterating that sexuality is a human rights issue. She equates homosexuality with racism in terms of difference. In other words, she says that parents should accept that prejudice, whether it be against homosexuality or colour, exists in the everyday lifeworlds of young people and so parents should discuss these issues with young people who need information.<sup>64</sup> Frankie reiterates this too in terms of respecting choices:

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<sup>62</sup> Gavin *NYPOonline\* human sexuality* 20 Sep 1999

<sup>63</sup> Becky *Re: NYPOonline\* human sexuality* 20 Sep 1999

<sup>64</sup> Benita Adesuyan *Re: NYPOonline\* human sexuality* 21 Sep 1999

On Mon, 20 Sep 1999 20:18:17 +0100, Gavin Sealey said:

>a) "Gay men and a lesbian women have as much right to be respected for their sexual choices as heterosexual men and women"

Of course they should, in the same way as anybody has the right to be respected.

>b) "The issue of sexuality has been discussed in my school as part of a lesson or lessons"

No, not really, though it should be. Maybe the class would go wild with ecstatic pleasure at hearing the word, "homo", that they would go bananas, but that doesn't usually stop them. School should help to dispel the myths around gays...

He also recognises the way in which young people need to be informed about sexuality:

Parents might know less about it than teachers, and the issue is not "whether you want your child to learn about it" but "how well you want them to learn". Children know about gay and lesbian people, the playground buzzes with the terms, they know what they do, how they do it, and 'how dirty it is'. Teachers should be giving children the facts and not the fiction which they know. If you don't teach, someone with less knowledge will.<sup>65</sup>

Rather surprisingly, though, Frankie admits that he would be concerned about what others think about him and his sexuality if he were to defend homosexuality. He does 'not really see it as my responsibility to preach ... I would not publicly tell someone that they were being unfair to gay people, as you don't make many friends that way'.<sup>66</sup>

Continuing this narrative, Becky/Breeze retorts to Frankie's opinion and disagrees with him to some extent. She suggests that teachers at her school are perhaps too embarrassed to discuss homosexuality which means that the students become embarrassed. She also suggests that the teachers might be ill informed about the 'facts' and that 'some parents don't want to "corrupt their children's innocence", but as far as we are concerned innocence doesn't exist any more'.<sup>67</sup> She suggests people refer to her theory that everyone at one time will believe that they are homosexual or bisexual. This is a brave theory to propose but clearly Breeze is not concerned about making this statement on the list, in such a space. In reply to the proposition that she would not want to defend a gay person for fear of being considered gay herself, she replies that what she hates is people saying,

that gay people are "unnatural". Yes they are, in the same way as we are \*all\* unnatural. And have been, ever since we left the caves and built our own and better houses out of mud and sticks.<sup>68</sup>

This, once more, is a brave comment for Breeze. In the above quote, she hints at notions of essentialism and identity. She recognises and proposes that identity, such as sexual

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<sup>65</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOne\* human sexuality 24 Sep 1999

<sup>67</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* human sexuality 24 Sep 1999

<sup>68</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* human sexuality 24 Sep 1999



identity, is not fixed and is a social construction. There is nothing 'natural' about the way humans are, whether they choose to prefer same gender relationships or not.

Again, on a third occasion, the issue of sexuality is raised. This time, it is raised by a usually a relatively silent member of the group. In this example, Frankie comments once more.

I wanted to find out about what reactions do people have towards gay people? Because I personally don't think that there is anything wrong with gay people as I have friends that are gay and they are just the same human beings like us, they have two eyes to see and brains, I just don't understand what is wrong with people. It just sometimes really hurts me to hear what people say and think sometimes. let me give you an example, I listen to all sorts of music and don't have favorites, I was just listening to techno music in college and my friend just turned around and said to me, Arti are you gay and I said no! She why are you listening to p... music for . Can't you listen to techno music any more !! Well I'm needed for my girls group project If you have anything to say about what I've just said I'm just a click away<sup>69</sup>

He, like Breeze two months earlier, refers to the social construction of human identity in terms of 'social conditioning' which he suggests is a 'buzz word':

On Tue, 26 Oct 1999 11:02:26 PDT, Arti Bhardwaj said:

>Because I personally don't think that there is anything wrong with gay people as I have friends that are gay and they are just the same human beings like us, they have two eyes to see and brains, I just don't understand what is wrong with people.

I agree. I have nothing against gay people, it's a natural choice. Gay people are often more sensitive than straight men, and more feminine, so I think being gay is allowing people to express emotions that social conditioning (a buzzphrase round these parts) won't let men do.

> It just sometimes really hurts me to hear what people say and think sometimes. let me give you an example, I listen to all sorts of music and don't have favorites, I was just listening to techno music in college and my friend just turned around and said to me, Arti are you gay and I said no!

I know what you mean. People tend to call anyone who's a bit different from the masculine "norm" gay, in an insulting way. Problem is you know that they mean it as an insult, you are not gay, and that homophobia is ripe in youth society, so all you can do is say "NO! Of course not", which kinda says you are against gays.

> why are you listening to p... music for . Can't you listen to techno music any more !! Well I'm needed for my girls group project

I wouldn't have thought that techno music is very gay..<sup>70</sup>

Frank Roberts,

Hi thank you for replying to my letter re: "being gay boy" I thought that I did not exist because you're the only one that replied to the letter thanx alot for sharing your thought.<sup>71</sup>

What is interesting about this exchange is that on the one hand Frankie refers to social conditioning but on the other, uses some 'essentialist' ideas about gay men being 'more sensitive' than 'straight men'. Additionally, although Arti refers to 'Being a Gay Boy', it is not altogether clear what gender Arti is. At the end of the posting, Arti suggests that (s)he

<sup>69</sup> Arti NYPOne\* Being Gay 26 Oct 1999

<sup>70</sup> Frankie: Re: NYPOne\* Being Gay 31 Oct 1999

<sup>71</sup> Arti Re: NYPOne\* Being Gay 05 Nov 1999

has to return to his/her 'girls group project'. Of course, this does not preclude Arti from joining this group if Arti is male, but it does render his/her gendered identity ambiguous. Finally, this shows appreciation of the idea that the technocultural lifeworld is somewhere that provides support for everyday lifeworld problems.

A change of perspective takes place nine months later when some new members join the group. The issue of sexuality in this example becomes associated with other prejudices which men and women encounter, including sexism. The elements that make for emotional or fervent postings and exchanges from the members reflect the different cultures, religions and ethnicities of the various narrators. The issue was raised after Breeze had posted some 'anti-men' jokes on the mailing list. The posting elicited this response from Kalai, who thought that Breeze actually wrote the jokes herself, rather than forwarding the jokes from another email which she had received:

I'll admit you've got a pretty good writing style and I was enjoying the story especially the twist in the tale, until of course the insult to all men. I know it's only a story but that type of thing happens too often for me not to get vex and give one of you femminists a piece of my mind! What I hate the most is how in this world, everybody preaches about equality and that it's a mans world, (i'll admit that there aren't as many boundaries for men as there are for women in a lot of things, especially when it comes to commanding a decent salary) when women are allwed to take the piss. All I ever see is women only this and that, cheaper car insurance for women only, if there was a mens one the media was crucify the company that ever dared to try. Even in my college there's a girls only Common Room, the weak excuse for that? "Every where is the boys Common Room". What rubbish is that? Like girls are banned from walking the corridors, with teachers kicking them out if the're caught loitering by the vending machines.

Is there a boys only canteen? Sports Hall? Dance Studio? NO! Why do girls get to have comfotable chairs, a sound system in a nice quite room. Maybe that ain't such a universal topic and it's down to the college but that's still femminism at work. What the hell is feminsm standing for anyway? The fight for Women to be a Superior gneder? I don't see anyone preaching about Masculism! Certain things just ain't right.<sup>72</sup>

MissyLix joins in the discussion as a type of mediator:

I'm gonna fas' myself up and join in this argument:

- 1) I agree that Becky is wrong for taking out her anger on one boy out on the whole male race. I understand how u feel, but it's nor right.
- 2) When and women, intellectually, are equal. However, if we start going into the specifics, you'll find too many flaws. I could argue that 'cos women have kids they're superior. But dat's blatantly wrong. Men generally have more upperbody strength than women. So are they superior? Dat argument is stupid
- 3) Wots da worth in being homophobic. If one of your close friends said he was gay, would u stop chatting to him? If so, then ur not a real friend, cos ur being friends with someone on the condition of who they sleep with. U may not agree, or understand it, but that doesn't give u the right to pass judgement (or r u God)<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Kalai Re: NYPOne\* Fwd: Perfect email 12 Jun 2000

<sup>73</sup> MissyLix00 Re: NYPOne\* Fwd: Perfect email 19 Jun 2000

This kind of exchange often encourages NYPO members who might usually lurk, to respond to the posting. Toluke, for instance, has a keen interest in the politics of sexuality, gender and sexism and indeed introduced the thread about homosexual pop stars and R n' B music. Toluke suggests that the word 'feminism' is often misunderstood and misrepresented in everyday discourse. Those who profess to be 'feminists' are often considered to be 'men haters' and stereotyped thus as a 'skinheaded, dungaree and DM's wering lesbian'.<sup>74</sup> She offers, instead, three feminisms or what she calls, 'Womanism', borrowed from the work of Alice Walker. The first womanism is a black feminist, the second is a woman who loves other women sexually and non-sexually and the third womanism is characterised by a love of music, spirit, food, struggle, folks, roundness and who loves herself. Toluke goes on to assert:

this sounds to me a great deal less threatening than feminism. I also feel that womanism is not Anti man as is suggested by conventional feminism, but pro woman and focuses on sisterhood. Alice Walker's book "the color purple" is actually a very good example of womanism.<sup>75</sup>

The exchange around the jokes that Breeze posted develops into a discussion about what Breeze feels to be the unnecessary pressure that are placed on women to be 'perfect'. Breeze resents the pressures that she considers women to be under to always 'look good', to be good looking and so on. This very much reflects what she presents on her websites. Ashish engages Breeze further on this issue:

Ashish B <a.k.b@ic24.net> said:

>Okay Becky,

>If you don't mind me saying, the thought of a perfect woman is total crap.

I know this. I KNOW. That's not the problem. It's the men who do believe in a "perfect woman" or something like it, and won't settle for anything less, and put pressure on the women they \*do\* go out with, to \*be\* like this non-existent stereotype - that ARE the problem.

>If women (think they) are perfect why (in your own words) do they spend 3 hours getting ready for a date?

Do I have to spell this out again? WE DON'T THINK WE ARE PERFECT. But so many of us spend 3 hours before a date simply TRYING TO BE - they don't think the man will be impressed otherwise.

>HEY, IF WE ALL HATE THE OPPOSITE SEX LIKE THIS WHY DON'T WE ALL START PUTTING NAIL BOMBS IN EACH OTHER'S CHANGIN ROOMS!!!!

Hey Ashish, no offense meant I'm sure but that's a really stupid, negative and unproductive comment. (NB, I'm not saying YOU'RE stupid. I'm saying THAT COMMENT was stupid. So the anti-insult brigade don't have to chuck me off the list ;-)).<sup>76</sup>

The discussion moves onto narratives of difference and becomes quite complex and hard to follow. Ashish makes a reference to David Copeland, the man who was responsible for

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<sup>74</sup> Benita NYPOne\* WOMANISM 19 Jun 2000

<sup>75</sup> Benita NYPOne\* WOMANISM 19 Jun 2000

<sup>76</sup> Breeze Re: NYPOne\* Perfect Woman? 4 Jul 2000

the bombings in Soho and Brixton. Ashish suggests that NYPO members should not waste their time discussing issues like sexism or the 'perfect woman' when there are people like Copeland with such strong hatred towards homosexuals and ethnic groups. Breeze replies,

You're saying we can never have a light-hearted conversation because there are psychos out there - or something? Or is it more a case of "let's all talk about babies with nails in their skulls, it's a much more interesting subject of conversation"? Anyway, sexism affects us \*all\* which is more than this David Copeland guy does/did.<sup>77</sup>

Breeze then addresses Kalai's comments about difference in relation to men and women. She challenges Kalai about his conception of difference by suggesting that there is nothing wrong with people choosing to be different by liking certain styles of music and clothing or having different beliefs. She contends, however, that women should have to be different from men because they perform a different gender.<sup>78</sup>

>>So... you say it's because they're "going against nature" and not doing what nature (probably God to you) meant them to do? Do you feel the same way about contraception and abortion? And what about the Pill?

If I got a girl preagnant by mistake I could never bring myself to terminating my child. The pill is slightly different, seeing as there is not yet a child. As long as development of the phetus hasn't startrd I think it's alright to terminate.

>>Also, I see how violently you hate gay men - do you feel the same about lesbians?

As I said in an earlier e-mail I don't hate Lesbians (Wonder Why?). Don't ask me though, I can't be botherd for the long answer of explaining the difference and persuading you its not double standards.(Gav explained about the violent thing)

>>what's so different about heterosexual love - apart from the children part?

You tell me. I ain't no expert on love but I know it ain't the same. I cant say more cause I havn't observed gay love in real life but on TV it seems properly tacky and off-key.

>>And the fact that heteros (I'm not saying "straight" - that implies discrimination) can be legally married, though I've seen the divorce rates (1/3 of all marriages) and I'm wondering who wants to get married anyway.

Congratulations Becky you've actualy made me come away from my views and think for a second. Hetra sexual marriges are a shambles, but these days once you reach a certain age corporate and even social success revolve around that happily married, family image. When you think about it gay people (dare I say It) may actualy be very nice people. Considering the sereo type of sensitiveness, which is usualy associated with kindness. The point being that Gay marriges might work, but I'd like to see the success rate statistics for gay marriges. At the end of the day, their marriges could be more successful but they are still weird, unsafe, unconventional, unappealing (could you ever see two men walking hand in hand and say "dont they make a good couple" or "ahh, dont they look sweet".) and ungodly beings.<sup>79</sup>

This opinion is shared by Piccolo who suggests that if homosexuality was 'meant to be' then God would have created Adam and Steve and Jenny and Jane. He also suggests that the human body would have been formed in a different way to allow same gender couples

<sup>77</sup> Breeze Re: NYPOne\* Sexism 4 Jul 2000

<sup>78</sup> Breeze Re: NYPOne\* Fwd: Perfect email 7 Jul 2000

<sup>79</sup> Kalai Re: NYPOne\* Fwd: Perfect email 5 Jul 2000

to procreate.<sup>80</sup> This reveals something about the way in which sex is thought about as a means for procreation and not as an expression of sexuality bound up with issues of identity and selfhood. Again, this is revealed in Kalai's comments above when sexuality is conflated with sex and procreation. Kalai's comments also illustrate a worrying attitude to homosexual relationships, which has been constructed from what he has seen on television. The images he has consumed have clearly produced an idea of homosexuality which is quite removed from everyday lifeworlds.

***"No Scrubs": feminist assertions through cyberculture***

Part of image and prejudice is the debate about women and men and their relative positions in society. This is an issue about which most of the NYPO members are aware, as obviously many of them see these male/female politics played out in their own homes. They also become aware of such issues thorough popular culture, as is the case with homosexuality. The next example highlights a discussion about the 'R 'n' B' (rhythm and blues) bands *TLC* and *Destiny's Child*, both of whom have had success with songs which complain about men:

the R'n'B Revolution? In the last few weeks we have been swamped with singles from streetwise female R'n'B groups - TLC, Destiny's Child and Fierce being only a few of them - and they're ALL having a go at men. Is this a good thing??? (well, yeah, I think it is but who am I to...)<sup>81</sup>

Toluke addresses Becky's question: she likes the genre of R n' B music very much so feels she has the 'right', to contribute to the narrative:

As a big fan of R'n'B music I felt the need to add to Becky's message that women have been having a dig at blokes in their tunes for years only now they are doing it in a more up front way. And yeah, it is a good thing as they are merely telling the truth about SOME men and the way that they behave towards women, the tale of the "scrub" is one that I have personally experienced many times before!<sup>82</sup>

Becky's reply narrates her brother's reaction to the email she is in the process of writing to the list.

Benita Adesuyan <badesuyan@hotmail.com> wrote:  
>As a big fan of R'n'B music I felt the need to add to Becky's message that women have been having a dig at blokes in their tunes for years  
Don't think I haven't noticed that...

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<sup>80</sup> Piccolo RE: NYPOOnline\* Fwd: Perfect email 28 Jun 2000

<sup>81</sup> Becky NYPOOnline\* Have you guys noticed... 16 Aug 1999

<sup>82</sup> Benita Re: NYPOOnline\* Have you guys noticed... 17 Aug 1999

My big brother - 21 - has just seen this email I am writing, over my shoulder, and is yelling at me about how bad the message is in "Bills Bills Bills" (by Destiny's Child) and saying that it's "crap" and "you don't really believe all that!" He has been shouting for 5 minutes continuously, saying stuff like "If I met a girl and she told me she listened to stuff like that, I wouldn't give her NO respect." Isn't that like saying "if you don't pay my bills then get lost" (which is the message of the song) When he finished on Destiny's Child he started in on me about TLC and "No Scrubs". Mum started as well even though she has never even \*heard\* either of the songs. Basically he's telling me that if I like that kind of music I'm "dumb" (his word) Typical male prick. It illustrates perfectly the stuff that TLC and Destiny's Child are going on about - good for them.

P.S. Have you heard the new TLC single, "Unpretty"? I like it...<sup>83</sup>

Gavin then steps into the discussion at this point and suggests that the promotion of aggression, whether it be towards women or men is wrong. To this, Becky reacts quite vehemently to Gavin's thoughts. Becky, though, seems to advocate aggression through words, such as songs, as a type of revenge for the years of oppression that women have suffered. This is a different type of feminism to that which Toluks, for example, advocates (addressed below).

>Seems to me that aggression (verbal or physical) leads to aggression. I'm not surprised that men feel angry and threatened by this though they would be better off just ignoring it. Aren't men and women there to help each other, to be kind, generous and loving?

Where have you been living all your life? I think that if men were kind, generous, loving etc - as some of them are - they'd understand what we are trying to do. The ones who aren't are the ones who respond aggressively, saying "it's crap", "you don't understand what they're on about" and blah blah blah.

(...)

>Putting others down makes some people feel more powerful. It's been traditional in the past for men to do that to women, now it seems women are doing that to men.

Let them know what it's like. About time for us to feel powerful, only a few millennia too late...

> It didn't make men better human beings, it won't make women better human beings.

But it's revenge, isn't it, for what they've done to us.

>Still, aggression can be fun - like a video game. Zap the baddie.

Isn't it better for TLC and Destiny's Child to get up on stage and sing songs about men, than to go out somewhere and beat up the men they are singing about? And isn't it better for young girls and women to listen to "No Scrubs" when they're feeling angry, rather than... etc, etc?<sup>84</sup>

He admits that he has not heard the songs in question, so Becky posts the verses of the TLC song to the list even though Gavin says he does want to hear them. Having read the verses, he supports Becky's view, but not in terms of feminism:

Gavin Sealey <gsealey@globalnet.co.uk> wrote:

>Thanks to Becky for posting the No Scrubs verses. Having read it I can't see what the fuss is about .. people seem to be saying that it is anti-men but it seems to be anti the kind of behaviour no one should have to put up with.

Remember talking about it on the sailing trip? And that's sort of what I've been saying. You really have to \*listen\* or at least \*know\* what they are saying... However the middle section IS a bit out of order:

If you have a car but you're walking (Oh yes son, I'm talking to you)  
If you live at home with your mama (Oh yes son, I'm talking to you)  
If you have a shorty but you don't show love (Oh yes son, I'm talking to you)  
Wanna get with me with no money, oh no,  
I don't want no scrub...

<sup>83</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Have you guys noticed... 18 Aug 1999

<sup>84</sup> BeckyRe: NYPOne\* Have you guys noticed... 19 Aug 1999

("Shorty" is slang for "girlfriend"...)

So that bit is probably what annoys people. Bills Bills Bills is similar. It starts off talking about men who always use their girlfriend's stuff/money/car/whatever, which is okay, and then has a go at them for not paying the bills, which is slightly less okay.

I wonder why they do that? Do they actually not see the difference?<sup>85</sup>

Much that has been written about music and young people has often concentrated on young black people and the expression of their cultural identities through certain styles of music. McRobbie, for instance, sites the example of ragga music which has emerged from the Jamaican dance halls. The sexually explicit language is subverted by the explicit styles of dance and dress styles which women adopt as a 'reply' to the lyrics.<sup>86</sup> In the example above, however, Breeze is appropriating a genre of music not along ethnic axes, but along gendered ones. She interprets the slang used in the lyrics but her concern is with appropriating this R'n'B track as part of her feminist toolkit to resist the sexism and repression of women by men which she feels has been happening for too long. As she suggests, 'it's revenge, isn't it, for what they've done to us'.<sup>87</sup> There is also a sense of 'solidarity' between Tolukey and Breeze, which is expressed through their chosen music styles, and their interpretation of the songs.

### ***Making ourselves @ home: NYPO homepage constructions***

Homepages and websites can be thought of as extensions of different selves which individuals embody. They are also extensions into the global fabric of the information society and cyberspace. Cyberspace is global, large and unknown. Thus, some may feel the need to have a sense of the 'local' in this global information societal fabric. In a sense, homepages and websites provide a familiar and local groundedness. These homepages have a broader function however. They serve as an 'anchor' in the context of a physical place or community that is diverse, but fragmented. As Turkle explains:

On the Web, the idiom for constructing a "home" identity is to assemble a "home page" of virtual objects that correspond to one's interests. One constructs a home page by composing or "pasting" on it words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites on the Internet or the Web. Like the agents in emergent AI [artificial intelligence], *one's identity emerges from who one knows, one's associates and connections*. People link their home pages to pages about such things as music, paintings, television shows, cities, books, photographs, comic strips, and fashion models.<sup>88</sup> [emphasis added]

<sup>85</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Have you guys noticed... 27 Aug 1999

<sup>86</sup> McRobbie (1994), 180-185

<sup>87</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Have you guys noticed... 19 Aug 1999

<sup>88</sup> Turkle (1995), 258

Turkle asserts that homepages are an illustration of new notions of identity as multiple yet coherent. She argues that when identity was defined as rigid and unitary, a particular idea of modernity, it was easier to police that identity and prevent 'deviation' from societal or community norms. Once a more fluid sense of self is accepted, there is more capacity for acknowledging diversity and difference, less likelihood of exclusion of those who 'do not fit'.<sup>89</sup>

The look and feel of homepages is important for the group or individual which the homepage represents. Some are critical of homepages and perceive them merely as adverts for the self/group or as cheap ways for commercial to advertise their products and services.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, some like DiGiovanna pessimistically suggest that homepages are,

basically modelled after the teen idol fan clubs of the seventies. Apparently, people want so bad to be celebrities that they'll take as their model the talentless nobodies they worshipped in their youth who were ruthlessly promoted and then thrown away. A fan club to oneself.<sup>91</sup>

Although this may be true in some respects to many of the homepages which exist on the Internet, it is a simplistic and naïve perception of homepages.<sup>92</sup> The NYPO homepage is made up of several elements, as is common with homepages in general, such as a list of members, links to other organisations in the Borough, but it also has a section for poems, articles, interviews and art which the various NYPO members have created. The main NYPO opening homepage is shown below.

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<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, 261

<sup>90</sup> J DiGiovanna (1996) 'Losing your voice on the internet' in P Ludlow (ed.) (1996) *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: conceptual issues in cyberspace* (Cambridge MA., London: MIT Press) 447-448

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, 448

<sup>92</sup> Abbott, (1998) however, has a more sophisticated perception and understanding of homepage construction based on empirical research.



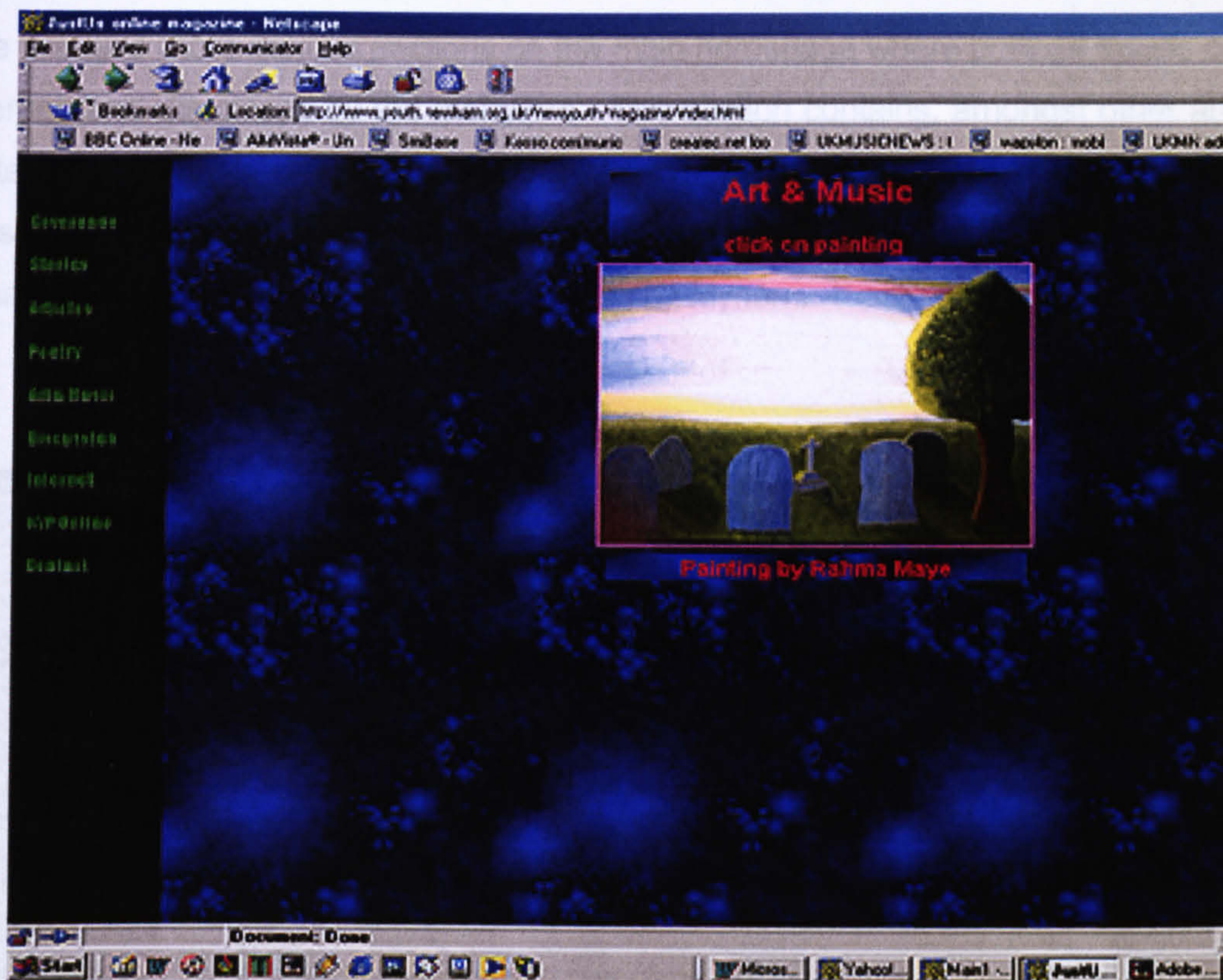
FIGURE 8.03  
SCREEN SHOT: NYPO HOMEPAGE

Although the homepage is not the most sophisticated site, it is easy to use and welcoming. The homepage offers resources and a gateway through which the broader spaces of the Internet can be explored. There are links to the members' homepages, which in turn provide links to other websites on the Internet. A diagrammatic representation of this can be found in Appendix III. One can see how the main NYPO homepage acts as a 'core' with various 'shells' providing resources and a showcase for various creative efforts of members. The inner shell acts as a forum for interaction and communication through the message boards and the general mailing list. The outer shell is the space in which some of the members' personal homepages are located.<sup>93</sup>

Often, those members with personal homepages linked to the NYPO page will inform others of new creations on their homepages. For example, Breeze's collages and images, which she has created, can be downloaded from her website.

<sup>93</sup> NOTE: this is entirely a visual representation of the way in which the researcher imagines the structure of the NYPO 'community' operates.

FIGURE 8.04  
SCREEN SHOT: THE ART WORK PAGE



Not all the creative elements are showcased on the NYPO website. Some members will post poems or stories they have written on the general mailing list, sometimes without an accompanying email of explanation. This example below was posted by a member who does not usually contribute to the list. The posting had no explanation accompanying it:

LOVE

to be cared and loved by the one i love. then this desire will be filled with happiness. i wait for him to show his love, by only bringing a little red rose. one day we will be sitting together under the moonlight. that day i will be proud of what i have gained.<sup>94</sup>

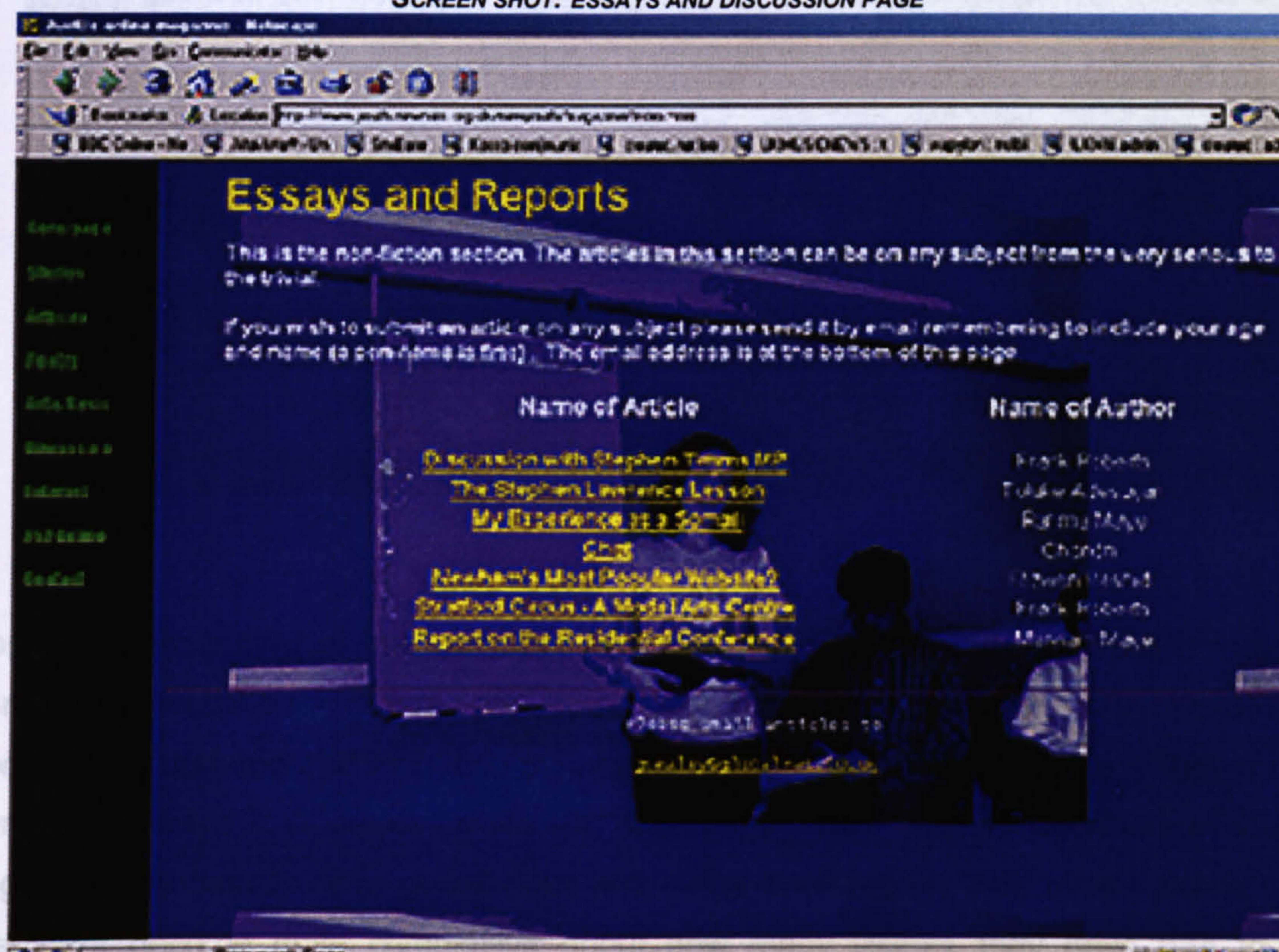
Often, those members with personal homepages linked to the NYPO page will inform others of new creations on their homepages. For example, Breeze's collages and images, which she has created, can be downloaded from her website:

<sup>94</sup> tehreem1984 NYPOOnline\* poem 13 Oct 1999

Talking about website updates, Becky's Cyber Space has got a new section. It's called "Background Bliss" and there is a link to it at the bottom of the entry page (<http://www.becky86.cjb.net>). It contains all my desktops, of Alisha's Attic, Britney Spears, Billie, Buffy and some lava lamps. Gavin, you might want to put a few more of them on the Arts section of the mag. "Buffy" is my favourite, but that's because it's my latest. It might be interesting to compare it with "Alisha's Attic" (my first).<sup>95</sup>

There are also more serious sections on the main homepage where political issues can be presented and discussed by the members. This section contains, amongst other articles, an interview which Frankie conducted with Stephen Timms the MP for Newham, an article discussing the Stephen Lawrence murder written by Toluwa and a Report on the residential trip that some of the members attended written by Myriam.

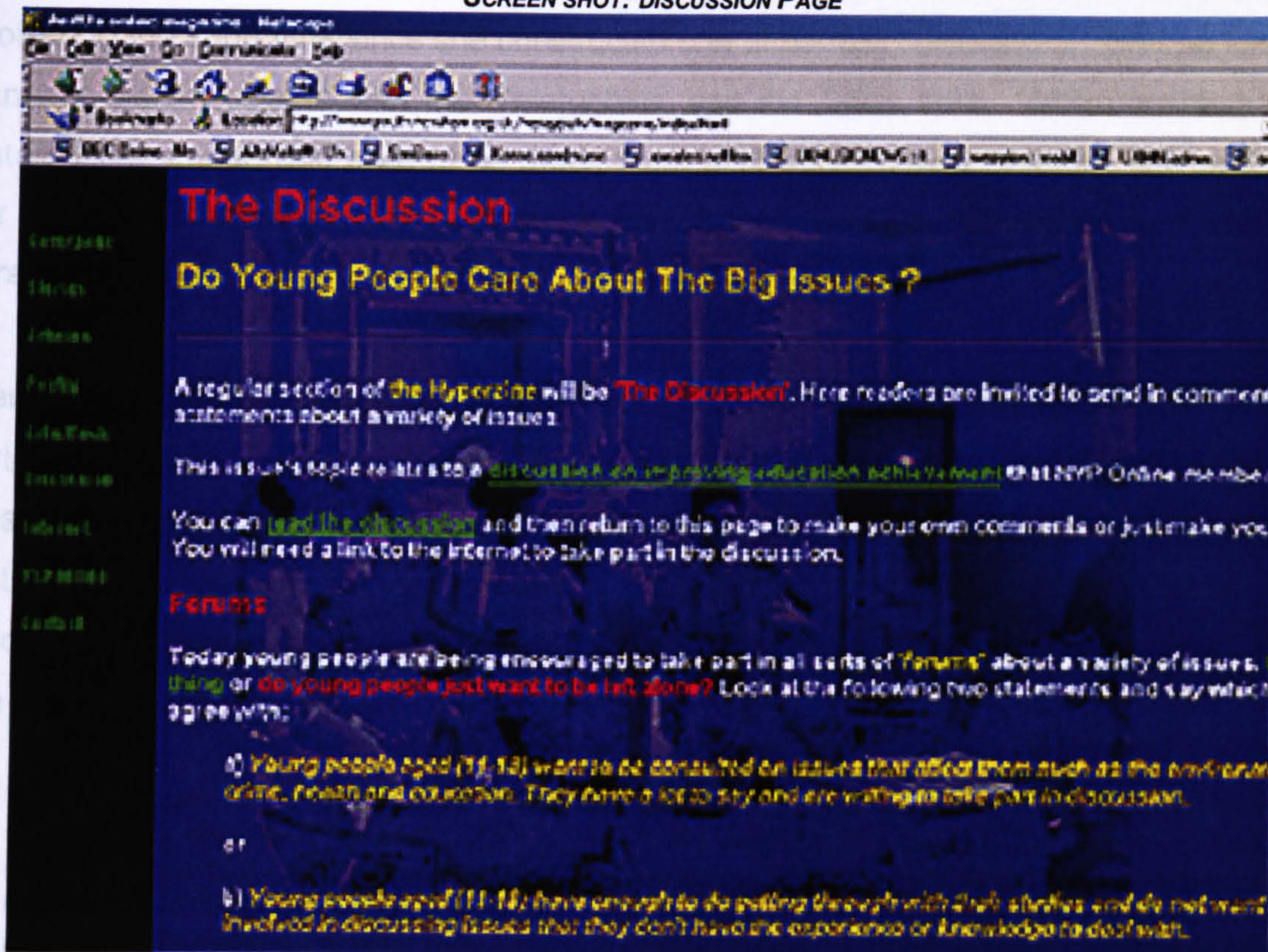
FIGURE 8.05  
SCREEN SHOT: ESSAYS AND DISCUSSION PAGE



There is also a section which presents a consultation some of the members had with the Schools Plus Policy Action Team (PAT) whilst on their residential trip. The group was consulted on issues such as in what ways schools could be improved and what should their proposed Neighbourhood Learning Centres be like. The main discussion points to be raised are reported in the section.

<sup>95</sup> Becky NYPOne\* Websites, huh? 29 Nov 1999

FIGURE 8.06  
SCREEN SHOT: DISCUSSION PAGE



Approximately a third of the members of NYPO have written and constructed their own homepages/websites. There are those key members, however, who keep these homepages updated and who also might have more than one homepage. They try very hard to advertise their pages on the list, encouraging new and old members to visit the pages. They usually have guestbooks and visitor counters on their sites. Some of the members become quite competitive about how many visitors they have had to their websites and enjoy this competition on the general list. The member's websites are all linked to the main NYPO homepage.

I have a new website @ [www.youth.newham.org.uk/newyouth/becky2](http://www.youth.newham.org.uk/newyouth/becky2) which is called Becky's Cyber Space. It's only two pages right now, an intro page and a links page, but hopefully it will grow fast. Gavin, could you please link it into the Newyouth City page instead of the other one (my second)? And \*please\* get rid of the first one which is ancient and features the Teletubbies and Spice Girls? (puke)

P.S. I KNOW that in chat rooms "cyber" is short for cyber pseudo-sex but trust

me that my website is nothing to do with that...<sup>96</sup>

As Turkle suggests, 'one's identity emerges from who one knows, one's associates and connections' and in the example above, one can see clearly that Becky's identity has evolved in the short time since she constructed one of her first homepages. She no longer wants to be associated with the 'Teletubbies' and the Spice Girls. She considers her tastes, likes, image and style to be much more sophisticated now. Hence, she updates her website to represent this shift in identity, in the way that she wishes to represent herself.

Breeze also uses her homepage or website as a tool for conflict. She tells the list in one particular posting about an incident a few days prior.<sup>97</sup> Somebody called 'Steph' posted a message on the NYPO message board, which is on the main website regarding Breeze's 'Anti-Cool' section of her 'old website'. 'She said among other things that I was "encouraging people to act like geeks and losers" and that my website was "harmful". And she swore'. This was Breeze's reply:

Steph... Do you know me or something? I don't think so. Me a "loser"... I could LAUGH. Maybe if you read my website a bit more carefully - WHICH I WROTE MORE THAN A YEAR AGO, BTW - you'll realise that I am not insulting people who have "lots of friends and care about what they look like." I am insulting people who have lots of friends because people don't dare to be their enemies. And who care what they look like - up to a fault. I stopped liking Teletubbies a few months after writing that site. It was just a phase of growing up for me. But I don't suppose that you would understand anything about "growing up", having not been through it yet... What is wrong with telling people to act like geeks - have you got a problem with geeks? I am also concerned about the future of our youth. And I think you'll find that you are the loser if you can't express your views without swearing. That's what I think is harmful. Thank you very much.

I'm awaiting her response now, but meanwhile I have updated the Anti-Cool Site and uploaded it to my website @ becky86.cjb.net along with something on the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Whoever is reading this, please check out "The Secrets of Status" - it's cool (!)<sup>98</sup>

This clearly shows how important one's website is as part of identity construction. It also illustrates how vital it is that one's website is updated. It is an extension and representation into an unregulated set of social spaces where anyone is free to comment or criticise. Personal attacks are common in the playground, but it represents something different when the user is not part of one's physical peer group. One does not know what this person looks like, what age she is, if indeed Steph is female. Nonetheless, Breeze's

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<sup>96</sup> Becky NYPOne\* MY NEW WEBSITE (again) 8 Sep 1999

<sup>97</sup> The same incident is referred to earlier on in this chapter.

<sup>98</sup> Becky NYPOne\* Websites old and new 19 Sep 1999

website also acts as a site of support for others who do not experience their 'selves' freely in their everyday lives. This is illustrated clearly in an email that Breeze received and forwarded to the NYPO list from a girl who she chatted to online:

We spoke briefly on teen chat yesterday, I called myself sad and sick of life... do you remember? Well anyway, i checked out your web site and loved it! Your opinions match mine to the spot, and you 'Secrets to status', made me laugh . I now should call myself, happy and crazy for life!

I think your web page does alot for people of our age. It gives them the oppertunity to realise that individuality is a good thing. If they find themselves liking groups, or fashion styles different from the 'in-crowd', they won't see themselves as freaks, simply unique! I have had a very confusing last year, basically trying to discover the real me and drag it out from under the mask I was wearing. Trying to act like the people you respect is pointless if it isn't the real you...bearing in mind theses brainless people don't deserve any respect. I have learnt to accept myself more over the last few months, than I ever have before. mainly because I have finally let my true self out. I'm now gothic, into placebo and Nirvana, and a bit of Marilyn Manson. And I'm bloody proud of the way I am.

I say this now, but last night I didn't feel quite as good. There are still some people at my school who I do act for. These people are my friends. But not out of choice. I would love to break away and meet others more like myself. But it is an emotional struggle just breaking away from the people you spend your life with. Even if they do slag me off behind my back...

What I'm trying to say is keep up the good work, your website certainly filled me with optimism and I hope others will feel the same.

Thanks,

Love

Eleanor<sup>99</sup>

Cyberspace can be a threatening place in some senses and the reaction that Breeze has is to subvert the threatening nature of cyberspace interaction and use the tools of cyberspace communication to hack Steph's email account.

I KNOW that this list has been flooded with my one-liners (7 today wasit?) so here is a question for you hackers out there:

Is there any way of finding out private information about somebody, through their Hotmail address? You'd have to hack the site, wouldn't you - or is there some other way? And can it be done with Funmail?

(Use "babie\_grl\_2000@hotmail.com" as a test address. I have a grudge against this person, and Gavin knows why... If \*you\* want to know why, then check out the message board in the TalkBack section of NYP Online, where a certain person calls me a loser and a geek. I am having a bit of a debate with her @ the moment, and it would be great to have some background information about her - like her age for a start. She claims to have been through her teen years. My first reaction was, <lapsing into "Clueless"-speak> "I \*so\* disbelieve that" - but I would be interested to know how old she really is. Then I'll shock her by telling her when she is lying to me in her emails. I'll get her thinking "what else does she know about me?" That's my idea of revenge. Maybe I AM a geek. But I am not a loser.)<sup>100</sup>

Riz replies that he does know how to hack into email accounts, and offers to tell Becky, but 'offlist' for privacy.<sup>101</sup> Gavin, the youth leader, tries to suggest that revenge in the way that Becky is imagining is negative and Frankie joins in the discussion:

<sup>99</sup> Breeze NYPOne\* Secrets of Status 21 Feb 2000

<sup>100</sup> Becky NYPOne\* Yeah... it's me again. 19 Nov 1999

<sup>101</sup> Rizwan Re: NYPOne\* Yeah... it's me again. 20 Nov 1999

On Sat, 20 Nov 1999 11:03:42 +0000, Gavin Sealey said:

>Revenge bad.

Yes

>Making websites, writing, music not loser behaviour  
Debateable.

>Revenge obsession definitely loser behaviour.

More debateable. Hacking sometimes creative!

>Creative people doing own thing have nothing to worry about.

Incorrect, - if only.

>INVENT. CREATE. THINK. COMMUNICATE

Ouch - my ears.

> - Negative opinions irrelevant - argue if amusing, otherwise ignore.

Irrelevance is often very relevant.

>Anyway if you hack into information she has given Hotmail all you get is the information she is giving Hotmail ... and a lot of people don't give true info.

You could find out what kinda people she talks to, or send e-mails from her name. It's not something to be abused.<sup>102</sup>

Homepage creation is a very important form of identity exploration. In chapter six, this issue of identity creation off-line was discussed more fully. Valentine *et al* assert that the concept of 'performativity' is useful in exploring young people.<sup>103</sup> Young people might perform their identities in contradiction to their embodied and visible identity. Performances of identity for NYPO members are mediated through online spaces where others cannot see what the individual looks like. They are also performed off-line. This is a vital way in which some of the NYPO members express and represent themselves which, it could be argued, is empowering and liberating. This is particularly so for those whose are shy and quiet off-line such as Riz, although one would not realise this without meeting him offline. Riz likes the US sit-com, *Friends* and has dedicated a website to the series. He is particularly efficient at web design and at promoting his creations:

This mailing is becoming so dead, if i am permitted to use this word! Seems like Becky and i are the only ones!

Well what is old Rizwan upped again? nothing but the usual: A new invention!!! And what is it?

Well it's fantastic

it's Friends

It's F.R.I.E.N.D.S-T.A.S.T.I.C!!! <http://www.friendstastic.cjb.net>

Yep, a whole new page about the TV show FRIENDS which everyone likes (not sure though!) It has message board, mailing list guestbook, sound videos, pitures, addresses lot lot more. Just go there! Oh and by the way it would be better if you had something like IE4 or Netscape communoicator 4.1 because i do use dinamyc HTML and Java sript but not a lot thoug! I tried to make it as small (in size) as possible so it doesn't take hours to load!

And if you don't beleive that it is fantastic than check this out: Only two weeks on the net and already 13 guestbook entries 2 UK and the rest world wide and also 14 mailing list members!!! and the message board is already running a conversation!! So why not join in and find out more about the best F.R.I.E.N.D.S in the world!!!

By the way if anyone wants to link to my site here is a small banner which might lighten up ye ol' NYP site! (hopefully!) It won't hurt adding it next to Buffy? will it ?

\*\*\*looking with raised eyebrow at Becky\*\*\*

<sup>102</sup> Frank Re: NYPOne\* Yeah... it's me again. 21 Nov 1999

<sup>103</sup> Valentine et al (1998), 5

And Hannan, i will refer you to any of those money making stuff if you advertise me on your siteS. Deal?<sup>104</sup>

A vital part of website creation is getting the 'hits' from visitors, the number of people downloading the page. Part of this comes from others making links and connections to the site from their own site. This has to be a reciprocal relationship, as Riz realises. He encourages Becky and Hannan to link his site to theirs in order to increase his number of 'hits'. Riz additionally makes use of a number of communicative tools, such as mailing (email) lists, message boards, and ICQ which is instant messaging software free to download. In this way, he has made sure fans of Friends have many ways in which to get involved with his Friends 'community'. Riz is clearly highly proud of his accomplishments and makes sure Gavin, the youth leader, knows how successful he has been:

Gavin,

As you know my 2 weeks old FRIENDS web site has been a success. I have had more than 20 entries in my guestbook, the same amount have subscribed to my weekly mailing list, the message board is getting on good, i am geeting emails from fans asking for more info and i am even getting ICQ messages! I had to authorize six FRIENDS fans for my ICQ contacts. In brief, the website is a success! Wait till you see the Nedstats results!! according to them i have had 1037 views so far!!!! cool don't you think?<sup>105</sup>

When NYPO members promote their websites on the list, they are doing a number of things:

- networking and connection their site to the main NYPO community;
- showing other members what they have achieved with the technology, creatively as well as in terms of how many visitors they have attracted;
- building a representation of what images and aspects of (popular) culture they like;
- creating a space to air their own opinions, freely;
- inspiring the other members to create;
- learning what else they could achieve with software and other tools, such as instant messaging services.

The other members on the list will visit the sites which are advertised and threads on the list will be created. Other members will perform a type of 'troubleshooting' service, such as in the example below where Becky mentions the issue of browser capability:

Vejita Sayajin <vegeku@hotmail.com> wrote:

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<sup>104</sup> Rizwan NYPOonline\* Are we the only ones? 18 Sep 1999

<sup>105</sup> Rizwan NYPOonline\* My FRIENDS website: results! 18 Sep 1999



> It has message board, mailling list guestbook, sound videos, pitures, addresses lot lot more. Just go there! Oh and by the way it would be better if you had something like IE4 or Netscape communoicator 4.1

How about making an alternative website for us poor people who don't?

>And if you don't beleive that it is fantastic than check this out: Only two weeks on the net and already 13 guestbook entries 2 UK and the rest world wide and also 14 mailing list members!!! and the message board is already running a conversation!!

That \*is\* really good! I'm jealous!

>So why not join in and find out more about the best F.R.I.E.N.D.S in the world!!!

>By the way if anyone wants to link to my site here is a small banner which might lighten up ye ol' NYP site!! (hopefully!) It won't hurt adding it next to Buffy? will it ? \*\*\*looking with raised eyebrow at Becky\*\*\*

What? ;-)<sup>106</sup>

In reply to Becky, Riz says that this is in development as well as a version which can be viewed off-line. He also lets her know that her support is appreciated. He shows this by signing her guestbook, as she signed his.<sup>107</sup>

The example above also illustrates the reciprocal nature of homepage creation and promotion: the more guest book entries, the better. The example below also demonstrates how promoting one's website in the NYPO community can be a way of encouraging discussion as well as welcoming new members and offering them a way in to exploring the Internet. This is all part of building relationships, supportive and reciprocal relationships:

I notice a couple of new members on the list - Tehreem Aftab and Hoang Truong. Welcome to the list, guys, and feel free to add your say to our discussion threads like the "Opinions" going on @ the moment. Also, PLEASE visit my website and sign my guestbook. I only have about 3 comments in there!<sup>108</sup>

Riz's brother, Kashan, is also keen to be as successful with website creation as Riz. Riz and Kashan are very close in age: eighteen months separate them. Kashan, in September 1999 was a new member of the NYPO and joined for similar reasons as Riz: to find friends in the Borough and to improve his communication skills. In the posting below, Becky and Frankie welcome Kashan as a new member who they both met at a committee meeting they had had the previous Saturday. They refer to his older brother and his skills as a designer and creator and his like of Friends, clearly showing an interest in Kashan's work.

On Sun, 10 Oct 1999 17:12:37 +0000 (GMT), kashan@homealone.co.uk said:

>be aware everybody, I have a website coming soon.be aware! I am just adding guestbooks and other stuff Kashan

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<sup>106</sup> Becky NYPOOnline\* Re: Are we the only ones? 19 Sep 1999

<sup>107</sup> Rizwan Re: NYPOOnline\* Re: Are we the only ones? 19 Sep 1999

<sup>108</sup> Becky NYPOOnline\* Welcome 30 Sep 1999

Hi Kashan, nice to see you at the meet on sat. What's your site all about? If you can get it any way near as good as your bro you'll do well, he's proved himself to be the best web designer on NYP Online (please don't let this start another 'king of the web' war..).

What are you a big fan of then? Not another Friends fan I hope <g><sup>109</sup>

**Frank Roberts <frank.roberts@zetnet.co.uk> wrote:**

**>Hi Kashan, nice to see you at the meet on sat. What's your site all about? If you can get it any way near as good as your bro you'll do well, he's proved himself to be the best web designer on NYP Online (please don't let this start >another 'king of the web' war..).**

Ha ha, I remember that. Good job there is only one contender for "Queen of the Web" (no anti-gay jokes please).

**>What are you a big fan of then? Not another Friends fan I hope <g>**

Let me second that!<sup>110</sup>

A week and a half later, Riz increases his family's presence on the Internet by introducing his 'family' website. This site includes contributions not only from Kashan but also their younger sister Naira.

Would people please make thier way to [www.rashids.co.uk](http://www.rashids.co.uk)?It's our new domain name. 'Our' includes Kashan, my brother, Naira, My Sister and myself. I am planning to have all three of our websites put on that one domain. and if you are wondering the price well it's free.I use a brand new ISP called FreeNetName. It's a service for UK users. It offers free Internet service, 20Mg webspace, unlimited@yourdomain.co.uk email addresses, free technical support (excellent, i have tried it), 30,000 newsgroups. It sounds too good to be true and it is. If you look at our website above, you won't see any adverts of any kind.

It's all free, no charge at all.<sup>111</sup>

At the same time, Riz manages to promote the free domain name registration service that he has found. Riz does not do this in order to get a financial reward from the service, he does precisely what the service envisages: he refers his friends. Riz shares this knowledge and connection to others on the mailing list so that they might take advantage of the service. This way of sharing resources has always been a way in which the Internet has operated. It is part of the rationale of the Internet, it could be argued that this has been increasingly overtaken by purely commercial drivers.

**On Thu, 28 Oct 1999 21:30:45 GMT, Rizwan Rashid said:**

**>Would people please make thier way to [www.rashids.co.uk](http://www.rashids.co.uk)?**

I have but it doesn't seem to do anything other than have a nice background. Maybe you used some sort of Javascript that I can't see (my browser is java enables but not everything works).

**>It's our new domain name. 'Our' includes Kashan, my brother, Naira, My Sister and myself. I am planning to have all three of our websites put on that one domain. and if you are wondering the price well it's free.**

This is very good. Are you sure that there isn't a catch? How long do you get the domain for before they start charging?

**>I use a brand new ISP called FreeNetName. It's a service for UK users. It offers free Internet service, 20Mg webspace, unlimited@yourdomain.co.uk email addresses, free technical support (excellent, i have tried it), 30,000 newsgroups. It sounds too good to be true and it is. If you look at our website above, you won't see any adverts of any kind. It's all free, no charge at all.**

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<sup>109</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOnline\* My Website 11 Oct 1999

<sup>110</sup> Becky Re: NYPOnline\* My Website 11 Oct 1999

<sup>111</sup> Rizwan NYPOnline\* Real Free Domain name 28 Oct 1999

OK, so all I have to do is think of a domain name....<sup>112</sup>

Promoting one's website on the list provokes interest in other members' sites. Part of this is competitive, seeing what features other people have added and viewing their 'hit' figures and guestbook entries. This also, however, builds a network of support for the different members. A great deal of help and advice is shared amongst the members about how to improve their site, as in the case above where Becky 'troubleshoots'. After promoting his website, Riz visits Frankie's website and offers some compliments, criticisms, as well as some advice.

On Wed, 03 Nov 1999 22:20:23 GMT, Rizwan Rashid said:

>I just visited Frank's site and it's worth saying WELL DONE okay so I edited that down but hey I'm a journalist!

Thanx.

>Secondly:....I barely know you!!!!

Ha! You never knew about my axe-murdering then?

>There was so much that I didn't know.

And still don't! But hey! you know more than most.

>Even I haven't achieved that much. You won some £200 prize award, you get your letter published in computer mag as STAR letter... what do you do to accomplish the IMPOSSIBLE.

It's worth writing things and sending them into places. It's not that difficult to pick up a few prizes! Internet Monthly in particular has a low input of letters, so they'll print anything good (whynot try sending in a letter yourself? Write to letters@itpub.com with anything remotely interesting to do with the internet.)

> I mean there is no way I can a letter published on any magazine!!

Ditto above. Give it a try! And anyone else, it would be cool to get more than one NYP member's letter in the mag in one issue!

>You really deserve that Shinig Through award.

I got bronze....

>Thirdly

Hey! I thought you said a couple!

>(the bad part) your picture didn't show up. I am sure you can do better about the links on the top and finally you have too much writing. people who don't know you will not read every single bit of writing like I did. A summary should do you and then a link to the full story.

Okay, I'll bear this in mind. I'll update it soon. You can also get to the site through my domain:

www.frankie-roberts.england.eu.org

Or get your own domain (at www.anything.a\_choise\_of\_things.eu.org e.g

www.rizwan.net.eu.org) go to www.eu.org to find out more...<sup>113</sup>

This form of mutual help and criticism is a valuable skill to learn. It is not often the case that young people have a chance to comment on the work of their peers, particularly in the context of formal schooling. An interesting posting, however, disturbs this mature critiquing of each other's work. Riz, after making comments about Frankie's site posts the message below:

i made compliments about Gavin and Frank's webpage doesn't mean i am a freak or something. Instead we should see more of these kinds of email. Everyone has a talent in here but no one is

<sup>112</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOne\* Real Free Domain name 29 Oct 1999 15:56:15 +0100

<sup>113</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOne\* Frank's page 09 Nov 1999

ever saying somethign about it. Are you shy or something? IF YES THEN WAKE UP AND DON'T BE. I am expecting at least a few compliments, if not then you will see THE RIZ ONE at his highest peak of mountain ANGER<sup>114</sup>

This surprises many on the list and is not only out of character for Riz, but also highly defensive. There is no record in the researcher's archives, or in the online archive of messages, which explains why Riz posts this message. Becky picks up on this, as evidenced by the exchange below:

Rizwan Rashid <vegeku@hotmail.com> wrote:

>i made compliments about Gavin and Frank's webpage doesn't mean I am a freak or something.

Is anyone saying you are?

> Instead we should see more of these kinds of email. Everyone has a talent in here but no one is ever saying somethign about it. Are you shy or something? IF YES THEN WAKE UP AND DON'T BE. I am expecting at least a few compliments, if not then you will see THE RIZONE at his highest peak of mountain ANGER

Yeah, well, we don't want to see that. Some of us have already SEEN your anger @ the Debden thingy and IT WAS NOT A PRETTY SIGHT... no, seriously, the problem with compliments is that sometimes people just say that another person's website is good because they want compliments about their own. This doesn't always happen all the time but it does happen. People \*should\* only compliment websites because they like them.

And the reason that I haven't complimented your website is because I AM JEALOUS that you have over 2000 hits already (while I have 30) and an active mailing list. And not just me - people don't compliment your website \*because\* it's GOOD and they don't want to admit it.<sup>115</sup>

One explanation for this could be that he received an off-list message from someone. Another explanation might rest in the way that Becky interprets his posting. She suggests that Riz is perturbed that he has not had many compliments about his work. Becky explains that this might be because the others are jealous of his work and the number of hits he is attracting to his site. This seems to satisfy Riz, and he continues to update the list on features he has added to the site. This includes a 'Friendly Dialogue' feature that he has added using a java script to create a dialogue from Friends. He has also developed a weekly news section and a Pen Pals business and asks the others on the list for advice on creating a chat section on the site.<sup>116</sup>

Aha, I get it. You want one so that people will sign up and keep coming back, instead of just logging in and forgetting about it afterwards. Well, I don't know any, except maybe Beseen who host the NYPO chat rooms...

(...)

I'll look out for better ones. The Beseen one is on the NYPO website, you can get to it from Newyouth City or the TalkBack area, and if it's all right you can go to Beseen.com and create a new chat room. It seems okay and has a few cute little pictures, but nothing for kicking out annoying people, which as a webmaster you might want.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Rizwan *NYPOOnline\* compliments* 03 Nov 1999

<sup>115</sup> Becky *Re: NYPOOnline\* compliments* 4 Nov 1999

<sup>116</sup> Rizwan *NYPOOnline\* the real important update* 29 Nov 1999

<sup>117</sup> Becky *Re: NYPOOnline\* important update* 29 Nov 1999

Becky offers some information on the chat tool which is used on the NYPO main website, but realises that Riz is actually trying to find a tool which will require membership to the site. This is a tool which many commercial websites make us of in order to give people a reason to return to the website, thus increasing the number of hits on the site. This is part of the tool kit which Jupiter Communications identified as vital for building online communities in a commercial context, discussed in chapter three.

These examples illustrate the kind of *informal learning community* that Tobin calls *Otaku learning communities*.<sup>118</sup> The word 'Otaku' is Japanese but is difficult to translate into English. It is a polite way of describing 'your home' or 'you', according to Tobin:

In the late 1980s the terms *otaku* and *otaku-zoku* (otaku-tribe) came on the scene to refer to young people with an obsessive interest in some aspect of popular culture which they accessed through the emerging computer/Internet technology without ever leaving their bedroom. In some respects *otaku* is equivalent to 'hacker'. But unlike 'hacker', *otaku* refers not just to someone skilled in using computers in non-traditional, unintended, and anti-authoritarian ways, but to someone whose computer interest and acumen is in the service of their obsession with a particular area of popular cultural knowledge.<sup>119</sup>

The NYPO members, it could be argued, represent an important 'node of adolescent cybermedia learning'.<sup>120</sup> This type of learning, Tobin argues, is characterised by self-learning on the Internet, through their peers and through the various connections they make with other users. Tobin further explains this kind of learning:

One way or the other, *otaku-tribe* members get the information they need individually, and then disseminate this knowledge laterally, to their peers, when their peers seek assistance. They disseminate information generously because such sharing is part of the ethos of the computer-, Web- and *otaku*-cultures and because it gives them a chance to show off. Unlike most school settings where students compete for grades and teacher approval, *otaku* tend to be lavish with their praise of work they admire, direct in giving constructive criticism, willing to admit their ignorance when they need advice, and generous about helping each other.<sup>121</sup>

This type of learning community is supportive and relies on the relationships, (inter)connections and the different articulations of identities online. One extra element to the NYPO community, though, is that the members often meet off-line. This adds a further dimension to the identities of the individuals as well as to the group as a whole. Different aspects of identity are drawn out on line compared to off-line, as evidenced by Becky's reference to Riz's rage on the residential trip. However, this type of technocultural lifeworld

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<sup>118</sup> Tobin (1998), 116

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, 109

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, 116

permits the NYPO members to express themselves, comment, critique, learn and share knowledge in much less restrictive ways than are possible within the formal schooling context. Indeed, Tobin suggests that to understand how multimedia literacy and learning can be achieved, the focus of pedagogy needs to move to 'nodes and networks of learning that function outside the parameters and vision of formal schooling'.<sup>122</sup>

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### Section III: Interconnections and Articulation of Difference

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#### **Micro, close social relations these entities construct**

Hakken suggests that this level of social relations is useful to researchers in order to elicit what new kinds of relationships are created in cyberspace and indeed how significant they might be. Other questions might be, Hakken asserts: 'What are the social correlates in friendship formation of less face-to-face and more screen-to-screen communication? How does on line activity affect off-line activity?'.<sup>123</sup> These are very much the questions with which this research is concerned. The following sections examine how new relations and connections are formed and articulated amongst NYPO members. The first salient issue is how and in what way interpersonal communication takes place, on and off-line, amongst the NYPO members. Part of this is concerned with how the technocultural lifeworld is organised in order to accommodate and facilitate this.

#### *Interpersonal communication*

Important for any kind of group or 'community' is organising the communication within and between the group. The challenge of community formation and sustainability is organisational, to build a structure of support and nourishment for the community members.<sup>124</sup> Often the NYPO members have to re-think about how their group is organised, how the communication system can be exclusive and how to ensure that the communication is *inclusive*. Gavin, the youth leader, makes a suggestion that in order to avoid exclusivity, another mailing list should be introduced for those members who are very active on the general list. His argument is that often, there are three or four core members of the group who contribute most to the discussion. Frankie defends the general mailing

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<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, 117

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, 127

<sup>123</sup> Hakken (1999), 8

<sup>124</sup> M L MacLaughlin, K K Osborne & N B Ellison (1997) 'Virtual community in a telepresence environment' in Jones (1997), 146-168

lists and highlights the similarities between the group interactions that take place online and those that take place off-line. He suggests that:

Mailing lists work by the diversity of people on them who are chatting. Creating more lists just splits up the people we do have chatting. If people do want to use our mailing lists but do not like the general then we should work to make the general more inviting, or encourage the use of the other lists we already have. Lists should be created when there is a need for them, our main problem is a lack of subscribers.

Perhaps the appeal of NYPO is somewhat limited.<sup>125</sup>

Frankie clearly views another list as superfluous and counter-productive to the NYPO community evolution. He suggests, instead, that there are other ways in which the group can be more inviting to people. Shanell, a usually very quiet member, agrees that 'it also can be a little boring, the things you guys seem to go on about. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the debates about serious issues'.<sup>126</sup> It could be argued that this is a reflection of the in-between nature of NYPO. As many of the members meet off-line as well as online, conversations can be carried on from off-line contact to the online discussion. This can be exclusionary in many ways as it means other members may feel they are missing out by not having had face-to-face contact. There does, however, seem to be a divide between those who consider the general mailing list as a forum for general discussion, and comments about trivial issues, and those like Shanell who think that the list should focus on 'serious issues', such as desired changes in Newham and problems that young people experience.<sup>127</sup> The exchange below between Gavin and Frankie reveals Frankie's desire to nurture the community which is mediated through the general mailing list. This is an important issue to be discussed as it indeed concerns the spine and core organisation of the community communicative channels:

On Tue, 28 Dec 1999 20:53:05 +0000, Gavin Sealey wrote:

>It [general] is 'opt in' only in the sense that people agree to be on it when they first join NYP Online. If we are trying to build a community then we need a forum where everyone can communicate with everyone else; an information only list does not do this. The general list introduces people to the community. They can opt out later in favour of the inform list and other special interest lists.

Fair enough I agree that most people should subscribe to the general list as it is the centre of communication. The point is that we have a basic mailing list (general) which has just began to act as a sort of low-level community, with a few contributors. This should encourage people to join in. There shouldn't be a need for another list because the conversations on general are too un-inviting, if this is the case it is better to try and change the group rather than introduce a new list.

>This is true and I wouldn't want to split off people who are making a big contribution and keeping things interesting. New lists can only happen if enough people want them. There are lots of good things about the way the general list works. The question is how can we make it more inclusive; thinking was that if the list looks like a few people talking to each other rather than to the group as a whole then that isn't so inviting (however interesting that conversation may be).

<sup>125</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOne\* New Mailing List? 28 Dec 1999

<sup>126</sup> shanell1 Re: NYPOne\* New Mailing List? 29 Dec 1999

<sup>127</sup> shanell1 Re: NYPOne\* New Mailing List? 29 Dec 1999

The problem is that people talk to who is there, if only a few respond to e-mail then they will be the ones that people talk to. It's the nature of communication and conversation, group discussions rarely happen; a few people end up talking with everyone else listening<sup>128</sup>

This type of narrative informs decisions about the kinds of interpersonal communication channels that the NYPO members want to have. It is important to decide whether the NYPO wish to be a community which communicates about all sorts of issues, or one which is more formal and deals with information and 'important issues'. Frankie, though, seems to be the only NYPO active contributor to defend the current communicative channel of the general mailing list. He argues that it is the responsibilities of the individual members to contribute to the discussion and if they find a thread boring, they should start another thread which they might consider to be more interesting. He points out that in any group, some conversations will be boring to other members and that this is no reason to create a separate list. He considers this to be divisive and unnecessary. As he suggests, 'you can't outlaw people for writing 'boring messages' nor insist that certain lists are for boring messages and certain messages [lists] are for 'interesting' messages'.<sup>129</sup> In response to Shanell's suggestion that a list should be created for 'hard based' issues, Frankie retorts:

I think that NYP Online would be a good place to discuss such issues, but you really have to try and start them, you can't really expect to just join a list with that kind of thing already happening. So far NYP Online has only ever had one list with any kind of ongoing discussion; the general list, and this rarely gets more than 5 contributors, goes into periods of boring or no discussion. I have been on lots of lists for different groups around the world, most of which are at a far later stage than us. These groups take a few years to develop, and have only developed because people have worked hard to get hundreds of people subscribed, and to get good discussions going. Our lists are only open to young people from Newham, which massively restricts our appeal, and recruiting is slow. So we can't really expect massive amounts of discussion at the moment. For this reason it's not really worth us creating any more lists, instead promoting the general lists and others we have got. However if we just promote the other lists then the few people on the general list will start to use the other lists, spreading out the discussion. People only have a limited reading and writing capacity after all! My (long winded?) point is trying to urge Gavin and Richard, etc, to get out of the frame of mind of just to keep on creating new lists and to work to use the ones already available. <g><sup>130</sup>

The exchanges regarding the mailing list give Frankie a chance to bring in his experience of other mailing lists, outside of NYPO. He admits that it takes some time to build relationships online. Communication is seen as key to build relationships and make connections with people within groups like NYPO, particularly with groups whose main communicative channel is online.

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<sup>128</sup> Frankie *NYPO Online\* New Mailing List?* 30 Dec 1999

<sup>129</sup> Frankie *Re: NYPO Online\* New Mailing List?* 01 Jan 2000

<sup>130</sup> Frankie *Re: NYPO Online\* New Mailing List?*, 01 Jan 2000



This concern for communication and the channels and content available to the NYPO group is an important one to be discussed. Some certainly feel strongly about the ways in which people can communicate with one another. Riz, in particular, has strong views about online communication and off-line communication. For a group that operates in-between on and off-line, in that some of the members meet off-line as well as online, this is a vital issue. Some, like Riz, consider online communication to be easier and better than face-to-face communication, off-line. He argues,

Anyway, I think that the Internet communication resources are much better than talking to someone face2face. My reason is the following: look at the previous sentence and tell me, would you have said exactly the same sentence if someone asked you that question? the answer is most obviously no, unless you are Gavin! (no offence at all :-> The reason is that when you are talking to someone online i.e ICQ, email or chat, you have ore time to think of the words you are going to use, which will result in your sentence to be more positive grammarwide. For example, if someone asks you face2face what did you have for breakfast. Naturally you will try to think something quick or else the other person will think that you are going to make somthing up. So in a hurry, you will just bable anything:

"Ohh...euhhh...welll... i had...a kebab..yeah that's right, I had a kebab roll!!!"

And then the next thing you see is your friend walking off leaving you embarassed. Whereas online, you can take your time to think before you write anything. And the other person will not walk off, because he/she will think that it's because of the Internet traffic! So you get my point? In brief, i find it much easier for me to express myself using any kind of online communication resource or hand-written letters. And if anyone is against my opinion, let them write, so that we can talk. And when i say talk, i mean taaaaaalkkkkkkkkkqqqqh!!!<sup>131</sup>

Riz finds it easier to express himself online than off-line and indeed he uses many communicative devices, such as instant messaging software, chat rooms and email. He also has more than one online identity, which, it could be argued, reveals more about how he feels about himself and how other people might view him. He evidently appreciates the space that asynchronous communication offers in order to consider what to say to others and how 'to be'. Being able to take one's time to write messages and to carefully consider what one wishes to convey in a message is a common attraction of online communicative devices such as email.<sup>132</sup> Becky, however, questions Riz's logic and makes the differentiation between these different communicative devices:

>The reason is that when you are talking to someone online i.e ICQ, email or chat, you have ore time to think of the words you are going to use,

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<sup>131</sup> Riz *NYPOonline\* Opinions* 25 Sep 1999

<sup>132</sup> See S Bergman & L van Zoonen (1999) 'Fishing with false teeth: women, gender and the Internet' In Downey & McGulgan (1999), 101

Not always! I was in a chat room yesterday and there were 59 people online. As soon as you started to type something the conversation switched to something different!

You have more time to think when you're writing emails. The disadvantage is that people can't see your expression. I know about smileys and all that, but there are so many different ways you can smile...

;-)

**>Whereas online, you can take your time to think before you write anything. And the other person will not walk off, because he/she will think that it's because of the Internet traffic!**

Not always, again. Sometimes the opposite can happen. I was in another chat room a few days ago and there *\*was\** a problem with the Internet traffic. So when someone asked me a/s/l, I got the message quite a few seconds later - too late. I said 13/f/London. The person said:

why did u take so long 2 answer my message r u lying

(I hate it when people don't know the meaning of punctuation, OR capital letters...)

I told her/him it was the Internet traffic. S/he said "what's that" and I gave up on her/him.<sup>133</sup>

Becky highlights the disadvantages here of some communicative tools, such as chat room, where not giving an immediate answer to a question can be translated as impoliteness. On the other hand, it is quite clear that Becky knows a great deal about 'netiquette' and emoticons. She is also aware of barriers such as network congestion which can slow conversations in chat rooms. Evidently, she does not have an enormous amount of patience with those who are not aware of such issues. This is confirmed by her comment aside regarding those who are not aware of the netiquette of using caps lock when typing, which is used to denote shouting and so on. Frankie argues that off-line communication can often be less thoughtful, again because of the nature of synchronous communication. He gives the following example:

Like this (in an e-mail):

"What do you think is the meaning of life?"

(24 hours later)

"I think that the real and true meaning to life lies deep within the space time continuum, and is a backwards facing mirror, reflecting to us the entire world and what lies within it. Only after finding this can existence be solved."

...okay so maybe that was a bad example.<sup>134</sup>

Frankie then makes a salient point about the different reasons people might have for using the Internet. He implies that most commercial websites are just about providing information for their 'customers', rather than giving people the chance to express themselves in different ways.<sup>135</sup> Becky, however, points out the nature of the medium through which their interactions are mediated. It is a medium which records what people say. She suggests, in response to Frankie's proposition. She adds, that 42 hours later, one can add to what one said 24 hours earlier:

42 hours later:

"scrub that I'm talking rubbish!"

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<sup>133</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Opinions 26 Sep 1999

<sup>134</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOne\* Opinions 27 Sep 1999

<sup>135</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOne\* Opinions 27 Sep 1999

But it can't be scrubbed. All our emails will be traceable for posterity. Whether or not we delete them from our computers/servers/archives. I hate that idea. It reminds me of Big Brother.

Becky continues the narrative thread that has developed through the discussion of online and off-line communication, and leads to a commentary on what the Internet should be. This then leads her on to talk about the way in which the Internet is represented as a medium, especially when young people are concerned:

I believe that the Internet should be about communication, not advertising. But every new development gets exploited by the advertisers. We have junk mail, phone calls about double glazing (that's usually what WE get anyway), ads on telly, and also on videos before the film starts. (Arrrgh! I hate that.) So spam is just the latest development. Something I want to say here - another subject - is that many parents are scared of "unsuitable things" being shown to their "children" (I HATE teenagers being called "children"! ). Is there a point to them being more scared of the internet than they are about the phone, strangers in the street, teenagers' friends, porn on telly and in magazines, songs with rude lyrics etc?

P.S. I should stop saying "I hate".<sup>136</sup>

To Becky, the Internet is in many ways no different in some respects to any other medium. She questions whether parents and guardians should be more concerned about what young people see and are exposed to online than off-line. It might be argued that this is so because parents and guardians have less opportunity to surveil or restrict young people's movements and activities. This reflects many of the issues about young people and the construction of their everyday lifeworlds, off-line. Their everyday lifeworlds are restricted and shaped through legislation, CCTV, policing, and formal schooling. Their everyday technocultural lifeworlds, it could be argued, draw on the same elements that influence them off-line, but they have more control over what they say and when they can say it and what they see.<sup>137</sup>

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#### **Section IV: Interconnections and Relationships**

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##### **Meso, Intermediate social relations (e.g. community, regional, and civic relations)**

This level of social relations explores the dynamics of community formation and geographical locations. For instance, Hakken asks: 'How does the accelerating decoupling of space from place characteristic of cyberspace affect the construction of community social relations and norms, at work and at home? To what extent does use of

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<sup>136</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Opinions 27 Sep 1999

<sup>137</sup> Although, it is accepted that many computers from which NYPO access the internet will have certain software programmes installed which not only record and surveil the sites which are visited, but which will also block certain websites which are deemed as 'unsuitable' for young people.

AIT [Advanced Information Technology], as in Internet use or civic computing, foster new forms of community and democracy?'.<sup>138</sup>

The ways in which these meso social relations are expressed is through narratives, which are articulated on the mailing list but also more importantly in the group discussions and one to one interviews which were conducted.

### *What's in it for us?*

The NYPO technocultural lifeworld is an example which is contingent on the geography of its location, Newham. Although Newham is one of the largest boroughs in London, there is a key central retail and entertainment area in Newham, Stratford.<sup>139</sup> Stratford has undergone major redevelopment in the last five years, including the Stratford Station redevelopment which provides a major high speed link to central London in 20 minutes. It also provides a link to the new Jubilee underground line and Docklands Light Railway. Part of the redevelopment plan of Stratford is focused on arts and culture and this is being achieved through the development of an arts centre, the Stratford Circus.<sup>140</sup> Frankie, Riz and Becky conducted an interview with Jon Harris the Director of the Centre. The NYPO community is keen to know what is happening in the physical communities of which they are a part. In particular, when there is a project such as the arts centre, the young people are keen to find out what it can offer them. A common complaint of young people is that there is very little to occupy their time and activities. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why many of the members of NYPO joined the group. The interview below conducted by three of the NYPO members was posted onto the general mailing list.

**Interview with Jon Harris (jon@stratford-circus.org.uk), Stratford Arts Centre.**

~~~~~ Interviewers: Frank, Rizwan, Becky ~~~~~

**What is the main object of Stratford Circus?**

The Stratford Circus will help to bring creative life to Newham. It will showcase creative talent and provide a focus for creativity in Newham.

**How many people will be able to use the centre?**

We expect it to be used by lots of people. As many as 20 000 people will be able to use it each year. There will be 2000 events every year (making approx. 5 a day), of which 1500 will be 'doing' events (i.e. participation events, courses, etc

**Who is the Stratford Circus aimed at?**

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<sup>138</sup> Hakken (1999), 8

<sup>139</sup> See URL for more details:

<http://www.newham.gov.uk/Environment/regeneration/arcstrat.htm>

<sup>140</sup> See the Stratford Circus URL:

<http://www.stratford-circus.org.uk/>

It is aimed at everyone, from the very young to the very old, and including all cultures, and disabled people. There will be full wheelchair access, and the building will be designed with blind and deaf people in mind, so that they can navigate the building easily.

**How will it involve Asian culture?**

There will be events involving Asian music and dance, and many presentations about Bollywood films. The programs for events will also be available in Asian languages.

**How strongly will the Stratford Circus be affiliated with Newham?**

The Stratford Circus will be for everyone, no matter where they are from, but of course it will be primarily for people in Newham. It will be maintained by Newham Council, so this obviously is a big factor in how Newham-based it is. There will also be events of local interest, and partnerships made with Newham based community groups.

**How different will it be from the places already in Stratford?**

Well in Stratford at the moment we have the Picture House and the Theatre Royal, which will both be extremely close to the Stratford Circus. They however only do mainstream films (in the case of the Picture House) and new plays and musicals (at the Theatre Royal). We will do everything else which is Dance, Music, Drama (but not new Drama), and Multimedia. As we are so close to the other places mentioned, we will be working closely with them, and will not be competing with each other, in fact we share some of the same workers, and we have board members on both committees

**Will you be running courses?**

Yes, of the 1500 user participation events a year, many will be courses, the others things like workshops, rehearsals, etc. The courses will be set up by a number of groups, including drama groups, and Colleges running courses.

**What will it cost?**

The Stratford Circus will be funded in a number of different ways, including commercials, and the council. Some courses, like ones run by colleges, will be free for the student, others will either be free or will require a small donation, up to a maximum of BP 2:50.

**Will you be showing films on the big screen outside?**

No, we will not be showing feature-length films. We will be showing things like commercials, MTV, Trailers, short films, etc. Basically the technology is there to allow us to show anything we want to show. But as it will be on for most of the day, it is impossible for us to create a continuous stream of information without going to places like MTV. As well as the big screen outside, there are monitors throughout the building, showing the same thing, and there is a screen in one of the auditoriums to allow us to show Art House and Independent films that would not be shown at the Stratford Picture House.

**Is there a Big Budget?**

Yes. We got 14 million pounds from the National Lottery, which is the biggest sum of money going to such a venue, outside of Central London. The budget altogether is 17 - 18 million pounds. We were awarded the grant a few years ago, but have been sitting on it, planning the centre for two years. Work on building it has only started this April. After the initial cost, ongoing subsidy will be provided by the Council.

**Will the Centre make any profit?**

No. In order to make any profit the prices would have to be quite high, and this would make it inaccessible to many people. We don't want people to have to pay more than BP 2:50, so it has to be subsidised. There will be concessions for unemployed people, students, OAPS, and anyone under 24.

**Will it have a big impact on Stratford as a town?**

It will have a MASSIVE impact on Stratford! At the moment Stratford is dead at night time, with no life at all, but after the Stratford Circus is developed, Stratford will be buzzing with life, the streets humming of culture and activity. The huge amounts of money being invested in Stratford are bound to make it more attractive to people outside of the borough looking for an alternative to the West End.

The questions Riz, Becky and Frankie ask are concerned with the inclusion of Asian cultures, young people and the impact that it might have on Stratford and Newham as a whole.

Other similar meso-level social relations, connections with community, civic and national issues are represented in the role NYPO have in the Festival of Youth Culture in Newham. This involvement was initiated by an email that Gavin the youth leader passed on to the whole mailing list. The email advertised the Festival and requested help for events:

This is a shout going out to any one living in Newham aged between 16-24. Ever wanted to get ahead in life now is the time. Next July theres gonna be the most boombastic shakedown of theatre music, movies, moves, mcs, acting and partying not seen this side of Newham since well never. We are looking for over 70 people to help put together a week long gig of talent filled days and nights that will truly put the Eastside on the map. If you have an interest in dance, film, theatre, administration, producing, music, or banging pieces of wood together its time to fess up!<sup>141</sup>

Email is an effective way to raise awareness and pass on information regarding events which take place in the wider off-line geographical area. Young people are often unaware of such activities and promoting an event which is concerned with art, culture, music and so on can be effectively achieved through an email list which targets a group of people such as NYPO. In this way, the members can connect with and get involved in activities and events which are relevant to them.

Getting involved in such events also gives the NYPO members a space to promote, show and share their skills to the wider Newham community. For example, the KultureTeq website which they are creating, aims to complement the Newham Youth Festival and serves as a resource other young people in Newham.<sup>142</sup> Below is a plan of the website which some of the members created.

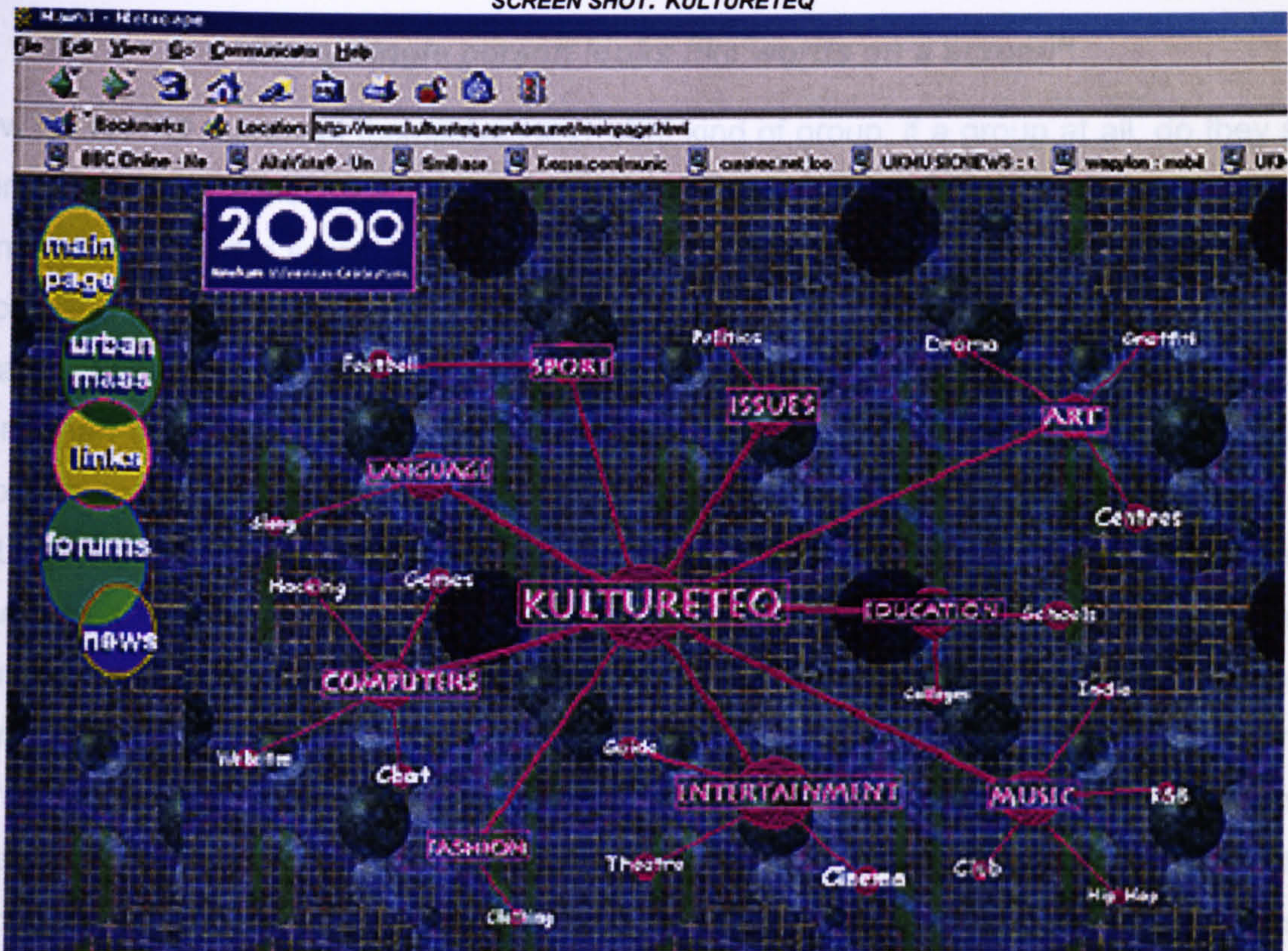
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<sup>141</sup> Gavin NYPOne\* Fwd: Festival of youth culture 31 Oct 1999

<sup>142</sup> <http://www.kultureteq.newham.net/>

Billie, Ibrar and Rhama join Riz to represent NYPO at the North East Forum and Rhama with Marylam represent NYPO at the Rafiq Forum.

FIGURE 8.07  
SCREEN SHOT: KULTURETEQ



Each element is hyperlinked so that by clicking on Hip Hop, one is taken to a page which perhaps one or two members of the group who listen and like that particular genre of music has created. There has been much discussion regarding the construction of this resource and which members can contribute to which elements. Much of the discussion has taken place off-line in face-to-face committee meetings, but some of the discussion has also taken place on the general mailing list online in order to keep members who are unaware of the project updated.<sup>143</sup>

...is becoming embedded and a part of some of the young peoples' everyday lives.

Other activities that NYPO are concerned to be involved with reflect their personal cultural, religious and political beliefs. For example, Gavin often posts details of meetings for the North East Youth Forum as well as the Youth Parliament. Interestingly, those who represent NYPO are not usually the most vociferous online contributors. For instance,

<sup>143</sup> Gavin NYPO Online\* Meetings 9 Nov 1999

<sup>144</sup> IM, 1999

<sup>145</sup> PR, Focus Group 2, 1999

<sup>146</sup> JO, Focus Group 2, 1999

<sup>143</sup> The discussions online, however, have taken place after the formal period of observation for this empirical work.

Billie, Ibrar and Rhama join Riz to represent NYPO at the North East Forum and Rhama with Maryiam represent NYPO at the Refugee Event.<sup>144</sup>

***“Every single person looks like words on a screen”***

How do NYPO represent themselves and what kind of group, if a group at all, do they see themselves as? Although it is difficult to ask people at any age what they understand by a term, which is at the same, time contested and employed widely in the media, the private, public and third sectors, ‘community’ is a concept of which the members of NYPO are very aware. They are also aware that NYPO forms a kind of ‘online community’ but that it is more than that. It is also an off-line ‘community’: ‘It is a community and we can, like talk about things’.<sup>145</sup> Another respondent and Executive Committee member confirms this by stating that the main aim of NYPO is to create an ‘online community’ between people in Newham, to create a ‘community feeling’ within and across Newham. Whenever ideas of community are discussed with the members, there is a tendency to talk about connections, friendships and improved communication. There is a perception that NYPO permits increased communication across the borough which otherwise would not happen.<sup>146</sup> Indeed another member had an acute awareness of ideas about what constitutes ‘community’.<sup>147</sup> There is an awareness that a ‘community feeling’ is important but does not really exist in ‘real life’. NYPO, according to JO, gives her the opportunity to meet people who are different to not only her personal but also her public ideas of ‘community’. In other words, it is evident that the young people are aware of different forms of social groupings, which might be described as public and private narratives of ‘community’. These ideas of community are evidently constructed around ideas and degrees of communication, relationships, differences, and connection making. Clearly, community is considered to be important and that NYPO is a form of community for the young people. However, it is also clear that NYPO as a community is becoming embedded and a part of some of the young peoples’ everyday lives:

to me it's just another world outside normal life. it's like you come home from school and courseworks and then you say to yourself: "ohhh yes, why am i sad, i can still talk to my friend online".<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Gavin NYPOonline\* Meetings 9 Nov 1999

<sup>145</sup> IM, 1999

<sup>146</sup> FR, Focus Group 2, 1999

<sup>147</sup> JO, Focus Group 2, 1999

<sup>148</sup> Rizwan 15 Jul 1999



Additionally, as NYPO is a combination of on and off-line interactions, it is emerging as a subtly different technocultural lifeworld, as has been suggested previously.

I think NYP Online is a lot like "real" communities. This is why:

In "real" communities there are people who always seem to have something to say and want to be involved in everything. @ NYP Online there are people who email on every subject of the rainbow and virtually (haha) live in the chat rooms.

In "real" communities arguments usually break out. People fight and shout at each other. @ NYP Online we argue in emails and flame each other - but luckily that doesn't happen very often. Thank god there is no virtual equivalent to "slap", "box" or "punch".

In "real" communities there are people who "keep the peace" - teachers, police, parents. @ NYP Online there is Gavin who always interferes/intervenes when people are arguing or flaming each other.

In "real" communities quiet and shy people are often bullied and intimidated. @ NYP Online there's nothing to be scared of as all you see of the person you're talking to is their emails.

In "real" communities, unfortunately, looks do matter and the good-looking, tall person gets the best treatment. @ NYP Online every single person looks like words on a screen. You only send a photo if you want to.<sup>149</sup>

> >What do you think a community is?

Community is group of people working together in order to achieve something.

> >Do you think you are part of a community?

yes

> >Is community important?

it is very important to me

> >Do you think NYP online is a community?

I think it is one of the best community

>If so, do you think it is an online community only?

No it is a community of everything e.g. media group, youth forum, etc.

> >Does being part of NYP online change the way you think about other people?

Yes it has, I think I have gain a positive feeling about others and myself as well as confidence

> >Why do you like being part of NYP online?

I feel that I am not alone on my own because there is always someone that I can talk to and share my problems with<sup>150</sup>

The young people themselves also discuss ideas of community feeling in terms of enhanced communication and the potential for connection-making not only across the borough but also across the globe. In this way there is an acute perception of local as well as global spaces.

As experiences of ethnic and cultural difference in the young people's lives are mediated through top down, institutionalised forms of 'community' or social groups, it is much easier to distance themselves from conflict and contestations of difference. As the same member suggests, at school because it is such a large form of 'community', it is easier to make friends with those who are the same colour or from the same cultural background.

And I think what's good about it (NYPO) is that everyone's different, everyone's different and you get to know someone who's different, not from, of course you have ordinary, other friends, but you get to know different parts about different people, cos there's not many communities round

<sup>149</sup> Becky Re: NYPOonline\* WANTED: help with research... 11 Jun 1999

<sup>150</sup> rahma Re: NYPOonline\* ahead of the meeting this Saturday 03 Aug 1999

here, there're not many communities around here which are like that... it's just, you just come, you do whatever then you go... you get to meet people because you get on a computer and you're all enjoying the same thing...<sup>151</sup>

Being a member of technocultural lifeworld means that connections and communication are made through a space where physical differences at least are not visible. For some members, this makes communication easier, but for others this induces reluctance to communicate, preferring face-to-face contact. For example, one NYPO member privileged communication mediated through the online community as,

(W)ell, over the internet I think, personally I do cos I'm sure like most people think that, over the Internet there, they've got more time to say what they want to say and they're less shy, cos you know when you're face to face when you meet someone you've never met before you don't want to talk to them a lot. And when you're online, you know people can't see you, you're not embarrassed, you're not shy - you can describe what you're saying more than you can when you're talking to them face to face.<sup>152</sup>

This contrasts with the view of another NYPO respondent, who argues that,

when I was on the mailing list first thing, um, I was quite nervous cos I didn't really know the people I was mailing to: I thought they might not like it if I said anything - I was quite ... but now I've met them face to face, I feel more comfortable talking to them about anything I want to talk...and I can send them an email and talk about any personal problems I have to them... I feel more close to them than before because before they were like strangers to me and I didn't really know what to say to them ...<sup>153</sup>

Nonetheless, what this illustrates is that a landscape 'in-between' has been created. Through the interactions of the online and the off-line a kind of 'community' of connections emerges, a 'community' where differences can be encouraged and different ways of communicating can take place in order for relationships to be formed: this is an *everyday technocultural lifeworld*.

### ***Reinforcing technocultural lifeworlds***

Meso-social relations are a vital part of community formation and sustainability. Connecting with wider community, regional and civic relations and activities is a way of grounding a technocultural lifeworld, in particular. It is a way of building relationships and being made aware and open to issues and events with which they might become involved. Another element of this is the smaller scale 'events' in which some the NYPO members take part. One example is the residential trip that was organised for the group by the youth

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<sup>151</sup> JO, Focus Group 2, 1999

<sup>152</sup> RR, Focus Group 2, 1999

<sup>153</sup> RM, Focus Group 2, 1999

leader, Gavin. This is an annual event where the group, or those who are able to, spend a weekend away at a residential centre to discuss projects like improving the website and other issues. They also have the chance to take part in activities which many of the young people might not have the opportunity to take part in ordinarily, such as sailing. In the comments below, it is clear that meeting together and actually spending time as a group off-line reinforces the sense of 'community' that the group feel.

**On Thu, 28 Oct 1999 21:18:05 GMT, Rizwan Rashid said:**

**>About the trip, I have to say that it was one of the best experience I have had with NYP, and it's a shame we didn't have more people from this list who came.**

**Yes, but at least we got the main members along, including you and Ibrar who haven't come on previous occasions.**

**>Who would have thought that we would have so much fun when talking about an NYP residential trip!! (no offence;D)**

**<BG>**

**>But we also learnt a lot. I know this sounds typical but I actually mean when I say learning. Not only on the Hyperzine or the other stuff this trip was supposed to be about, but discussions like religion, philosophy (i think) and other think that were arguable. This is the one thing great about NYP, it's not only 'get down with the work' it's also 'so, hows that game that you were struggling on?'**

**Yes, I also think that that is one of NYPO's good points.**

**I hope that Rahma is reading her e-mail so that she can talk to us, it was nice having her and she should post her poem to the list.**

**I'll start a new thread called: "Stories" for people to post their stories to, if they have typed them out. Even if it's only one chapter people should post so that others who didn't come can see.**

**It would be nice to start the Brightstar up again.<sup>154</sup>**

**Frank Roberts <frank.roberts@zetnet.co.uk> wrote:**

**>Yes, but at least we got the main members along, including you and Ibrar who haven't come on previous occasions.**

**Yeah, that did make a big difference especially in the discussions, you (Rizwan) and Ibrar were the leaders on the anti-feminism front (BOO...)**

**(...)**

**>It would be nice to start the Brightstar up again.**

**Well that's what we ARE doing, with help from you guys I hope. Must go cos Red Dwarf is on!<sup>155</sup>**

Clearly, the benefits of getting together, off-line, are appreciated as a vital part of the group's identity. When they get together this way, they have the chance to enhance the discussions they have online, about feminism for instance. Meeting face-to-face changes the dynamics of the discussion. For instance, Riz, who Becky suggests was one of the leaders in the anti-feminism debate, has gained confidence in his interactions online so that he now feels confident to debate and lead such issues. It is evident too that some of the conversations that are initiated online overlap in more detail off-line at their face-to-face meetings. As Riz suggests, they discuss 'work' such as the website and the hyperzine, but also more casual issues, such as how they are negotiating a particular computer game.

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<sup>154</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOne\* Debden, Essex 29 Oct 1999

<sup>155</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Debden, Essex 29 Oct 1999

A further element related to meeting face-to-face is that they can discuss other creative ideas which might have decreased in significance online, such as the Brightstar list. This list was designed as a fantasy narrative. Several members of the group have developed 'characters' for the Brightstar story and a fictional place where the story takes place. These are textual representations and inventions and the narrative is added to over time by the different characters. This takes some time, effort and commitment, but the residential trip clearly reinvigorated their creativity and commitment to this story list. Finally, meeting face-to-face and having residential trips mean that those usually very quiet members of the list can communicate and interact off-line with the other members. This is vital as not all of the members can access computers as freely or as often as the core contributors. This does not mean that they are disinterested in contributing to the mailing list, but that they may feel more comfortable interacting off-line. As argued above, there are different forms of interpersonal communication and not all the members are like Riz, who prefers online interaction. Rhama, for instance, as illustrated above, prefers to get to know the NYPO members off-line before she has the confidence to interact with them online. Another usually quiet member, Johural, enjoyed the residential trip and took it as an opportunity to meet other members of the NYPO group:

The trip to Debden, Essex was great because it was nothing like what i had imagined. i thought that all we were going to discuss the hyperzin, stratford art center, and finally write alot. But it was nothing like that because we discussed alot of things like sexism and religion. Because some people thought that women were not treat fairly as men. Also we had time to play games and even watch tv. we also went for walks and see the town shopping centre. Whice meant that it was never boring because there was always something to argue about. This was a great trip and i think that this should happen again soooon. i like to thank Gavin and Sharon for not being bossy and teacher-like and for taking time to organise this trip. Finally thanks to everyone for not making this trip dull and boring. It was also a great opportunity to meet other NYP members. it is a shame that other members had not been able to came to this trip.<sup>156</sup>

Johural undoubtedly appreciated that this was unlike a 'school trip' experience. This, it could be argued, is a key feature of the NYPO group. As it is outside the formal institution of the school community, there is more freedom to discuss issues freely and informally, without the trip being 'task driven' as many conventional school trip tends to be.

Generally the young people appreciated the technocultural lifeworld of NYPO as providing them with the opportunity and the spaces - both online and off-line to meet new people, to learn and to talk to 'elders'. Schools generally did not have the physical nor the human

resources to provide them with these spaces. Where there are computers in the schools there were several factors cited which prevented the young people from interacting with them as they would in NYPO:

- few were connected to the Internet;
- those which were tended to be used by the teachers for their own research;
- when permitted to use the computers, the young people found they were restricted to using it for certain activities only - they were prevented from surfing the Internet for what was perceived as 'fun';
- the young people also appreciated NYPO as it provided them with the chance to talk more informally to elder figures, such as teachers, and interact in different ways: there is no space or time to do this at their schools.

### Synopsis

At this juncture, some general observations can be surmised. It is vital to pause to reflect on this chapter prior to moving into the next.

For the NYPO members, their technocultural lifeworld fosters and may even embody a type of community which functions in-between the on and the off-line, which is absent in not only their personal but also their creative and educational lives. The young people are forming relationships, understanding about differences, making connections across local and global spaces and plugging into an 'information society'. They are also making connections between each other and across the borough and articulating their identities in different ways, through diverse homepages, through their discussions on line as well as those offline. They are also articulating and negotiating their relationship with ICTs by embedding them into their everyday leisure, learning and communication landscapes.

The next chapter now deals more fully with the evidence which shows how NYPO connects and relates to national and transnational contexts.

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## Chapter Nine

### *Making More of the Technocultural Lifeworld: Macro social relations*

#### Preamble

The previous chapter explored the more micro-level social relations which are articulated and represented by and through the technocultural lifeworlds of NYPO. This chapter addresses the connections and relationships that are constructed by NYPO on national and transnational levels.

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#### Section I: Articulating Different Communities

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##### **Macro-social relations (e.g. national and transnational)**

The fifth level of social relations and cyberspace that Hakken identifies is very much located in the context of the processes of globalisation and the imaginings of cities within the global information society which were discussed in chapter three. The level of macro social relations questions the ways in which cyberspace and other such ICTs mediate the imagination and reproduction of cultures, in the context of globalisation.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, this level questions the relevance of national cultures in the constructions of cyberspace cultures. Hakken goes so far to question whether cyber technologies have the potential to be used in the reconstruction of the 'nation' as a meaningful social formation.

In relation to this research then and the NYPO case study, this level can help to explore analytically the ways in which NYPO mediates different cultures and indeed what kind of technoculture(s) is created through the interactions of the NYPO members (entities) on and offline. How do NYPO members imagine their online culture and indeed their offline

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<sup>1</sup> Hakken (1999), 9

cultures, and thus what kind of technocultural lifeworld emerges at the intersection of the on and the offline?

### *"Dumb Dome"*

The NYPO group is by no means an insular group, enclosed and distanced from the world around them. This is a common criticism levelled at 'virtual' communities and one which Robins, in particular, champions. On the contrary, the NYPO members often use the medium that mediates their community to discuss wider issues that might affect them. They also disseminate information about other events which are happening outside of their immediate physical context. The NYPO members will often pose questions which might be of a political nature to the list, such as the example below provided by Frankie:

What do people think of what happened yesterday in the capital? A huge crowd of protestors, campaigning against capitalism took control of the streets. It did in some cases get violent, with some aggression towards the police, who were unable to contain the masses. The police had to withdraw, with one van running over a woman in its haste to leave. The woman is now recovering from intensive wounds in hospital. Some campaigners are saying that they will return the same time next month. Elsewhere, marchers campaigned against 3rd world debt, and three young men scaled the walls of a local prison in an attempt to show how unsafe it was to house a pedophile there. What do you think of these acts? Stupid or responsible? Wrong or correct? You tell me.<sup>2</sup>

This posting refers to the 1999 J18 Reclaim the Streets protest which occurred in the centre of London. This posting, however, only elicited one response. The response was from Becky who suggested that 'this is London. It's *a/ways* like that'.<sup>3</sup>

There is also discussion about other national celebrations and events which are celebrated and discussed in other media. One example of this is the Millennium celebrations. London was the national focal point for these celebrations with several 'Millennium Projects' being constructed, costing millions of taxpayers' pounds. The main project to nationally attract much criticism is the Millennium Dome. This monstrous icon is located opposite Newham and represents Britain in the Millennium. It also, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Frankie NYPOne\* Yesterday's outbursts of aggressive political activism 19 Jun 1999

<sup>3</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Yesterday's outbursts of aggressive political activism 20 Jun 1999

represents millions of pounds, which could have been funnelled into other projects in low-income areas such as Newham. The members of NYPO are precisely the people who the Dome is supposed to attract and inspire. The members of NYPO do not have a high opinion of this construction and indeed, this ties in with their attitude towards the 'millennium' in general, as is evidenced by the comments below.

**Frank dared to ask about the "Dumb Dome"**

**>Another question (to everyone), what do people think of the Dome now that it is a few weeks away from its opening?**

**\*I\* think it's useless... i ask: WHAT IS THE WORTH??? Some of you will say that it's to celebrate two thousand years of "human-modern-style-life", to mark the beginnig of a new era, to honour the queen, to show respect... well let me tell you what i think.I think all this \*dumb dome\* (and i refuse to put caps on the D) is just a way to get a lot of attention around the world. Tourist from around the world are going to come and people will also broadcast live images to thier country. If you think about it, England is the only major country who has prepared itself for the millennium. And the reason for all that attraction of people around the world?? Let me tell you. While all the people will either being ripped off by the millennium-wheel-whatever, and others drinking their heads off, the Stealth planes from english air garage will leave base to invade those countries and take over them. They will try to take over as many countries as possible and then drop an atomic bomb on New Dehli and they will try to take over and build up an empire just like they did many years ago. It's all a ruse....**

**Remember:it's what i think, not what is goin to happen...<sup>4</sup>**

**Gavin mr-i-sort-it-all-out said:**

**>Hmmm ... try to get more sleep. But why bomb New Dehli?**

**I sure will dear comrade...and why New Dehli in particular? Well because if you might remember back in 1940's when Ghandi formed his Congress party to try and get India their independance, the British Empire knew that they had to accept their demand so they did. They sent out Earl Mounbatten to divide the so-called Hindustan into a Muslim and hindu area. But they didn't want to do that and inside them they were firing with anger because they were forced to do that. Of course they could have just shot them all and say "get back to work, and when we need you for the war, we'll call you" but being victorious in the 2nd world war, they didn't want to show the world how 'old traditional very posh" england also had bitterness in them. So that's why. Now that they are not in a heroic mood, they need revenge.**

**That's why, that's why.<sup>5</sup>**

When Frankie asks people what other members are going to be doing on Millennium Eve, a night which the media suggests everyone should remember, the responses are less than enthusiastic. Becky, who has already declared herself an atheist, sees little relevance in the celebrations and intends to stay in surfing the Internet. The reason for

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<sup>4</sup> Rizwan Re: NYPOonline\* dumb dome 12 Dec 1999

<sup>5</sup> Rizwan Re: NYPOonline\* dumb dome 18 Dec 1999



this, she suggests, is because all her 'so-called friends' are going to parties and she is not.<sup>6</sup> Riz displays a similar attitude:

**Frank:**

**>What is everybody doing for "Millennium Eve" and "New Millennium Day"**

Hmmmmmm, let me seeee..... wake up at 2:pm, have breakfast, watch favourite cartoons, go upstairs work on the computer like a freak for the rest of the day until lunch which is 4 pm. Then start my [www.rizwan.htmlplanet.com](http://www.rizwan.htmlplanet.com). and then...shall i go on???IT'S JUST MILLENIUM DAY, 2000 YEARS. SO WHAT? What's the celebration about? What's the Dome about?? I don't even understand why the even celebrate a new year. It's just a day like all the others to me (partly because i am Muslim and we don't have new year until...when was that again Arif?)<sup>7</sup>

As Riz and Becky suggest, the Millennium celebrations do not mean much to them because of religious differences. A further reason, it might be argued, is the lack of celebratory activities in which young people can take part. The alternatives seem to be staying in and watching the celebrations on television or surfing the web. Other wider connections apart from physical interests are made in more global spaces, as the following explains.

### ***Exploring complex articulations of global spaces: language***

Part of the *otaku*-type learning community, which Tobin identifies and which NYPO have constructed, is about the sharing of knowledge, experience and skills. This includes some exchanges about the specifications of their tools, the hard and software, which the members use. Very often they discuss these issues in a proprietary manner. In other words they, in a sense, boast about what computer specifications they have and how powerful their computers might be. This can be interpreted as a particularly male characteristic, but Breeze is one of the members who shows her knowledge of web authoring skills. This is clear in the exchange below.<sup>8</sup>

**Frank Roberts <[frank.roberts@zetnet.co.uk](mailto:frank.roberts@zetnet.co.uk)> wrote:**

**>On Wed, 10 Nov 1999 21:28:14 +0000, Becky said:**

**>>Gavin Sealey <[gsealey@globalnet.co.uk](mailto:gsealey@globalnet.co.uk)> wrote:**

**>>>I tend to think that people should have at least a version 3 browser. If they don't they're just not taking the web seriously.**

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<sup>6</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* Y2K Celebrations - What are you doing? 24 Nov 1999

<sup>7</sup> Rizwan Re: NYPOne\* Y2K Celebrations - What are you doing? 24 Nov 1999

<sup>8</sup> Turkle (1995) and Stone (1991) both comment on the 'male' and 'female' characteristics.

>>I'd say that's discrimination. What if they don't want to use IE anything? \*I\* use Netscape...

>And I use Opera, an excellent browser which has loads of features that IE and NS doesn't have AND uses less RAM (IE and NS are both examples of bloatware).

Well, Netscape does have a HTML editor and some other stuff as well. But I just don't like Microsoft 'cause they have a big monopoly on the market. And Bill(ionaire) Gates is really rich & I'm jealous.

>I do have a copy of IE 3 though, even though it's not installed, it still manages to work and associates itself with every .HTM file. (That reminds me, you should always name ALL files \*.HTM rather than \*.HTML

I figured that out. It's not long since I had a 486 with eight-letter filenames and three-letter extensions, and there were always problems with \*.html filenames.

>as the latter causes some problems on some people's computers and across the net [though it works on mine] )

>But me and Becky are just Freaks right?

"Cyber-geek freaks"...<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to note the pride and sometimes condescension evident in some of the comments. Often this exhibition of knowledge by Breeze, in particular, is countered by jovial comments directed at the representation of her skills and knowledge. In the example below Riz, who enjoys friendly competition with Breeze, comments on one feature of her website:

I have found one bad thing about \*her\* website; The hit counter. As an experienced Private detective, i investigated the case. When i first went there (to her site), the first thing i did was to scroll down and satisfy myself to see only 11 hits. When i went through all the other links, i came back to the homepage and was quite suprised to see 14 hits. I was wondering wether others came to visit while i was looking at the wonderful collage. But no, it was all a ruse to get as many hit as she/he could (for security measures i will not say who). Because she/he knew that the person visiting would have to come back to the main page wher the counter is situated and the reason you ask? BECAUSE ALL THE OTHER MAJOR LINKS ARE THERE, that's why. That would get him/her more counts and then come to me and say

"Look, Riz One, i have ... counts, how many do you have?"

and i would say

"HAHAHA, nice one."

Detective Claude Francois

(for those who didn't get it, that's all a joke)<sup>10</sup>

Becky does respond in defence however by suggesting reasons why her counter did not function as it should. She suggests that the site from which she took the counter was 'down' so she had to make temporary arrangements.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* The Hyperzine has landed 12 Nov 1999

<sup>10</sup> Rizwan NYPOne\* buffy stuff 13 Nov 1999

<sup>11</sup> Becky Re: NYPOne\* buffy stuff 14 Nov 1999

Certain members are recognised throughout the group to be great experimenters with software that is freely available on the Internet. They recognise that the use of such complicated software, and learning to use the software, carries kudos and respect from other web users. Riz illustrates this valuable sense of knowledge and equates it as knowing another language:

For those of you websdesigners who only speak english, don't despair. You are now like me; a bilingual...no wait a minute it's trilingual! Anyway, since you guys know HTML, you are now bilingual! Remember H...T...M...Language! And if someone asks you prove that you can speak HTML, simple all you do is answer as follow!  
They ask: How do you say hello in HTML?  
You say: "Open brackets/html/close brackets"  
They ask: How do you say how are you in HTML?  
You say: "Open brackets/title/close brackets/How are you/open brackets/forward slash/title/close brackets"  
They ask: How do you say bye in HTML?  
You say: "Open brackets/forward slash/html/close brackets"<sup>12</sup>

Some, like Frankie, reminisce about 'the good old days', which is really very recent 'history', when web authoring was simply a matter of writing in the language of html:

**On Mon, 15 Nov 1999 00:44:24 +0000, Gavin Sealey said:**

**>I have just spent a lot of time revising the Hyperzine ... I thought it looked okay in Navigator4 but that was before I had added my floating frames and those of Rizwan and Kashan.**

The dreaded Riz and Kash!! Trying to crash our tinny computers with their ridiculous java applets and floating frames again!!!! Wait till I send you the latest super-virus!!!! Hah! <only joking, don't get mad and send a virus to me!!!>

...

**> though I have to say that IE5 is the best browser that I've used.**

Humpff... <mutters "bloatware...">

Beck in the good OLD days there was such a thing called "Standard HTML". It followed certain rules, had certain tags, and everybody could view it equally. There were lots of browsers around that all displayed the HTML in the same way. Then Micro\$oft came along...nowadays most pages take ages to download, flash irritatingly, and use complicated java applets for things that HTML can do easily <example: image maps>...<sup>13</sup>

This shows the already emerging historical sense of the Internet and indeed the sense that the members are experienced and knowledgeable. Frankie, above, also exhibits a

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<sup>12</sup> Rizwan *NYPOnline\** to all webdesigners... 29 Nov 1999

<sup>13</sup> Frankie *Re: NYPOnline\** seen the error of my ways 15 Nov 1999

critical attitude to the monopolising power that Microsoft has over the software industry that provides their tools with which to create.

***Exploring complex articulations of global spaces: chatting***

One of the most attractive aspects of the Internet for many of the NYPO members is the thousands of 'chat sites' that are available for synchronous but 'anonymous' interaction and communication with a global audience. However, the members who use the chat sites show a high degree of sophistication and critical judgement about the various chat sites or rooms. Breeze, for instance, shows awareness about that which many adults are fearful: cybersex and the fear that their 'children' will be sexually propositioned:

Try <http://www.teenchat.co.uk> (I think that's it) for a chat room that is actually better than most I have browsed. Yes there are sad losers and pathetic people wanting cyber sex - but what's new?<sup>14</sup>

Those who use chatrooms will often share their experiences or amusing anecdotes to the rest of the group.

I'll tell you something that was really funny. I was in this chat room and people were asking about where everyone was from. London... Manchester...Liverpool... No problem there. However, when this girl said she was from Scunthorpe, the anti-swearing mechanism in the chat room kicked in and it came out as "S\*\*\*\*horpe"... So then she tried separating the letters - S C U N T H O R P E - and it still showed \*s. So then everybody started trying to work out a way of writing Scunthorpe properly! At last I figured it out. I had to put hyphens in the word - "s-c-u...", etc...

Well, it was funny at the time...<sup>15</sup>

Certain chat sites will be recommended to other members if they show interest in connecting to such sites.

Well here is a selection of chatrooms you can go to  
WITHOUT JAVA

1.[www.splash.chatroom.net](http://www.splash.chatroom.net) (You will need to sign up)

2.[www.dotmusic.com](http://www.dotmusic.com) (Its quite crap!)

The best one really are the ones with java

WHICH IS

1.[www.capitalfm.com](http://www.capitalfm.com) (Its my favourite one)

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<sup>14</sup> Becky NYPOonline\* TeenChat 16 Aug 1999

<sup>15</sup> Becky NYPOonline\* anti swearing thingies in chat rooms 27 Aug 1999

2. [www.teenchat.co.uk](http://www.teenchat.co.uk) (A huge variety of rooms)  
3. [www.bollywoodchat.com](http://www.bollywoodchat.com) (Mostly for asians but quite fun)  
I usually have the odd chat about finding out about the person, About life (the same boring life!)  
What do you study and just regular chat really.<sup>16</sup>

**Chandni Tanna <chunglee2@hotmail.com> wrote:**

**>Well here is a selection of chatrooms you can go to**

**>WITHOUT JAVA**

**>1. [www.splash.chatroom.net](http://www.splash.chatroom.net) (You will need to sign up)**

I hate signing up to things. You usually get a stupid "welcome" email and sometimes weekly emails after that. Sooo annoying.

**>2. [www.dotmusic.com](http://www.dotmusic.com) (Its quite crap!)**

**>The best one really are the ones with java**

**>WHICH IS**

**>1. [www.capitalfm.com](http://www.capitalfm.com) (Its my favourite one)**

**>2. [www.teenchat.co.uk](http://www.teenchat.co.uk) (A huge variety of rooms)**

Been there, done that and put a link to it on my website.<sup>17</sup>

Like the posturing that surrounds web authoring skills and tool-knowledge, members are sometimes keen to show that they are knowledgeable on other places in cyberspace such as chatrooms, as Breeze shows above. This is particularly evident when NYPO members who never usually contribute regularly to the mailing list, post some recommendations, such as above. Nonetheless, such postings, like the following example, sometimes have the affect of encouraging a response from others who might usually be quiet. Chandni posts three website addresses of 'bhangra' music sites, which is an important part of young Punjabi identity.<sup>18</sup> The posting elicits the following response from Arif:

Hi "Chandni Tanna" !

Thankyou for giving out the useful bhangra addresses I really like listening to bhangra music but never get the time to find out whats new, because I'm not that farmilier with bhangra music and friends think i'm a bit crazy not knowing much about it and what I'm missing, being a punjabi I don't really know much about my own culture this will help me learn more .

So thanx mate for the address!!<sup>19</sup>

There are other ways in which NYPO members use the Internet to communicate. One such tool is America Online's Instant Messaging service. One can download the

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<sup>16</sup> Chandni *NYPO*Online\* Chat 14 Oct 1999

<sup>17</sup> Becky Re: *NYPO*Online\* Chat 14 Oct 1999

<sup>18</sup> Chandni *NYPO*Online\* FOR ALL YOU BHANGRA FANS (IF THERE ARE ANY) 21 Oct 1999. See Dwyer (1998), 'Contested Identities', 51, 61

<sup>19</sup> Arti Re: *NYPO*Online\* FOR ALL YOU BHANGRA FANS(IF THERE ARE ANY) 22 Oct 1999

software for free and the messages sent to a 'contact' with the software appear immediately on their screen. This kind of software is used in business too, but is not perceived to be as private or secure as email communication. Nonetheless, it is highly appealing to young people because of the instantaneous nature of the communication. In the example below, Breeze encourages people to download the software and to give her their contact details:

Who on here is signed up to AOL's Instant Messaging? If you are, could you \*please\* tell me your names (privately if you want) so I can put you on my Buddy List. If not, please sign up if possible, it's at [www.aol.com](http://www.aol.com). I advise everyone who hasn't updated their version to update - there are some rather cool-sounding things on the new 2 meg program... And remember to \*sign up\* every time you go online! My name is "Astralis86". This is because I'm involved in the Brightstar story and my character is called Silverbeam Astralis.<sup>20</sup>

Frankie replies with his 'handle' of 'Frankieroberto' and suggests that they could arrange to log on at a certain time every evening.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting that the NYPO members do not limit their communicative channels to email. They are eager to explore other shared 'communities' and communicative channels that are freely available on the Internet. Yet, it is clear that they are still keen to share those different channels with their 'friends' on NYPO. This sharing of experience and sharing of knowledge about software and other tools available to them, through which they can exploit the Internet, is an important facet of the NYPO technocultural lifeworld.

### ***Exploring complex articulations of global spaces: capitalism***

It could and has been argued that the Internet has moved from a model of free speech and anarchism to one which is driven by capitalism, as shown in chapter three. Certainly one of Robins and Webster's critiques of such a technoculture is that it is driven by capitalism but that it is not a revolutionary new capitalism.<sup>22</sup> They suggest that the advocates of technoculture are naive futurologists only interested in continuism and that the enthusiasm for a technocultural landscape is driven by economic possibilities:

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<sup>20</sup> Becky NYPOonline\* AOL Instant Messaging 21 Nov 1999

<sup>21</sup> Frankie Re: NYPOonline\* AOL Instant Messaging 25 Nov 1999

<sup>22</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 232-235

What they find exciting are the vast commercial possibilities inherent in a new technological product - the Internet or digital broadcasting of virtual reality games. But when it comes to new social and political forms appropriate to the new global order, they don't have a clue - all they can come up with is interactive consumption and virtual community. Behind the cyber-rhetoric, there is both a fundamental conservatism and an impoverished imagination. Change is really the last thing they want. They want a future that just perpetuates the past. Work on your computer, consume through the digital TV, and be happy with your own personal virtual community. Just be happy with the trivial pursuits of the digital life. The fundamental principles of capitalist society will continue to exert that famous dull compulsion.<sup>23</sup>

To some extent, it can be argued that the Internet is becoming increasingly commercialised and utilised as a conduit for consumerism. There are, though, ways in which the 'consumer' can circumvent and exercise resistance to this increasing commercialisation of the Internet, and these strategies are recognised by many of the NYPO members. For instance, the example below shows the scepticism that some of the NYPO have over 'money-making' websites, particularly over one scheme which Hannan's website promotes:

My money-making website has been updated once again. These offers are genuine!  
Visit it at <http://GetPaidToSurfTheWeb.virtualave.net>  
-Look out for the one that pays \$4 for a referral.  
-And the one that pays \$50 for 4 referrals  
-And the one that pays for reading email<sup>24</sup>

Hannan is aware that many of the NYPO members are suspicious of such schemes and some are keen to find out exactly how such a scheme can work. Frankie, for instance asks if Hannan has actually ever received money from the scheme.<sup>25</sup> Riz complains,

The first time you told me about that, i beleived you and signed up with Alladvantages.com, reffering you. then they said will email me telling me when i can download some 'bars' Well let me tell you it's been now 7 months and no response. all i get is update emails saying nothing!!! So tell me what sould i do!!!!<sup>26</sup>

Breeze explain to Hannan why other NYPO members are suspicious about such schemes:

Hannan <d-bergkamp@arsenalfc.net> wrote:  
>Why is everyone so sceptical?

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<sup>23</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 234

<sup>24</sup> Hannan *NYPOonline*\* My money making website 31 Aug 1999

<sup>25</sup> Frankie *Re: NYPOonline*\* My money making website 31 Aug 1999

<sup>26</sup> Rizwan *Re: NYPOonline*\* My money making website 04 Sep 1999

Because "get rich quick" schemes are exactly the sort of thing you need to be sceptical \*about\*.  
>You've got nothing to lose by signing up. All you give is your address to send your cheques to and email address to contact you easily.

Otherwise known as "SPAM"

> If these do turn out to be a con then all you have done is display a couple of adbars ...ruining the whole ambience of the website...

>and received some email that gave you no benefit.

Yeah, spam

She suggests that the schemes encourage 'spam' which is unwanted email marketing and that it means one's website is a highly frustrating experience for other users. Indeed, visiting Hannan's website is an incredibly irritating experience as a result of the adverts and extra 'windows' which are opened automatically. This not only slows and sometimes crashes one's computer, but it also distracts and discourages the user from the actual content of the website. The NYPO members are very aware about capitalism and the economic exploitation that pervades the Internet. Yet, they are also aware that they can avoid certain aspects of this exploitation and are keen to promote those strategies of resistance. There are other schemes which are sometimes represented in other ways. Breeze posts this example below:

...check out the Hunger site @ [www.thehungersite.com](http://www.thehungersite.com) and press a button to make the website's advertising sponsors give a free cup of rice to starving people. It doesn't cost you anything to be kind... (well not in this case)<sup>27</sup>

This type of scheme may or may not be legitimate, but it could be argued that it shows how NYPO members are aware of not only exploitative schemes through Internet use, but that they are also aware of the economic potential that the Internet has. Far from being naively exploited as consumers by the 'powers' of capitalism, they are aware of how a communicative tool like the Internet can enable and facilitate ways in which to subvert economic exploitation.

## Section II: Enlarging Connections

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### The production and reproduction of political-economic structures

This final level can be related back to the theoretical discourses which were examined in chapter three and four. These discourses have created ways of knowing and

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<sup>27</sup> Becky NYPOne\* Feed the Hungry... 8 Sep 1999



representing the processes that have overlapped to construct a way of seeing and talking about a 'global information society' and indeed the meanings of 'community' within such a society. It might be argued that these discourses constitute wider structural forces that shape the way in which technocultural lifeworlds are being shaped. This is shown to be evident in chapter four which explored the politics of community-ICT initiatives and the UK government's thinking in relation to how such initiatives might be viewed as a way of countering social exclusion in UK cities.

There are multiple ways in which the NYPO members negotiate online spaces and means by which they create their landscapes of computing in order to construct their technocultural lifeworld. One of the main questions that Hakken asks and which is most salient for this research is: 'What does [cyberspace] ethnography suggest about the relationship between cyberspace and some of the changes in spatiality already perceived by some to be underway - globalisation, or the decoupling of space and place - and what are the likely longer term implications of such changes?'<sup>28</sup> This is very pertinent in the context of the discussion in chapter three with respect to the idea of the city in a global information society as well as the political rhetoric of social exclusion in cities: in other words, the idea that the city is in decline in the context of globalisation.

One might also relate the NYPO technocultural lifeworld with the political-economic landscape of youth identity. Much of this was discussed in chapter six of this research. It was suggested that young people do not have access to power and channels of communication which might influence policy. Their 'voice' is not often heard in the public sphere and indeed in the private familial sphere. Coupled with these institutional formations of community, through schooling for instance, mean that encounters with difference is restricted. Learning is also highly structured and their experiences with new ICTs is limited and restricted. Additionally, the wider social, economic and political context of socially excluded urban areas influences the everyday lifeworlds of young people in urban areas. Chapter six, again, illustrates this by examining the strategies of control that structure the everyday lifeworlds of young people in public spaces. Such

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<sup>28</sup> Hakken (1999), 9

strategies include the CCTV surveillance that is experienced by certain young people, particularly those who are perceived to be 'troublemakers'. Very often, as Armstrong and Norris have shown, these perceptions are constructed around ethnicity and style of dress.

The issue of political-economic structures can be conflated with Robins' critiques of the technocultural landscape. If one considers Robins' proposition explored in chapters three and six of this research in the context of what is happening in and around NYPO on and off line, several points can be explored. Robins suggests that 'the technoculture is a culture of denial' of the disorderly possibilities of contemporary 'urban reality'. A 'technoculture', Robins furthers, seeks a continuation of 'the community of the pre-modern city' which exhibits the 'rational order of modern urbanism', which leads to a 'de-realised urban reality':

The advocacy of technological culture is linked to ideals of communication and community - the restoration of community through the enhancement of communication - promising an ordered refuge from the disorders of change in the real world.<sup>29</sup>

Communication does not simplistically 'create' community. Channels of communication open to young people living in low-income urban areas are limited, however. Communication across different cultures is particularly restricted, as is suggested by some of the NYPO members. Webber, in 1964, argued that:

(T)he enlarged freedom to communicate outside one's place-community that the merging technological and institutional changes promise, coupled with an ever-increasing mobility and ever-greater degrees of specialisation, will certainly mean that urbanites will deal with each other over greater and greater distances. The spatial patterns of their interactions with others will undoubtedly be increasing disparate, less tied to the place in which they reside or work, less and less marked by the unifocal patterns that marked cities in an earlier day.<sup>30</sup>

Although this is a visionary comment to have made at that time, it may still be used to describe what technocultural lifeworlds like NYPO offer. However, this research shows that instead of the logical conclusion being what Robins terms a 'refuge from the

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<sup>29</sup> Robins (1999), 44

<sup>30</sup> Webber (1964), 147

disorders of change in the real world',<sup>31</sup> technocultural lifeworlds instead resist the privileging of face-to-face communication which is a feature of some 'ideal community', critiqued by Young.<sup>32</sup> Technocultural lifeworlds like NYPO offer those residing in marginalised urban areas some kind of 'community' which does not initially require communal meeting places or high levels of face recognition, but ultimately may foster such ingredients of urban life if desired.

Once, it *might* have further been argued that the embedding and institutionalisation of ICTs in 'deprived communities' by predominantly private and public interests was just about a pan-capitalist theory of neoliberalism that Armitage proposes. Armitage suggests that the neoliberal discourse of technology is intricately bound with notions of free enterprise, economic globalisation and multi-national corporatism:<sup>33</sup>

this discourse is principally concerned with legitimating the political and cultural control of individuals, groups, and new social movements through the material and ideological production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of self-styled 'virtual' technologies like virtual reality and cyberspace.<sup>34</sup>

This discourse is also about the evolution of the relations of 'virtual class' whose members include Tony Blair, Bill Gates and Newt Gingrich. Thus, Armitage suggests, it is vital to equip the 'digitally dispossessed' with active political strategies and voices.<sup>35</sup> Without advancing such resistance strategies for groups and individuals - community groups of the third sector perhaps - the increasingly institutionalised neoliberal discourse of ICTs posited by members of the 'virtual class' will become an immensely hegemonic means of social control. Electronic spaces and place-based urban spaces are always shaped by conflicts and social struggles over access and control. Various actors exercise what may be seen as uneven amounts of 'power' in these contexts. However, it is vital for policy thinking to understand to what extent these struggles influence the shape and uses of urban spaces and places after the introduction of community-ICT

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<sup>31</sup> Robins (1999), 44

<sup>32</sup> Young (1990b), 232

<sup>33</sup> See Kroker & Weinstein (1994)

<sup>34</sup> Armitage (1999)

<sup>35</sup> Armitage (1999)

initiatives like those types of initiatives in chapter four. As a key community development figure suggests,

Lots of people are very happy having online relationships with people they've never met - they're comfortable - they're not necessarily deep, although sometimes they are deep...relationships with people they never or seldom meet - they are comfortable with that. Against that, in neighbourhoods, people have tremendous conflicts - you mustn't forget, communities are full of conflicts - they are riddled with conflict, and some of them overflow to the poorest neighbourhoods are ghettos in the sense of being dominated by tribal warfare, you know, the dominant families make sure that they can control what happens in the community, the locality, um, so you know there's actually a problem there...the quality of relationships online in virtual communities across the globe can be very strong; the quality of relationships on a local level can be appalling - very negative...<sup>36</sup>

Members of NYPO, this research argues, are simultaneously reclaiming and resisting hegemonic global and private sector dominant discourses about the global information society. They are doing this by shaping their own spaces by their technocultural practices in their different landscapes, virtual and physical. In this way, the power of human agency is revealed:

ICTs are more than tools, all right, they're more than a tool because they're culturally loaded as a tool and they're not there for any particular purpose...<sup>37</sup>

The space being shaped is a type of community in-between the on and the off-line, a landscape through which understandings and articulations of identities, conflict, difference, relationships, connections may be approached - understandings which acknowledge the everyday tensions of living in a simultaneously global and local 'community':

Technology will anyway, whether we like it or not, celebrate diversity - that's what I think. For example, somebody, when we were doing the INSINC exercise, er, 3 years ago now, somebody said look at the way black groups picked up community radio - fantastic - very individualistic use of a particular technology: or what happens when black groups get hold of internet, and, you know, the potential for music and, um, live video over the internet and whatever, and when that comes, they'll be ready and they'll grab it and it'll be distinctive - a distinctive diversity, you know, and that's what I would expect.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> KH, 1999

<sup>37</sup> KH, 1999

<sup>38</sup> KH, 1999

The technocultural lifeworld emerging, thus, is a means through which global and local connections are formed, made sense of and negotiated, and through which communities of difference can be fostered and mediated.

### Synopsis

The previous and this chapter have presented the empirical evidence which has elicited how a particular group of young people living in a 'socially excluded' urban area have constructed their technocultural lifeworld. Integral to this technocultural lifeworld are relationships, connection-making, differences and the articulation of identities and differences. The evidence was organised around six analytical levels, each of which examined the ways in which a group might relate to various micro and macro level of social relations, through landscapes of computing.

It could be argued that it is helpful at this stage to understand the evolving technocultural lifeworld which NYPO have constructed, as one third sector respondent suggests, in terms of

the overlaying of the virtual and the face to face - local virtual and local face to face. Connections because of hotlinks and so on, you know, connections to the outside world are enormously powerful - they bring in, I'll just give as an example, the local, um, authorities research from their committee on building on green space or whatever, um, and you link to it...and you can go further, link to statutory regulations from the DETR or whatever all on your little community website - it's wonderful - I think that's really exciting. The next step then is to say, OK, where's the...peoples' virtual interest communities and do they overlap, overlapping circles - I think that's really quite interesting, but I think that's, we're talking 5 or 10 years hence, I mean not for you probably, but I think in actual terms and understanding how peoples' communities of interest overlap...baseball cap collectors, or whatever they are - you know and how that overlaps with your local community or local interest. Now, one of the questions I ask in that research is...comes back to this question of information income... and a lot of it is now being done with people who they've never met, globally, what happens to local communication? Because, is local community activity threatened by the ability of communicating globally with your virtual interest community?<sup>39</sup>

The ability for young people to 'extend their voices' is powerful and something which young people have very often been prevented from doing. There are very few opportunities for young people to reach a global audience, other than through the Internet. As the research shows, though, the young people of NYPO can also extend

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<sup>39</sup> KH, 1999

their voices to reconnect with local issues which might affect their everyday lifeworlds. Hence, the NYPO technocultural lifeworld can go some way to allaying the concerns that some, like KH, might have regarding 'virtual' communities about overlapping interests and what becomes of local community interests when one is communicating globally. Rather than the Internet *itself* extending young peoples' voices, though, this research shows that the Internet mediates certain social relations and forms of interaction which the young people shape in a way which forms a 'coherent' online group/community. As Abbott suggests,

The Web is clearly offering the young people who use it for publication a highly sophisticated and complex means of speaking to their peers, to others interested in the same topics and to those they seek to influence. It is extending their voices, offering them previously unattainable access to other countries and is providing interaction at increasingly complex and sophisticated levels.<sup>40</sup>

They do this through their landscapes of computing, through the habits and behaviour that they adopt. It is a type of community produced in a technocultural landscape, as there is evidence to suggest that the NYPO members are concerned with the organisation of the communication channels for the group, such as various chat, mailing lists and homepage formats. There is also evidence that NYPO members like to maintain connections with the group if they have not physically been in Newham for some time, or if they move out of Newham to College or University. Additionally, the nature of asynchronous communication means that if a member has been absent or non-communicative for some time, it is not an issue with other members. In other words, there is no sense of animosity when a member does not contribute. This is not to say that it is not acknowledged, and indeed members will often post a message 'wondering' where a particular member is or why they have not been contributing. It is simply that it is accepted that members will be absent at some times, either because they do not have the usual access to equipment, they are on holiday with their family or they have exams.

So to summarise, there are a number of initial points that can be made and carried through to the next part of this thesis:

- 1) NYPO have constructed and a technocultural lifeworld that has emerged from the in-betweenness of the on and the off-line.
- 2) This technocultural lifeworld is a space for informal learning:
  - space of peer support;
  - space for criticism;
  - space for conflict;
  - space for discussion and differences about issues such as sexuality, religion, body image and sexism.
- 3) These issues are not easily discussed off-line.
- 4) It is a space which gives them time to think about how to answer and when to answer.
- 5) This technocultural lifeworld is gateway to explore the net.
- 6) The technocultural lifeworld encourages self-learning and life-long learning.
- 7) The technocultural lifeworld offers young people the place to explore different parts of their identity.
- 8) It offers a space for creativity.

This research argues that NYPO does indeed form part of a 'technocultural landscape', mediated through specific experiences of the young people's landscapes of computing. It shows a uniquely progressive representational politics of youth. It does not, as Robins suggests, offer an escape from the 'real world' of difference and disorder into a mythic realm of stability and order. It creates a space in-between - a space of negotiations between the online and the off-line landscapes, which relies on the contingency of the 'virtual' and the 'physical'.

This part of the thesis has developed Robin's critique of virtual urbanity and the technocultural landscape by considering the everyday practices of how communities construct their lifeworlds within a technocultural landscape. The chapters have reclaimed the idea of 'technoculture' to describe how a particular community-ICT initiative has been successful in articulating a technocultural lifeworld. These chapters

have also shown how young people can connect and relate on multiple levels to each other and to their local and global 'communities'. It has shown how they have constructed their technocultural lifeworld which is located at the fissures of on and off-line social relations. Their identities and experiences are re-produced through this technocultural lifeworld and the result is the creation of a place which offers the young people multiple ways of interacting, communicating and creating.

The next chapter, which introduces the final part of this research, reconnects the themes which have been explored in **Parts One** and **Two**. It arrives at some conclusions about ways of thinking about community-ICT relations in policy discourse, the interplay between on and off-line community, and the construction of technocultural lifeworlds.

*On the Net*

On computers, on the Net  
Is where you'll find us - you can bet  
Talking, talking - you can't ignore us  
The Internet - will never bore us

NYP - my friends and me  
Part of one big Net community

Gavin the man - can always rap  
None of his talks are ever crap  
Frank's the biggest email sender  
We all know he's a great Eastender

NYP - my friends and me  
Part of one big Net community

Becky's emails are very long  
But what she says is never wrong  
Rizwan's website is called Friendstastic  
So darned big - it's just boombastic

NYP - my friends and me  
Part of one big Net community

Ibrar's a real computer freak  
On his 'puter all day, all week  
Like me, Bill, he knows the stats  
When it comes to computers - we're both bats

NYP - my friends and me  
Part of one big Net community



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**PART THREE**

**INTERPLAY BETWEEN POLICY  
DISCOURSE AND TECHNOCULTURAL  
LIFEWORLDS**

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## INTRODUCTION TO PART THREE

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This final Part of the thesis is dedicated to threading together the themes which have been explored in **Parts One and Two**. **Part One** highlighted the different perspectives and visions about technologies and community-ICT relations. The main discourses which drive these ways of thinking were drawn out and related to how community-ICT initiatives are thought about and constructed in practice. The themes which were identified considered the tensions in the language used to construct policy discourse which tended to be technologically determining. Additionally, the discourse of social inclusion, the digital divide and possibilities for the recreation of 'community' through ICTs was identified as a vital shaper in the ways in which community-ICT initiatives are structured. Increasingly in the US and the UK, ICTs are being considered as mediators of community spirit and social cohesion, aspects of urban life which are considered to be in decline. Some commentators, such as Robins, critique these ideas as part of a technocultural discourse which celebrates virtual urbanity and actually serves to distance humans from the apparent 'real social ills' in their physical landscapes, such as deprivation.

**Part Two** developed Robin's critique of virtual urbanity and the technocultural landscape by considering the everyday practices of how communities construct their lifeworlds within a technocultural landscape. This meant examining the everyday lifeworlds of young people and how their constructions of community and social relations are very much shaped by external and institutional strategies. These strategies include the regulation of young people's behaviour and movements in public spaces through the use of technologies like CCTV. The constructions of young people's technological lifeworlds were then explored through the empirical work which focused on NYPO members and their on/off-line social relations. The empirical work in chapters eight and nine reclaimed the notion of technoculture to tell the story of how a particular group of young people are constructing their technocultural lifeworld.

**Part Three** reconnects these themes with the overall context with which the thesis is concerned. It also further develops the themes which have emerged from the narrative analysis of the empirical evidence presented in the previous two chapters. The main theme to have emerged is the place of technocultural lifeworlds such as NYPO in young people's lives in low-income communities. What is clear is that the form of community which engages with the on and the off-line provides a different space outside of the

institutional ideas of community and formal education. This space offers young people in Newham a way to express themselves in different ways. In particular, the discussion is connected back to ideas about how ICTs can aid urban regeneration and alleviate social exclusions. In doing so, the context of thinking about the relationships and negotiations of the online and the off-line is situated more fully. This chapter is concerned with the idea of 'content' in urban spheres: content in terms of what kinds of relationships and social groupings are forged, as well as the 'content' of technocultural lifeworlds and places. In other words, this chapter aims to approach an understanding of a 'multi(media) urbanity', a kind of urbanity which attempts to understand and negotiate a technocultural lifeworld. Multi-media urbanity is one which accommodates and accepts the possibilities of technocultural lifeworlds, where the boundaries between the on and the off-line are melted and where young people can have a choice about how they wish to communicate and interact.

## Chapter Ten

### Creating Multi(media) Urbanity?

#### Preamble

The preceding chapters have sought to engage with the dominant discourses which have helped to shape the meanings and ways of knowing community-ICT relations. These ideas reveal how systems of knowledge about the global information society, cities and on and off line communities have been produced and reproduced through language. These meanings and ways of knowing are becoming institutionalised gradually as private, public and third sector embrace the notion of online communities and the rhetoric of the global information society. The use of the Internet to encourage 'community' development and urban regeneration is becoming increasingly evident particularly in public, private and third sector policy. It is now clear though that the concern should not be whether ICTs such as the Internet connect people to world wide communities of like-minded people or whether such technologies isolate people from 'real' relationships and problems of societies. Neither should one seek to occupy a 'middle ground' between the two concerns, as does Doheny-Farina in his work.<sup>1</sup> The concern is to make meaningful links between 'virtual' and 'physical' urban 'communities', links which are concerned not only with political and economics, but social and cultural economies. In doing this, not only a deeper understanding of 'differences' between 'communities' is developed, but also one may approach what Iris Marion Young calls the 'unoppressive city' where there is an understanding and encouragement of 'difference'. This means not identifying with one 'community' as opposed to another. 'Community' is not Tonnies' romantic *gemeinschaft*, but a social construction comprised of countless subgroups, as opposed to a homogenous, anonymous mass. What is clear is that *on* and *off* line communities are *not* characterised by bounded, homogenous identities.

Returning to some of the discussion raised in **Part One**, some commentators analyse ICTs in the theoretical framework of 'mass society' and indeed, discourses surrounding community networks are often placed within this framework. There are two general theoretical camps (although this is not to advocate some polarisation of the arguments).

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<sup>1</sup> S Doheny-Farina (1997) *The Wired Neighbourhood* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press)

The first suggests that humans are 'using the Internet as a substitute for the real world' ultimately leading to the breakdown of family and 'community' ties.<sup>2</sup> The second asserts that 'computer technology in concert with other efforts could play a role in rebuilding community life by improving communication, economic opportunity, civic participation, and education'.<sup>3</sup> The role of this research then has been to examine and articulate a particular group's experiences of a technocultural lifeworld, a particular formation of community-ICT relations.

To summarise, then, the fundamental failures of much of the thinking around ICTs have been as follows:

- 1. Past research has conventionally considered synchronous face-to-face contact as preferable to asynchronous computer mediated interaction.**
- 2. Virtual communities are conventionally considered to be geographically ungrounded supporting weak community ties.**
- 3. ICTs are represented in policy discourse as primarily useful in low income communities for skills training and for education.**
- 4. Policy discourse represents ICTs and their uses in low-income communities and socially excluded urban areas in technologically determining and economically driven ways.**
- 5. There has been very little recognition that constructing technocultural lifeworlds which exist at the boundary melting points between on and off-line communities can help in social and cultural regeneration.**
- 6. Academic commentators such as Robins have failed to empirically examine how virtual urbanity in a technocultural landscape can actually reconnect people to 'real social ills of their communities' as opposed to distancing people from difference and conflict.**

The following section discusses the results of the empirical evidence against these criticisms in more detail.

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<sup>2</sup> B Shell (1994) 'Cyber Encounters of the First Kind' *Adbusters Quarterly* 3 (1), 61

<sup>3</sup> Schuler (1994), 39

## Section I: Geographies of Regeneration

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### ICTs and urban regeneration in Newham

Clearly, regeneration efforts in particular places are impacted by the characteristics of the geographical population and other economic, cultural and political factors. As has been highlighted in chapter five, Newham has one of the youngest and most ethnically diverse population profile in London. There are also many established global links within Newham. Canary Wharf for instance, although contrasting hugely with the residential and central areas of Newham in terms of obvious wealth disparities, does have an influence on the regenerative potential of Newham. There are good transport links now as a result of the further development of Canary Wharf. There is an excellent existing telecommunications infrastructure through Newham Council as well as through the University of East London. So, geography is clearly vital. The concern for Newham is how to include ICTs in this regenerative process.

One way of thinking through these regenerative possibilities is imagining how ICTs can regenerate social and cultural economies. For instance, creating spaces in which to share ideas and cultural values in order to disseminate these ideas and values is one way in which ICTs can be used. This is fundamentally about producer-driven content. This is what NYPO has achieved, as the co-ordinator of Newham Online, the umbrella community network suggests:

if you take something like NYPO, it's built up in lots of different, separate communities. For instance, one person just wanted to start an Islamic mailing list, um, and was going to start an Islamic mailing list but the point that made within the rest of the group was that they wanted it to be open to all faiths, somebody else has come back with, well, let's have a faiths mailing list, so...there's...there's discussion going on... what will happen, I think is that the expertise generated is those groups by people who are capable of developing websites, running mailing lists, it'll be leading edge, I mean, everything we can get that we can give, we will give that ... then, they will take those skills and expertise into their own communities and those communities then benefit from that, but underneath, there will still be the peer group of people working together. So, that's my hope that you actually start building up those links between communities by working and supporting those people that are already working together and, um, co-operating with each other and doing stuff, so, I mean, it's a here a very bottom-up strategy because I don't think top-down works in community development at all, in any way shape or form ... whereas infrastructure, yeah, but here, I mean working with young people, helping them help their communities, I think is a very much healthier way of getting this into the community.<sup>4</sup>

The way in which RS considers ICTs to be beneficial in regeneration efforts and community development is throughout a top down approach to infrastructure provision with

a lateral or bottom up approach in terms of how the ICTs are then appropriated and utilised in urban areas. Content, however, is produced by those in communities *for* their communities.

### **Urban content: four themes**

What has emerged through the research suggests that a less politico-economic driven agenda for ICTs should be approached. The emphasis should shift to what have been identified as four ways of thinking about community-ICT relations: through relationships, (inter)connections, articulations and difference. The empirical evidence showed how young people make relationships and connect with one another, (or not) and how they connect with global as well as local spaces. The evidence has also illustrated how online places and a technocultural lifeworld can offer young people creative opportunities that are more liberating in many ways than purely off-line spaces. Young people have the choice to communicate and interact in different ways that might suit their different subjectivities. This kind of technocultural lifeworld which is in-between the on and the off-line offers young people of Newham the place in which to think about, negotiate and encounter different people. In this way, there is more space for 'different, youthful subjectivities' to be constructed and produced. Off-line, this opportunity for the encounter of different youthful subjectivities is often stifled.

The empirical data has also revealed that what is vital for technocultural lifeworlds is creativity and diversity of 'bottom-up' approaches to multi(media) content development in an technocultural lifeworld. Multi(media) content development is key to the formation and evolution of technocultural lifeworlds. In a sense, it could be argued that it is a representation of consumed cultures - cultures that are at once local and global and thus produced as glocal. It is clear that place and locality have a crucial impact on the shape of the technocultural lifeworlds, and as Shearman proposes:

(I)n many cases, place-sensitivity leads to a focus on the 'community' as a means of providing the context within which content and services are developed and delivered. Community-based content creation and development adds a 'bottom-up' and 'active' as well as socially inclusive dimension to online content development.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with RS, Newham Online co-ordinator, 1999

<sup>5</sup> C Shearman (1998) *Multimedia Europe: content producers or 'Voices from the tower': a report on socio-economic aspects of multimedia content development in Europe* (European Commission)

NYPO provides a context in which content and services, such as website and homepage creation are developed. This is socially inclusive as well as active participation. However, NYPO is different to many community-ICT initiatives in this way as the members strive to create a space of interaction, communication and a space through which different social relations are expressed and explored. This experience is crucial for young people in particular, as has been shown. The space created offers the NYPO members a community place which they might not experience off-line. Nonetheless, it has been made clear from the evidence that online and off-line interactions and experiences are inherently contingent on one another and on the success of the technocultural lifeworld. Returning to the four themes then, it is clear how they relate to the empirical evidence presented.

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## Section II: Relating Themes

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### Theme One: relationships

The landscape of the city holds a diversity of people, different functions, movements and cultures which overlap in public spaces.<sup>6</sup> The 'ideal of community' within the landscape of the city tends to be a notion which totalises and detemporalises conceptions of social life by constructing a polar opposition between what are considered 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' social relations. This opposition is very often evident in 'evaluations' of social relations mediated through on and off line communities.<sup>7</sup> So, identification with one or another community group implies identification of one group as 'other' to different groups. As Young asserts:

Racism, ethnic chauvinism, and class devaluation, I suggest, grow partly from a desire for community, that is, from the desire to understand others as they understand themselves and from the desire to be understood as I understand myself.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnicity, as experienced by some of the NYPO members could be interpreted as exclusionary. Nonetheless, this is their everyday experience of ethnic relationships, connections and differences. It is unproblematic according to one NYPO member to prefer the company of other Ghanaians, for instance.<sup>9</sup> These experiences of ethnicity are related to notions of ethnicity based on culture, not on colour. Kalai emphasises that what is important is to have something in common which people can relate to and very often there

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<sup>6</sup> Young (1990a), 319

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 302

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 311



are cultural elements such as national celebrations and language. Through the technocultural lifeworld of NYPO, difference is not distanced, but the experience of difference is explained and shared over cyberspace. Robins' insistence that 'all real experience is experience of the other', and that 'virtual' culture does not accommodate this type of experience is directly contradicted by this research.<sup>10</sup> His insistence, moreover, on explaining such experiences in terms of 'real' and 'virtual' is also highly questionable.

One of the main themes which was raised by the empirical evidence is that some of the NYPO prefer to have face-to-face (offline) interaction with other members before they feel able to communicate online. Some, however, prefer online interaction because of the time one has to think about responses and postings. The key to NYPO, however, is that there exists the option to have both kinds of social interaction. It could be argued though that the online and off-line interactions compliment each other in some ways and indeed enhance the types of exchanges which take place online. Roberto Unger suggests that community requires face-to-face interaction between members, but there are a number of difficulties in privileging face-to-face relations. Young outlines these difficulties as follows:

- Privileging face-to-face relations presumes an illusory ideal of unmediated social relations and further, incorrectly associates mediation with alienation;
- this privileging serves to deny 'difference' in the sense of time and space distancing;
- it imposes a model of 'good society' as constructed by decentralised small units. This notion, according to Young, is politically undesirable and unrealistic;
- the political relations between decentralised communities is evaded.<sup>11</sup>

So, it is evident that entirely negating on-line interactions is inaccurate and inadequate. The ideal of city life, according to Young, is about relationships between people. The city therefore is not a *metropolis* as some suggest, but a set of relationships providing an inexhaustibility of social relations.<sup>12</sup> As Webber suggests, the city is a 'culturally

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<sup>9</sup> Kalai Re: NYPOonline\* Sectarianism and Racism 3 May 2000

<sup>10</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 249

<sup>11</sup> Young (1990a), 313

<sup>12</sup> Young (1990a), 319

conditioned system of dynamic interrelationships among individuals and groups'.<sup>13</sup> These sets of relationships are played out between different NYPO members face-to-face, off-line as well as online. Indeed, it could be asserted that this is the key subtlety of the technocultural lifeworld. By not privileging face-to-face relationships, NYPO is not negating difference, but negotiating difference. Relationships are made between NYPO members and their 'places' on various levels. Indeed, this is a vital mode of communication for many young people, as discussed in chapter six. As Giroux suggests, young people are often restricted from speaking in those spaces, such as the public sphere where such voices might shape social policy. Young people, particularly in low income communities, are often marginalised from the channels of communication through which power can be mediated to 'make knowledge consequential with respect to their own individual and collective needs'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, chapters eight and nine revealed how NYPO members make relationships at micro, meso and macro levels. This is reflected in RS's own thoughts on forming relationships on and off-line:

but coming back to virtual communities ... most of the ones which mean most to me are ones which I've actually met the people involved. Now, sometimes, I've not met those people involved 'til after meeting them virtually - you have mediated first impressions, if you like because you... I mean one of the amusing things is that you get a group of people that have met on line and they have their first physical meeting and it's astounding because *you know that group of people could never get together in one space in any other way, because they'd be, just the sheer prejudices, differences, you know, the people with the rings through their nose and the suits, you know, are just not going to be in the same place easily, um, so it's very good at that kind of breakdown stuff, and...you don't have... you can do that which you can't so in other ways, but I am not a member of any list that is not focused on a purpose, and in almost every list I have met people, I mean, even the international lists ... it's just basically people that I know online, and like, and you know, well, why not? ... all I think of the things I've done for about four or five years have been about the closeness of linking the personal, um, personal in real space and cyberspace - it's a - there's plenty of people doing the global stuff and the communities of interest stuff - there's plenty of people doing that... But, I thought when I started this there are very few people doing what this could do, um...at the local level for people that are, you know, directly want to meet each other and make things work together and actually trying to achieve projects and do things ... and an awful lot of discussion lists don't do anything.*<sup>15</sup> [emphasis added]

There is a sense that online communities work best when they are extended and overlapped into offline spaces and social relations, thus the rationale for technocultural lifeworlds. When social interaction takes place online physical prejudices are not activated as they are when one meets another off-line initially. As RS suggests, 'people with the rings through their nose and the suits' are not likely to be in the same place having a

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<sup>13</sup> Webber (1964), 93

<sup>14</sup> Giroux (1998), 24

<sup>15</sup> Interview with RS, Newham Online co-ordinator, 1999

dialogue off-line. This is precisely the type of experience along the axes of gender, age, ethnic lines which NYPO members have.

### Theme Two: (inter)connections

Allen has suggested that the influence of global media and the 'exposure of the global to the local has served to break down some cultural barriers': but social ties and connections link places together in peoples' everyday lives.<sup>16</sup> Global media also brings popular culture and styles to localities. Thinking about ethnicities for instance, Dwyer suggests that ethnicity is subject to an understanding of how all identities are articulated out of 'particular places, histories and experiences'.<sup>17</sup> 'New ethnicities', which emerge through the multiple interconnections through which different cultures are translated, can be represented in different spaces of youth culture.<sup>18</sup> NYPO is one such unique space of youth culture where multiple interconnections of different cultures are translated and represented. However, the interconnections are also forged through their other online social interactions in different areas of cyberspace, in different chat rooms and so on.

Making connections and interconnections, it might be argued, is key to groups like NYPO who try to negotiate the on and the off-line. It is also a key way of imagining how such a group might be considered to be a meaningful type of model for social inclusion and community regeneration. This is discussed in more detail in the final chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, it could be suggested that the NYPO members represent a crucial 'node of adolescent cybermedia learning'.<sup>19</sup> Tobin argues that this type of learning is characterised by self-learning on the Internet, through the connections they make with their peers and through those connections they make with other users. Tobin further explains this kind of learning as *otaku*-type learning. *Otaku* tribes, as described in chapters eight and nine, find information or resources they need individually then share this knowledge laterally to their peers as and when they require assistance.<sup>20</sup> *Otaku* are generous with praise about the peers' work and will give constructive criticism, something which does not tend to happen in the formal school environment and institutional learning

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<sup>16</sup> Allen & Massey (1995), 113

<sup>17</sup> Dwyer (1998), 51

<sup>18</sup> Dwyer explains this through Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy's use of the concept 'diasporic cultures' which they use in turn to examine intercultural exchanges and the identities produced from those exchanges.

<sup>19</sup> Tobin (1998), 116

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 117

communities. It could be argued that this type of supportive learning community relies on the relationships and (inter)connections that the NYPO members construct and produce on as well as off-line.

As discussed in chapter three, the prominent myth of globalisation is that increased use of ICTs will liberate people from cities. Indeed, some doyens of the 'digital age', like Nicholas Negroponte, suggest that ICTs will erode the locational hold that places have over people. Others, such as Pascal, elaborate on this theme to suggest that face-to-face connections will cease to exist thus there will be little requirement for 'cities'. Yet, more and more commentators are defending the city as a landscape of multiple identities in the context of globalisation and dystopic predictions for the city. In doing so, it is increasingly recognised that the city can be re-represented and re-imagined in the changing contexts of global and local relations:

We would agree that the 'city' now needs to be considered as a set of spaces where diverse ranges of relational webs coalesce, interconnect and fragment. The contemporary city is a variegated and multiplex entity - a juxtaposition of contradictions and diversities, the theatre of life itself.<sup>21</sup>

This argument can be related to Iris Marion Young's 'ideal of the city' as a set of relationships and not as a fixed and monolithic metropolis.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Amin and Graham continue this theme by suggesting that the 'essence' of the city is the concentration of diverse relational intersections between and within activities like culture, economic, governance, which are declining.<sup>23</sup> The city, then, is far more than the arena of place-bound and place-mediated relationships. NYPO members illustrate this relational connectedness of contemporary urban living by weaving online interactions into their everyday lifeworlds. They effectively construct their technocultural lifeworlds through their landscapes of computing. Further to this though, they relate and connect to local spaces and their geography. When introducing themselves online, many of the NYPO members will situate themselves geographically in terms of the school they attend, the area of the borough in which they live or the particular resource centre from where they access the Internet. The NYPO members also connect with local issues. One example of this was the Youth Festival for which NYPO designed the website. Other examples are the North

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<sup>21</sup> Amin & Graham, Trans, 418

<sup>22</sup> See Young, (1990a), 318

<sup>23</sup> Amin & Graham (1999), 411

East Youth Forum at which there are NYPO representatives. Another instance is the interview that three NYPO members conducted with the Director of the new Stratford Arts Circus. This centre will provide arts venues and presentations of Bollywood films and so on. It is aimed at the inclusion and representation of the diverse cultures which exist in Newham. It is also aimed at young people and youth culture and this obviously is of interest to NYPO members. It is clear then that youth culture mediated online is not the only interest with which NYPO members are concerned. They are interested in the ways in other places where 'youth culture' can 'take place'. They are not exclusively concerned with global youth cultures, but with local youth cultures too and perhaps, it might be argued, the interplay between the two is reflected in the 'glocal' NYPO technocultural lifeworld.

People are often neglected in discussions concerning globalisation and ICTs. It is increasingly important, as Massey suggests, for social relations between people as opposed to the networks of capital movements to be put into focus.<sup>24</sup> This is because, according to Massey, places are constructed from a 'unique constellation of social relations which meet and weave together at different loci'.<sup>25</sup> Places are never experienced as they are constructed from 'histories' - as places which consisted of coherent and homogenous communities.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Massey continues, one can only understand a sense of place by linking it with places 'beyond'. A progressive sense of place recognises this without being threatened by it. Taking this argument further, Allen suggests that one cannot examine what is meant by 'local' or a 'sense of place' without examining the connections with the wider sphere and that 'the global is the variety of interconnections which over time give shape to different parts of the world'.<sup>27</sup> Different social groups and individuals are placed in specific ways in relation to these global flows and interconnections.<sup>28</sup> So, as Massey suggests, instead of thinking of places with boundaries, they can be imagined as,

articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted,

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<sup>24</sup> Massey (1991), 28

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 28

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 24

<sup>27</sup> Allen & Massey (1995), 106

<sup>28</sup> Massey (1991), 25

which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local.<sup>29</sup>

In this way then it can be suggested that the NYPO technocultural lifeworld is produced from articulated moments in networks of social relations and understanding. It could be asserted that members of NYPO are acutely aware of what a 'sense of local place' is, precisely because they connect and reflect on these connections in the wider sphere of the global spaces of the Internet. By interacting outside their local urban lifeworlds, into their technocultural lifeworlds, they can re-focus on the social relations, differences, and connections which they might make locally.

### **Theme Three: difference**

Can ideas of 'community' be re-located through the model of the technocultural lifeworlds which NYPO have produced? Community formation is said to be through shared interests in shared spaces and indeed outwith shared spaces, in the form of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities'.<sup>30</sup> Again, these ideas have often been used to explain as well as critique virtual communities. The city, though, has been described as a 'clashing point' for diverse subjectivities, corporealities, ethnicities and spatialities.<sup>31</sup> However, as Amin and Graham ask, what are the sources of creativity in diversity? It is recognised that individuals have multiple identities: the same can be said of places.<sup>32</sup> Cities, though, can be segregated by communities allegiances as well as spatial separations. For example, there are groups of individuals who are embedded and operate fully within the 'global' information society and who use that position in powerful ways, as is clearly evident in the landscape of Newham and Canary Wharf. There exist highly complex and messy social differentiations that within the global information society. There also exist multiple differences between the degree of movement, communications, control and power which locales and individuals might have.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Massey (1991), 28

<sup>30</sup> Anderson (1991)

<sup>31</sup> See Pile (1996) cited in Amin & Graham, 413

<sup>32</sup> Massey (1991), 28

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 27

Young people have not conventionally had access to diversity and other communities outside their bounded familial (semi-private) communities and formal (semi-public)<sup>34</sup> institutional communities, such as school. At school, for instance, it is much easier to be friends with someone who is the same colour, as Riz pointed out in chapter eight. Additionally, the degree to which young people have the opportunity to be in positions of power within the global information society which is driven by the rapid exchange of wealth generated by knowledge workers, is limited. Being part of a group like NYPO means that young people in Newham can extend their voices out of their locality and into the spaces of the global information society. They are able reproduce an identity which they extend through their homepages into these global cyberspaces. Differences are negotiated, discussed and expressed in different ways. Through homepages, for example, representations of different identities, beliefs, opinions and values of the individual members are extended into multiple spheres and spaces - globally and locally. They are able to experience, interact with and produce what McRobbie calls 'different, youthful subjectivities'.

In a global information society the shift in relations of work, economics, politics, cultures, have been manifold. The shift in politics within this context has been from class differences to other differences such as feminism, ethnic nationalism and environmentalism.<sup>35</sup> NYPO members are very aware of these political concerns on micro as well as macro levels and seek to shape NYPO into a community where such differences can be explored and played out. Many of these explorations originate from individual discussion points, but others are derived from other media, such as newspaper reports. Zukin argues that public spaces of urban everyday life which are the 'theatres of life' should be maintained. Social confidence and 'tolerance' grows from the sharing of spaces by different communities, but this is not always evident in urban neighbourhoods.<sup>36</sup> NYPO illustrates that in physical space, it is easier to form social groupings with those of the same colour of with those who share the same cultural values. The technocultural lifeworld in-between the on and the off-line that members of NYPO construct, mediates social relations and understanding between those who do not share the same cultural

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<sup>34</sup> I suggest that the familial and institutional spaces are semi-private and public respectively as the family home does not provide young people with their own private space. Nor does the public institutional spaces which they inhabit. Both spaces are highly structured for young people and their lives as they are not yet of the age to exercise their own rights. This is discussed in more detail in chapter six.

<sup>35</sup> Webster (1995), 73

values. These differences are by no means eliminated and diversity is not assimilated in the cyberspaces that they share. Thus, their technocultural lifeworld in-between the on/off-ness of NYPO becomes the clashing point for diverse subjectivities, corporealities, ethnicities and spatialities. Out of this, new ethnicities and youthful subjectivities can emerge.

#### Theme Four: articulations

It could be argued that 'creativity' in cities is a key aspect which emerges from a city and communities of difference, connections and relationships. The idea of public spaces as the 'theatres' of public life, and that the everyday life and identities are performances in diverse contexts, conjures the notion of 'creativity'. Aspects of urbanity and community such as differences, connections and relationships are articulated through creativity:

Historically, creativity has always been the lifeblood of the city. Cities have always needed creativity to work as markets, trading and production centres, with their critical mass of entrepreneurs, artists, intellectuals, students, administrators and power-brokers. They have mostly been the places where races and cultures mix and where interaction creates new ideas, artefacts and institutions. And they have been the places which allow people to live out their ideas, needs, aspirations, dreams, projects, conflicts, memories, anxieties, loves, passions, obsessions and fears.<sup>37</sup>

The degree of mobility and freedom in places is not just determined by capital. Ethnicity, age and gender and so on all influence experiences of place, as has already been discussed.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Young's ideal city is one where people from different groups or locales can mix in public places without necessarily adopting another culture.<sup>39</sup> Communities can exist outwith shared places, and indeed, people can occupy different positions within given communities.<sup>40</sup> The homepages which the NYPO members construct can be a metaphor for this idea of community and culture. NYPO members enjoy encountering websites of other members and exchanging knowledge and experience but they do not necessarily feel the need to agree with what the website represents and they do not feel it necessary to adopt the beliefs that a website might be representing. Indeed, when members visit other NYPO websites, they perform their *otaku* identities by offering help, comments and constructive criticism. Homepages and websites

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<sup>36</sup> A Amin & S Graham (1997) *Transactions*, 422

<sup>37</sup> C Landry & F Bianchini (1997) 'The creative city' *Demos*, Comedia, London, 3

<sup>38</sup> Massey (1991), 24

<sup>39</sup> Young (1990a), 319

<sup>40</sup> Massey (1991), 28



also provide a familiar and local groundedness. They serve as an 'anchor' in the context of a physical place or community which is diverse, but fragmented. As Turkle suggests, homepages are constructed with elements like words, images and sounds which represent an identity of the creator and indeed, 'one's identity emerges from who one knows, one's associates and connections'.<sup>41</sup> Homepages and websites also give NYPO members the space to be creative in the ways they want to express their creativity. Rhama, for instance, has donated her paintings to the NYPO main website and many have contributed poems, articles and stories. Frankie has a link on the main NYPO website to a radio play he adapted and produced and there is a link to the publicity video which the researcher helped the NYPO members produce. These are all important elements of place-making for the NYPO technocultural lifeworld.

Many have commented on the need for a sense of place and fixity in a world which is in flux. This fixed sense of place is supposed to provide individuals with stability and a source of unproblematic identity.<sup>42</sup> As Young suggests though, there is no universally shared concept of community, only 'particular articulations that overlap, complement, or sit at acute angles to one another'.<sup>43</sup> NYPO and the extended identities represented by the members' homepages are particular articulations that overlap or sit at acute angles to each other. The sense of place which is achieved through the NYPO technocultural lifeworld is produced through these intersections of different identities, identities which are shaped by gender, ethnicity and so on. NYPO as a sense of place, is by no means static. The NYPO technocultural lifeworld does serve as a 'place' which offers a familiar and safe gateway or entry into the global messy spaces of the Internet. It offers the NYPO members a place in which to 'live out their ideas, needs, aspirations, dreams, projects, conflicts, memories, anxieties, loves, passions, obsessions and fears'.<sup>44</sup>

Turkle additionally asserts that homepages are an illustration of new notions of identity as multiple yet coherent. She argues that when identity was defined as rigid and unitary, a particular idea of modernity, it was easier to police that identity and prevent 'deviation' from societal or community norms. Once a more fluid sense of self is accepted, there is more

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<sup>41</sup> Turkle (1995), 258

<sup>42</sup> Massey (1991), 27

<sup>43</sup> Young (1990a), 302

<sup>44</sup> Landry & Bianchini (1997)

capacity for acknowledging diversity and difference, less likelihood of exclusion of those who 'do not fit'.<sup>45</sup> Young people's growth and development depends upon environments that provide stimulation, allow autonomy, offer possibilities for exploration, and promote independent learning and peer group socialising. These criteria are important in all settings, not just those designed specifically for teens such as schools, leisure environments, and teen centres.<sup>46</sup> The environment which offers growing space for the ecology of youth, in this case, is produced and constructed through cyberspace and through the social relations and interactions which are occurring through the overlapping spaces of the online and off-line.

ICTs as artefacts are articulated in different ways over time and space. Society and technologies shape each other and do not intrinsically overcome space barriers.<sup>47</sup> However, the articulations of technologies in places are contingent on the ways in which they are linked to social-cultural contexts by human agency.<sup>48</sup> Political, cultural, social struggles can serve to re-direct the articulations and use of technologies. The 'impacts' of ICTs are contingent then on how they are socially and politically constructed in different contexts and how they become woven into different spatialities.<sup>49</sup> As Langdon Winner suggests, ICTs do not determine human behaviour but they are the mediators through which actions, understandings and, ultimately, identities are shaped.<sup>50</sup> The technocultural lifeworld constructed by NYPO members is heavily influenced by the political-economic structures which NYPO members produce and reproduce and by which they are constrained. Such influences are:

- the image of Newham as socially excluded and the poorest borough in London;
- the young and ethnically diverse population of Newham;
- the established cultural economy in Newham;
- the iconography of Canary Wharf and the awareness of the wealth creation within;
- the awareness of the potential in e-commerce and job prospects in ICTs;

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<sup>45</sup> Turkle (1995), 261

<sup>46</sup> Katz (1998), 141

<sup>47</sup> Graham, 22

<sup>48</sup> Amin & Graham, 420

<sup>49</sup> Graham, 22

<sup>50</sup> L Winner cited in K Robins & J Cornford (1990) 'Bringing it all back home' *Futures*, 875

- the shaping of the availability of computers through public sector discourse about the potentials of ICTs for social inclusion;
- the lack of provision for ICT 'play' and creativity in school communities;
- the broader strategies of Newham's UDP and urban regeneration;
- the reclamation of physical telecoms infrastructure by Newham through Newham.net Ltd.
- the broader strategy of Newham.net Ltd.;
- the emerging links with other multi(media) content producers such as Three Mills.

These factors shape the ways in which the members of NYPO construct their landscapes of computing as well as their technocultural lifeworld.

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### Section III: What it all Means

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#### Consuming cultures and producing difference?

What are the implications of these young peoples' narratives and constructions of their technocultural lifeworld, to the content of cities and urbanity, the ideas of difference in communities and cultures and the visions for an 'inclusive information society'?

The overwhelming challenge posed by the information age ... is that of maintaining creative diversity, and of cultivating the values associated with empathy and consent. The fragmentary language of binary code, built upon a macabre dance of zeroes and ones, is simply too narrow to embrace the incomputable human and natural forces that now, as ever before, will decisively drive events. In principle, digital tools can be appropriated to such creative ends. But it is first necessary to acknowledge a profound tension between the configuration of electronically mediated virtual worlds, on the one hand, and, on the other, the eye-to-eye physical and spiritual places in which we live.<sup>51</sup>

This tension does indeed need to be acknowledged. However, more importantly it needs to be thought about through the experiences of particular people in particular places and times. What is produced out of this tension is something which can be thought of as different and inclusive. 'Cultures' in one particular vision of the Information Society Forum, are not consumed and subsumed in globalising process and in the discourse of borderless world and disappearing place. Indeed, the vision imagines that:

With the right policies in place, the information society will give each person easier and fuller access to their own culture, be it in the form of works of art in museums and galleries, films,

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<sup>51</sup> D Brown (1998) *Cybertrends* (London: Penguin Books), 21 - 22 cited in Shearman (1998), 38

novels, plays or poetry. New channels will open to disseminate minority cultures allowing individuals and businesses the chance to create and distribute low-cost content.<sup>52</sup>

This echoes, in a sense, what RS suggests is a fundamental aspect of ICTs: that different cultures and communities can communicate and interact through ICTs and take what they might learn back to their communities/cultures. It is clear that NYPO members are, in a sense, consuming cultures, ICTs and different spaces. Indeed, the idea seems to be to 'preserve' local cultures and supporting local community-ICT initiatives which make use of ICTs for the expression and development of cultures and 'building communities'. There is also an awareness of the impacts that ICTs might have on localities in a global context and the importance of 'spatial communities'. As Shearman suggests:

The groups notes that while ISTs [ICTs] will undoubtedly alter the cultural cohesion of such spatial communities, the outcome is not predetermined. One effect might be to reduce people's sense of local space as they become more interested by a global view of the world. Another effect by contrast might be to lead to a relocalisation of cultural resources back into the community.<sup>53</sup>

In the case of NYPO, it could be argued that a combination of the two is being produced. It is further suggested that any ideas of ICTs in 'communities' should,

promote cultural production and consumption at the local level. This is important as part of helping to reassert a sense of place and pride, to develop people's natural creativity (especially in remote and peripheral areas) and as an educative process. It is important, therefore, that when cultural services are devised that they counter, rather than reinforce, centralising effects. Once again, the natural place for cultural expression is in the public sphere, and policies for the information society should be avowedly committed to developing the public spaces and shared celebration of culture.<sup>54</sup>

Chapter six raised one important question for the consequences of this research. The question was whether it could be argued that the technocultural lifeworld which might be produced is a 'sub-culture' which acts as a means through which young people might resist their social, economic, political and cultural position in which they are 'placed' in society. The technocultural lifeworld which NYPO has constructed re-produces social relations and identities, producing a particular type of information society for young people in Newham which is not a 'sub-culture'. Nor is the technocultural lifeworld which they construct altogether a conscious form of resistance and opposition to their position in Newham and

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<sup>52</sup> Information Society Forum (1996) *Networks for people and their communities*, first annual report to the European Commission, June, 30 cited in Shearman (1998), 43

<sup>53</sup> Shearman (1998), 43

<sup>54</sup> Interim Report of 'high level group of experts' (1996) *Building the European Information society for us all*, 67- 68. Quote 68 cited in Shearman (1998), 44

wider society. It could be argued, however, that the young people exhibit subtle resistance to the hegemonic ideas and ideals of the 'global information society' and the potentials for ICTs in low-income communities which policy discourses pronounce. As Wyn and White warn, care should be taken to differentiate the multiple motivations for 'resistance' and 'opposition' displayed by young people which are shaped by social, cultural, political and economic contexts.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, perhaps the crucial point to remember in the context of this research is that the 'resistance' exercised by 'disadvantaged' young people is not always in opposition to mainstream institutions, but is an attempt to find a place within them.<sup>56</sup>

### Synopsis

The role of this chapter has been to thread together the theoretical themes with the empirical evidence to produce an understanding of a particular empirical example of how community-ICT relations can operate in a socially excluded urban place. Six points were raised at the start of the chapter which emerged from the empirical evidence. These points and the empirical evidence have been understood in relation to the city, the global information society and social exclusion through the ways in which relationships, (inter) connections, difference and articulations are constructed and social relations are mediated. The whole process of threading together the theory and the empirical evidence has been set against the critique of 'technoculture' which Robins proposes. This critique has run through the entire thesis. This chapter has shown that community-ICT relations are messy and over-simplified in many policy discourses.

The empirical evidence has illustrated that, particularly for young people, drawing on popular cultures, difference across gender and ethnicity, and opening up spaces for multiple means of communication and interaction is the most fruitful way to use ICTs for urban regeneration. This directly contradicts Robins arguments that virtual urbanity and a technoculture distance people from 'real social ills' and negates 'difference'. On the contrary: technocultural lifeworlds open up spaces and places for self-expression, empowerment, encounters with difference and a complementary way of learning new skills for this apparent 'global information society'. Whilst the technocultural lifeworld constructed reaches into the 'global', it also reconnects back to the 'local'. Using tools of the information society to construct a space and place to create (a technocultural lifeworld),

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<sup>55</sup> Wyn & White (1997), 62-64

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 92

to learn through peer support, and to plug into a 'global information society' through this technocultural lifeworld is valuable and fundamentally important if ICTs are to be used effectively for social inclusion. New ways of working and thinking are indeed skills which need to be developed, particularly for those who are conventionally locked out of wider society and hence an information society.

The following chapter explains as a way of concluding, the implications of this research to policy makers and community-ICT relations in more detail.

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## Chapter Eleven

### Inter-Playing: Implications of the Thesis

If the regeneration of East London is premised on the *information economy*, then in addition to land development and economic development there needs to be *cyberspace development*. An abundance of bandwidth is the equivalent of transport networks opening up a new site. New industries will have no interest in physical locations that aren't *wired into the cyberworld*.<sup>1</sup>

#### Preamble

This final chapter is charged with making connections and providing conclusions to the themes which have been examined throughout this work. It is also responsible for making some recommendations about understanding, and developing policies, to address community-ICT relations in low-income urban areas. The chapter makes the links between *urban regeneration* and social inclusion and with community-ICT initiatives. The focus will not be entirely on the *everyday lives of young people* and the potentials that community-ICT initiatives hold for their increased inclusion in UK. The chapter *instead re-engages* with the ideas surrounding the global information society and inclusion in that society(ies). However, it is essential to highlight the results and recommendations in relation to young people as the group under study did consist of such a group. There are five fundamental points which have emerged from the research.

- 1) **This work suggests that it must be accepted that the boundaries between 'virtual' and 'real', on and off-line, everyday lifeworlds and technological lifeworlds are melting.**
- 2) **Young people are best placed to articulate these melting boundaries as:**
  - they enjoy more leisure time;
  - they have less opportunity to extend a powerful voice in the public sphere;
  - their everyday lifeworlds are usually structured by private and public institutional ideas of 'community';
  - their everyday lives and youth cultures are a collage of global products.
- 3) **The resulting technocultural-lifeworld which emerges from the melted boundaries between on and off-line community is something in-between which aids social urban regeneration through:**
  - connecting young people with each other;
  - re-connecting young people with local issues;

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<sup>1</sup> The Newham Online Report (1999)

- giving young people a global voice;
  - offering young people a space which they can own and construct to express their different youthful subjectivities;
  - offers young people the chance to plug themselves into their own *glocal* information society;
  - the result is increased confidence, opportunity, skills base, power and voice.
- 4) **The work has revealed the importance of creativity and play in urban places for the regeneration of social and cultural economies. This can be achieved effectively by using tools such as ICTs.**
  - 5) **The key finding is that groups like NYPO provide the type of informal *otaku*-type 'learning communities' which provide peer support and ways of learning which are less restrictive than formal institutional 'learning communities'.**

The following sections explain these points in more detail.

### **Melting boundaries**

What this research has made clear is that the theoretical thinking about the global information society, everyday life in the city, and community formations across other spaces like the Internet, is overly narrow and archaic. Too little attention is given to the developing ways in which people melt their experiences and uses of the spaces which are created through ICTs, with physical spaces. It is not simply that online spaces, or those which are perceived as 'other' to physical spaces, are 'overlaid' onto physical urban spaces. It is more that everyday lives are made up of multiple interactions across multiple domains. It is pointless thinking about 'virtual' and 'real', as has been suggested previously, but these terms are still used in everyday discourses to describe such interactions. In the same way that the artificial boundaries between nature/culture, public/private, machine/human have been unpacked and recognised to be unhelpful constructions of modernity, it should be accepted now that the boundary between 'real' and 'virtual' is a highly constructed and permeable one.<sup>2</sup> Some, such as Robins and Webster, insist on using these terms to legitimise their critique without actually exploring and experiencing for themselves the messy, complex nature of social relations at the boundaries between the on and the off-line. They insist that,

virtual culture is driven by the desire to surpress the complexities, difficulties and divisions that characterise real geographies. But for there to be any kind of meaningful social encounter and experience, we believe, there is need of such unaccomodating geographies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Haraway (1991) for instance.

<sup>3</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 239



This research clearly shows that complexities, difficulties and divisions that apparently characterise 'real' geographies also characterise geographies of technocultures. This research has re-claimed the notion of 'technoculture', which Robins critiques, to show that an inclusive, creative, and often contradictory set of social relations can be played out in a technocultural lifeworld in-between the on and the off-line.

### Young people @ melting points

It is clear that wider social, political, economic and cultural contexts have an impact on the processes through which technocultural lifeworlds and community-ICT relations can be configured. Young people in the UK are best placed to exploit and shape the technocultural landscape and indeed show other groups how the internet can be used in much more creative and complex ways than the government's *National Grid for Learning* and Social Exclusion Unit imagines. The problems which characterise low-income urban areas in the UK impact young people's lives in more powerful ways due to the lack of power and voice that they have relative to adults. For instance, the National Strategy for *Neighbourhood Renewal* report of Policy Action Team 12, which addressed the problems which young people experience in *low-income communities*, identified some fundamental changes in the economy and society in UK which have impacted young peoples' lives.<sup>4</sup> The PAT suggest that many changes in socio-economic factors have had positive impacts on young peoples' lives, such as improved education, more wealth and with better health provisions meaning longer life expectancies.<sup>5</sup> There are also changes which have meant that young people have new challenges in their everyday lives. Some of these changes are quoted in the box below, taken from the Report.

- **far more jobs now only open to those with qualifications.**<sup>6</sup> Most young people therefore spend more time in learning, but there are fewer opportunities for those without skills;
- **the disappearance of traditional sources of employment**<sup>7</sup> and less likelihood of a 'job for life'.<sup>8</sup> While some welcome the prospect of periodic job

<sup>4</sup> National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people March 2000, 14

<sup>5</sup> ONS Social Trends 28, TSO, 1998 cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>6</sup> P Robinson (1999) 'Education, training and the youth labour market' P Gregg & J Wadsworth (eds.) *The State of Working Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

change and acquiring new skills to learn throughout a working life, for others it is a threat;

- **longer dependence on parental support**<sup>9</sup> as young people enter work, marry and leave the parental home later in life;
- **earlier and more intense exposure to high risk behaviour**,<sup>10</sup> including experimentation with alcohol, smoking, drugs and sex, and exposure to violence;
- **social and media attitudes** encouraging pre-adolescents and adolescents to be seen as older than they are and behave accordingly;
- **greater likelihood of experiencing breakdown in their own relationships** with one in four marriages likely to end in divorce;<sup>11</sup>
- **racism, with a more diverse population of young people**, concentrated in the poorest places. Those from ethnic minority groups very often experience greater poverty, poorer public services and in some cases specific challenges like the need to learn English or recover from the trauma of being a refugee.<sup>12</sup>

Source: National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal,  
Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March  
2000, 14-15

The lack of employment opportunities due to the disappearance of the 'traditional' labour market is a major problem for young people. As well as this, the Report suggests that a more diverse population of young people is concentrated in the poorest places. The Report suggests that those young people from ethnic groups experience poverty and indeed may have to negotiate learning English or recovering from refugee experiences.<sup>13</sup> However, the construction of technocultural lifeworlds affords those members the place to creatively express their experiences and share those experiences with other young people. The Report also identified the weakening support mechanisms upon which young people have conventionally relied, as illustrated in the box below:

<sup>8</sup> P Gregg and J Wadsworth (1999) 'Job Tenure 1975-1998' P Gregg & J Wadsworth (eds.) *The State of Working Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>9</sup> T Bentley & R Gurumurthy (1999) 'Destination Unknown: Engaging with the problems of marginalised youth' *Demos* cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, J Coleman (1999) 'Key Data on Adolescence' *Trust for the Study of Adolescence* cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>11</sup> J Haskey (1991) 'Children in Families Broken by Divorce' *Population Trends* 61, OPCS/HMSO, cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, L Platt & M Noble (1999) *Race, Place and Poverty: ethnic groups and low-income distributions* YPS/Joseph Rowntree Foundation, cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people March 2000

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, chapters eight and nine showed that this was true of some of the NYPO members

- for many young people, **family ties** have become more fluid or more fragile. One in four children born in the 1970s experienced the break-up of their parents' marriage by the age of 16.<sup>14</sup> One in 12 children currently live in step-parent families and around one in five children live in single parent families, three times the number in 1971.<sup>15</sup> And over the last ten years, contact with grandparents and other relatives also fell.<sup>16</sup>
- **community ties** too may be of less help to young people, particularly where a whole neighbourhood has suffered entrenched long-term unemployment and so role models and informal networks are either limited or provide a negative influence;
- there is **less access, in schools and elsewhere, to help with problems in learning of personal life because of limitations on resources and the priority given to the most acute problems;**
- by far the most powerful factor has been the effect of **growing inequality in income and employment.** In 1995–96, one in three children grew up in poverty, compared with one in ten in 1979.<sup>17</sup> One in five households have no family member in work.<sup>18</sup>

Source: National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal,  
Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people March  
2000, 14-15

Some of the most significant issues, in the context of this research, are identified above. The first significant points recognised by PAT12 are the lack of *informal* networks and the limited influence that 'community' has on young people. The second significant issue that PAT12 recognised was the inadequately resourced *formal* institutions and networks that are in place to help young people with problems in their personal and learning lives. Other ways of providing these networks of support in learning their personal lives need to be identified.

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<sup>14</sup> K Kiernan (1997) *The Legacy of Parental Divorce: social, economic and demographic experiences of adulthood* Case Paper 1, London School of Economics cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>15</sup> J Graham, comment on J Bynner contribution to *Comprehensive Spending Review of Provision for Young Children – supporting papers*, volume 2, HMT, 1998, cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>16</sup> F McGlone, A Park & K Smith (1998) *Families in Kinship* Family Policy Studies Centre cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>17</sup> DSS Opportunity for all: tackling poverty and social exclusion, First Annual Report 1999 (Cm 4445), TSO, 1999, cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

<sup>18</sup> ONS Labour Force Survey 1998/99, TSO, 1999, cited in National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young people, March 2000

### Informal 'learning communities'

A strategy to provide an informal network of support for young people has emerged from the empirical evidence presented in this research. The technocultural lifeworld, which has been illustrated through this research, differs from formal institutional learning communities. Young peoples' everyday lifeworlds in socially excluded urban areas, as has been discussed, are structured in certain ways by policy and formal networks. There is no doubt that there are benefits to be gained from people learning to use ICTs in order to increase their knowledge and skills base to render them more 'employable'. However, this idea is a rather narrow view of the potentials for ICTs and the wider agenda of inclusion in the 'information society'. It also means that people perceive ICTs and the Internet in particular, as only relevant for information gathering and skills training:

access to IT is desirable. The problem may be ... education policy and the degree to which it is oriented towards vocation and the problem with the notion of access to IT may be that most people, or many people perceive it to be about employability, so Penneywell or wherever, when I asked them why did you come on this course, and we're talking here about single mums whose kids are just about old enough to see themselves home from school kind of thing...they say, well it's about I can get a job, can't I...and very often they do - and that's tremendous.<sup>19</sup>

The Internet and ICTs are much more than just information gathering and training, as the empirical evidence has shown. Indeed, the 'information society' is not a fixed idea primarily concerned with global capitalism. As the eEurope report more broadly suggests:

Education is a crucial factor determining economic and social progress and equality of opportunity in our societies. It becomes even more vital in the digital age to ensure life-long-learning and the emergence of new generations of creators, researchers, entrepreneurs and to empower all citizens to play an active role in the information society. Achieving this starts at school. Much is already being done in the Member States to bring schools in to the information age. In the employment guidelines Member States are committing themselves to putting all schools on-line in 2002. The aim of the present initiative is to further accelerate this process and turn digital literacy into a basic competence for all young Europeans.<sup>20</sup>

Yet, again the focus for policy shown above is obviously on education and life long learning. Indeed, there is no doubt that the Internet will be increasingly used in many other forms in the everyday lives of young people. Many wish to maintain some kind of website as they grow older. This is a vital point to recognise if inclusion in the information society is to be achieved. As ICTs evolve, ways of accessing information, interacting with other people, and communication will be influenced. Many more lessons characteristic of *otaku*-type learning communities, such as peer support, learning, knowledge sharing and constructive criticism, are not experienced at school. Further to this, informal learning that

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with KH, 1999

is so vital to the ways in which young people develop into 'citizens' is less restricted in the type of technocultural lifeworld explored in this research. Such learning as understanding differences in subjectivities along the axes of gender, ethnicity and sexuality is vital for the development of young people. Subsequently, learning about the ways in which to relate and articulate these differences, occurs with much more ease and in a more secure environment.

### Technocultural lifeworlds

This research is not blindly celebrating the use of the Internet in low-income communities and a critical edge has been maintained throughout the work. This research understands that there are indeed notes of caution to be sounded about the emerging technocultural landscapes. It is recognised that the simplistic idea of trying to introduce ICTs in low-income communities without showing people the potential of the technologies will not be successful. People need to have a sense of 'ownership' of space and that sense of *ownership is something that is absent in many low-income communities*. People living in low-income neighbourhoods do not 'own' their streets. *Their streets are owned, regulated and controlled by powers outside of their control*. For young people, particularly, *their voices are restricted in the public and private spheres*. Related to this is the need to have a 'presence'. Many young people are overlooked and marginalised in their communities or categorised as 'deviant' and troublemaking. Their presence is only acknowledged as a 'nuisance' on the street and in the shopping centre. In a technocultural lifeworld, people can have a 'presence' which can overlap into off-line spaces. Having a sense of 'ownership' and a sense of 'presence' gives people confidence in their social interactions.

A further note of caution can be sounded with regard to the content and rationale for 'being' online. Robins and Webster suggest that the Internet is being driven by futurologists whose only interests are in the commercial potentials of new technological artefacts. They further propose that,

virtual culture is a culture of disengagement from the real world and its human condition of embodies (enworlded) experience and meaning. We might think of it in terms of the progressive disavowal - both intellectual and by technical means - of the real complexity and disorder of actual society and sociality. What is preferred is the order that can be established in a domain where the dangers and challenges of the real world are negated - a domain purged of worrisome shadows, masked faces and opaque stares.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> eEurope (2000)

<sup>21</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 244

They suggest that there is a deep lack of imagination and a return to a passive consumption model of consumerism embedded within the technocultural landscape.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, this research suggests that technocultural lifeworlds can be constructed which draw out the imaginative potentials of different groups of people. Through play, creativity and imagination, one is opened up to new and productive possibilities. The Internet and technoculture can open up spaces for the expression of such possibilities and is very much concerned with embodied experiences and the politics which that embodiment implies. These spaces, these technocultural lifeworlds can give people a sense of ownership, control and a way to express themselves. Although commercial interests are indeed increasingly guiding the content of the Internet and people search for familiar products and services when they are online, people do have the critical capacity to consume information and to communicate without being blindly guided by such commercial interests. The power of agency that individuals and groups can exercise is something which Robins appears to neglect. He unintentionally subscribes to the idea the ICTs are runaway monsters who viciously advocate a global notion of capitalism. Technoculture is far more complex than this. Human relationships and the ways in which they wish to make connections and form relationships are far more messy than Robins suggests.

### **Creativity and play in urban places**

It could be suggested that constructing a cultural economy to assist urban regeneration influences the construction of the 'local' face of the Internet and the information society in multiple ways. There are already many different types of community-ICT initiatives in the UK with different areas of interest and different agendas. Some initiatives are aimed purely at local service information provision, others are aimed at citizen empowerment in the form of community networks. Some are aimed at bridging cultural divisions in geographical areas. Others exist purely to provide IT training. It could be argued that there needs to be a typology of different initiatives with their varying agendas which must be recognised by the Government and disseminated to local authorities and community groups. Along with this, there needs to be a 'tool kit' for each kind of project and indeed new ICT and multimedia firms can play a vital role in this tool kit development. This will mean that individuals and groups can choose which type of initiative suits their own needs, whether it be an online community, an information site, a site which will provide access to

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 234

White Papers or a site where people can just communicate online. To some extent, this idea is already being approached by organisations like UK Communities Online and websites like Making The Net Work.<sup>23</sup> However, it is recognised within these organisations that this needs to be incorporated into national policies. Fundamental to this, however, is to give a bottom-up approach in terms of giving the users the space to interact online and to own and construct a technocultural lifeworld. A top down approach, however, is needed in order to secure the financial and physical infrastructure to facilitate the construction of this technocultural lifeworld. Every online community will of course be driven by place and identity specificities and it could be argued that this is part of the rationale for community-ICT initiatives. People need a reason to use the Internet and they must feel that there are multiple communication and resource channels open to them online.

This will impact the way in which the Internet is not only perceived in local places but also the ways in which the Internet is used and shaped by individuals and groups. The Internet needs to be represented as a easy medium to interact in and use and a key to this has to be accessibility. There needs to be recognition at a national level that the Internet can help to construct a social and cultural economy which in turn can assist in urban regeneration. It also needs to be accepted that there are many ways in which the Internet can be used in urban places. People have to be provided with the spaces and places in which to access the Internet for free. These people also need to have a reason to return and a reason to want to get involved with ICTs, which is outside of formal training, as one community development worker suggests:

To some extent, unemployment is with us to stay, so what do we do about it, we address quality of life issues, social economy, where's the contribution of IT to the social economy, that's what I want to know. The social economy is underpinned by community activity, the voluntary community activity which supports the social economy, so why aren't these people getting access to the technology...<sup>24</sup>

People and groups need to feel like they have a stake in their 'local' Internet. The Internet and local technocultural lifeworlds, for instance, can act as a familiar base, a kind of gateway, to the global spaces of cyberspace.

People need to feel that they 'belong' to the technocultural lifeworld, just as they need to feel a sense of belonging to their physical community. People need to be empowered to

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.communities.org.uk>  
<http://www.makingthenetwork.org.uk>

contribute to the technocultural lifeworld. People need to be encouraged to play, to chat, to use the technologies in informal ways. The Internet is not just about IT skills, it is not just about information, it is about communication. It is essential for communities to use ICTs, plug into the global information society to create a productive and creative place online:

Full regeneration is only achievable by adapting with mainstream change: otherwise Newham may keep up, but will never catch up. Commercial, public sector and regeneration investment working together can help make the necessary *creative and productive cyber-environment a reality*. The development of a high quality infrastructure, capable of supporting widespread use of broadband network applications, is a pre-condition of gaining the investment, experience and skills needed to give Newham sustainable regeneration.<sup>25</sup> [emphasis added]

What has been key in this research, then, is the recognition that a 'creative and productive cyber-environment' is fundamental to the sustainable regenerative and inclusive potential of ICTs. This means that community-ICT initiatives should provide people with the tools with which to form relationships and connections online which might overlap off-line.

#### **New arising research issues**

This thesis reveals some important implications for research in areas like youth studies and urban cultural geographies, where ideas about the on and off-line are developing. There are points which need more consideration in any future research which aspires to understand how technocultural lifeworlds might be used as kinds of model for other examples of inclusive community-ICT relations.

- 1) Research should identify instances of micro-level resistance to meta-discourses of technologies and identity. These instances are important ways of self-expression, particularly amongst young people**
- 2) These instances of resistance should be considered in the context of information society discourses**
- 3) Future research should re-visit ideas of community and examples of technocultural lifeworlds in order to re-assess changing social relations through time**
- 4) Models of sustainable technocultural lifeworlds should be sought, but they should not be prescriptive models**

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with KH, 1999

<sup>25</sup> The Newham Online Report (1999)



- 5) Any consideration of urban youth, particularly in low-income areas, should evaluate not only use of and expression of identities through geographical spaces, but on-line spaces too.**

Online spaces and different technocultural lifeworlds are and going to be increasingly a part of young people's everyday lives. It is vital therefore to include considerations of how young people see and use the Internet in order to see how they are positioned in a global information society.

### **Concluding comments: problems of policy**

There are limits to how policy can be formed in order to make it easier for technocultural lifeworlds to be part of everyday life. There are many models that can guide community-ICT relations. The case study explored in this thesis is just one messy model, but it highlights a subtlety that needs to be integrated in policy thinking. The subtlety is that the Internet has been constructed around a paradigm of free speech, ease of information gathering, sharing and communication. The freedom to play, create, learn and share in informal and self-directed ways has always characterised cyberspace. However, the types of physical places where people access the Internet and the portals through which they access cyberspaces have an impact on the type of experience a user will have. How can policy be made to support a technoculture that opens up space for creative counter-cultural experiences and resistance to one's position in society? What this implies is thinking more carefully about not only about how policy can be created to provide people living in low-income communities with the means and skills by which to use participate in the global information society. It also implies thinking through the ways in which opportunities might be created to provide people with the examples, inclination and freedom to create their own technocultural lifeworlds through which they can construct their own and relevant information society. This is how to empower and include people in the global information society. Equipping people with hardware, software and culture-ware is vital in this process. Celebrating and negotiating differences between people is key. Being able to engage in discussion about democracy, racism, sexism and politics is also key to a democratic inclusive society. Online communities/technocultural lifeworlds should not be about 'like minded people sharing similar interest', but an online place where differences can be discussed and negotiated and where creativity can be used to express these differences in urban places. Technoculture is not about multiculturalism, nationalism, homogenisation, virtuality or reality. Technoculture is about opening up different channels

of communication, information and interaction and reconnecting people with their everyday lifeworlds and the places in which they live. Together with the theorisations about on and off-line communities, technocultural lifeworlds and young people which have been presented in this thesis, there are several questions for policy which must be considered in future research:

- **How can government policy be inclusive not only of low-income communities in meaningful ways but also of *young people* – the future ‘information and knowledge workers’ and the shapers of future community and urban life?**
- **How can ideas of *informal learning communities* be negotiated into education policy in a way which integrates learning through ICTs in less prescriptive ways?**
- **How can ideas of *technocultural lifeworlds* be integrated into the national learning grid and so that spaces for ‘unrestricted’ learning, creativity and play are produced?**
- **How can these new ideas about *on and off-line geographies* and inclusive information societies be shaped into a sustainable model for policy-makers?**

Policy-makers must recognise that models cannot be sustainable for technocultural lifeworlds in economically driven ways. Constant re-dressing of technocultural lifeworlds and analyses of the ever-shifting on and off-line geographies of young peoples’ lives are vital for inclusive future societies.

Fundamental to policy-making though, must be the recognition that so far, policies have been driven and proposed in technologically-determining language. The language used to describe what the ‘government proposes’ for community-ICT relations often neglects the power that ‘people’ have to shape the information society. ICTs and the information society do not have stable, fixed meanings and this has to be made clear and an information society is not just about e-commerce and dot com businesses. The only way to articulate one’s position in the global information society is through the construction of a technocultural lifeworld, but Robins and Webster ask,

what should we make of the idea of the global city as an information or virtual city? This interpretation has rapidly and easily become a received idea. The slick advocates of the new virtual urbanism seek to impress us with the social and political potential of what they call ‘real-time’ cities and ‘virtual urban spaces’. They are eager to persuade us that new technological

systems can radically and beneficially transform urban life and experience. But, we should be asking, just what kind of vision or utopia is it that they are wanting us to buy into? What kind of urban living would go on in the virtual city? And how does the informatic vision correspond to the actual realities of global transformation in contemporary urban contexts?<sup>26</sup>

The implications of this for the form and experience of the city are subtle but important to address. As highlighted previously, Massey proposes that one can only understand a sense of place by linking it with places 'beyond' and that a progressive sense of place recognises this without being threatened by it. Technocultural lifeworlds can provide that link to places 'beyond' and can be a way of reconnecting people with their sense of local place. A progressive sense of technoculture can recognise that 'virtual urbanism' is not a utopian ideal and is not based on sameness. Robins is guilty of refusing a progressive sense of technoculture, but so too are policy makers. A progressive sense of place accepts that interaction and communication online is a legitimate and useful way in which people can encounter and understand difference. It is also a place where the regulation of everyday life on the streets, in the school, in the 'community' through policy and technologies of surveillance can be resisted. A progressive sense of technoculture accepts that 'virtual urbanism' is not coherently ordered and does have to be driven by a fast paced capitalism.

Above all, a sophisticated understanding of the complex interpenetration of urban and technocultural lifeworlds, will be a prerequisite before we can begin to sustain innovative research and creative policy making to society.

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<sup>26</sup> Robins & Webster (1999), 251

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## Appendix II

**Frank Roberts (frank.roberts@zetnet.co.uk)**

**Article about Stratford Arts Centre (Stratford Circus)**

Stratford in Newham had never been a particularly popular place. With an old run down shopping centre, connected via a dirty subway to the old and shabby railway station, it wasn't much of a place. But things started to change. Docklands was the first area to come under the "Urban Regeneration Area" title. Realising that Central London was becoming a too crowded and expensive, centre of high-density buildings had to be erected elsewhere. Part of the investment was in building the DLR monorail-like automated train service. One small branch of this service led to Stratford. The railway station was constantly expanding, in order to cope with the increased capacity of the railway infrastructure, and to prepare for the proposed European rail link. More platforms were built, and then a new arty-looking terminal was put in place. This, along with the new funnel-shaped bus station, makes Stratford a very busy place during the day, with thousands of people passing through. There were plans, however, to improve Stratford as an entertainment spot. We now have a new cinema, The Stratford Picture House, the theatre is being refurbished, and a new Arts Centre, called the Stratford Circus, is on the way.

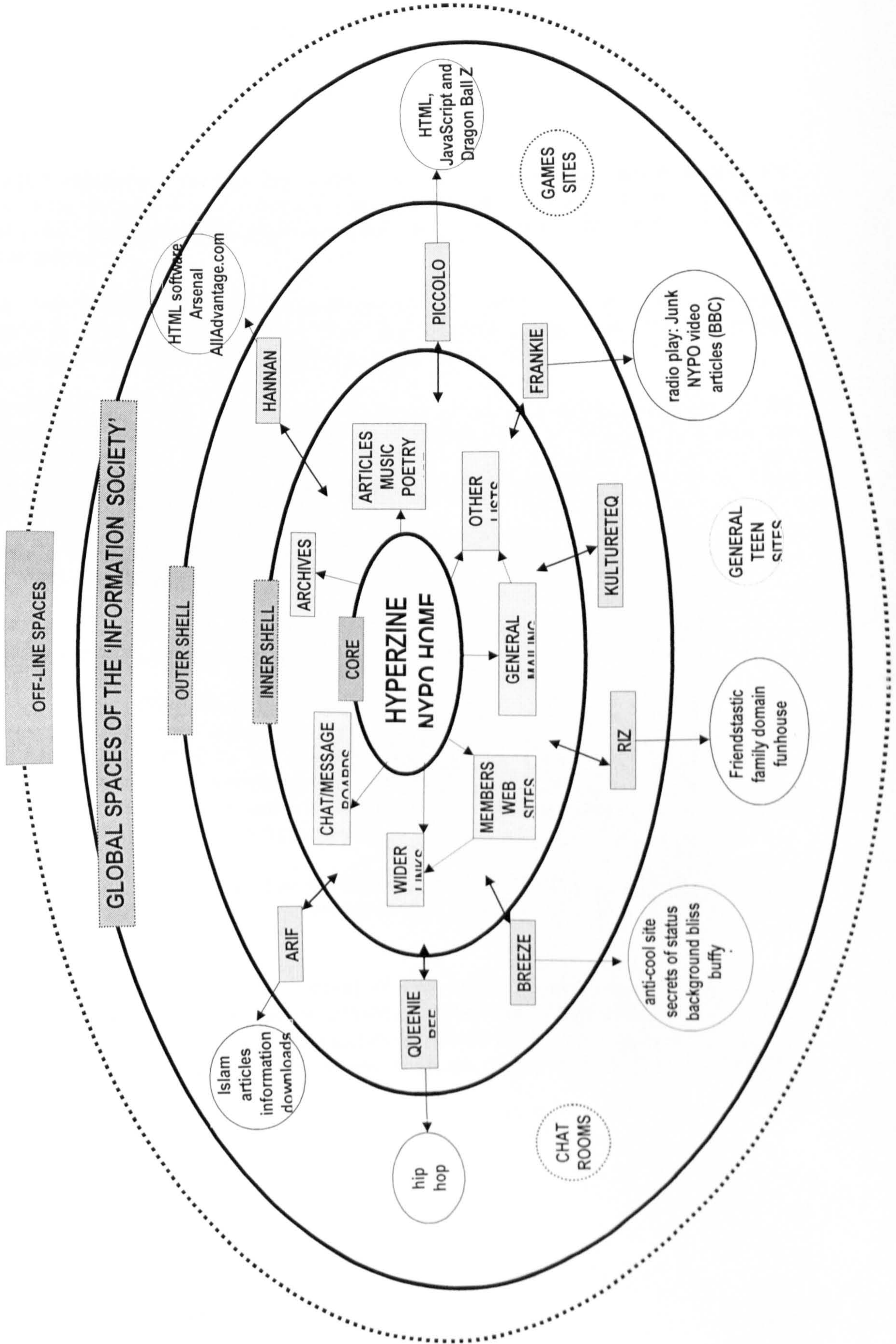
I caught up with Jon Harris of Stratford Circus, to talk about the impact that these developments will have on Stratford.

"It will have a MASSIVE impact!" he said, "at the moment Stratford is dead at night time, with no life at all. After the Stratford Circus is developed, however, Stratford will be buzzing with life, the streets humming of culture and activity. The huge amounts of money being invested in Stratford are bound to make it more attractive to people outside of the borough looking for an alternative to the West End." The Stratford Circus is being built next to the Theatre Royal, and will contain two auditoriums, one of which has retractable seating to turn it into a dance floor, the other one also having a screen for showing independent films. It also wills media rooms, rehearsal rooms, Internet connections, a cafe and mezzanine, and places to meet. Mounted on the outside will be a huge video screen, which will be showing music and trailers throughout the day. Encased on the side of the lift shaft will be a wall of high-tech futuristic-looking fibre optics, a hypnotic array of flashing colour which will change psychedelically as the lift rises and drops. Altogether the project will cost 17 - 18 million pounds. This includes a 14 million pound lottery grant, which is the largest ever of its kind. 20 000 people a year will come from far to experience the 2000 odd events it will put on every year! The venue will feature live music and dance from a variety of cultures, as well as clubbing, traditional drama, and local presentations. "It's important to be accessible to everybody," says Jon Harris, "from the very young to the very old, including all cultures, and disabled people. I hope that lots of people will come." Architects tell us that there will be full wheelchair access, and the building will be designed with blind and deaf people in mind, so that they can navigate the building easily. These plans look excellent, and the Stratford Circus will be an exciting place to go to, but there are still questions to be answered. Stratford is still in the second poorest borough in Britain, and trying to make a sustainable good reputation for Stratford will be an uphill task. Members of Stratford Development committees hope that projects such as the Stratford Arts Centre will help bring the community together in creative spirit. Whether this will work though, and whether the entertainment will still be of a high quality in five years time, only time will tell. Meanwhile, you can visit the Stratford Circus web page, which like the building is under construction.... [www.stratford-circus.org.uk](http://www.stratford-circus.org.uk)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Roberts Subject: NYPOne\* Re: Interview with Jon Harris 29 Oct 1999

# Appendix III NYPO Plan





# Appendix IV

## Glossary

**Community-ICT relations:** denotes the social relations and processes which shape and fashion forms of 'community' in the context of a 'global information society'. It's thought this is a more useful term to describe the emerging relationships with and articulations of ICTs in physical urban places

**Cyberspace:** The impression of space and community formed by computers, computer networks, and their users; the virtual "world" that Internet users inhabit when they are online. First introduced by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*.

**Information society:** 'A society characterised by a high level of information intensity in the everyday life of most citizens, in most organisations and workplaces; by the use of common or compatible technology for a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities, and by the ability to transmit, receive and exchange digital data rapidly between places irrespective of distance.' (INSINC 1997)

**On-line:** refers to the social, cultural, economic, technical, political spaces and groupings which exist through the Internet

**Off-line:** refers to the social, cultural, economic, technical, political spaces and groupings which exist in geographical, physical space

**Otaku learning communities:** The terms *otaku* and *otaku-zoku* (otaku-tribe) emerged in 1980s and refers to young people with an obsessive interest in some aspect of popular culture which they accessed through ICTs without ever leaving their bedroom. Otaku learning communities are characterised by self-learning on the Internet, through peers and through the various connections made with other users. This type of learning community is supportive and relies on the relationships, (inter)connections and the different articulations of identities online.

**Resistance:** In this work, the term is used to describe micro-level strategies, behaviour and uses of ICTs that contradict expectations of young people, particularly in discourses of youth, ICTs and the global information society.

**Technocultural lifeworld:** Used in the context of this thesis to describe the processes, practices, production and re-production which construct something 'in-between' on and off-line experiences and social relations. The 'technocultural lifeworld' is the product of this in-betweenness. This term is reclaimed from Robins' critiques of technoculture to explain the empirical evidence.