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Power, Metaphor, and the Closing of a Social Networking Site

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Abstract

This project expands root-metaphor analysis by examining the closure of a once popular social networking site, advancing critical interrogation of ownership vs. the idea of online spaces as "communities." Yahoo! 360° participants used private sphere root-metaphors of home, family, and community constituting a space of intimacy, camaraderie, and care. The closing exposed previously unseen power differentials between participants and Yahoo! Participants reacted by using the metaphor of war and violence to frame the actions of Yahoo!

M etaphors are highly significant communicative devices used for describing and making sense of the world, and are "ways of imagining reality, or portraying in concept,

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image or symbol something about the nature of what one is trying to understand or express" (Olds, 1992, p. 55). Popular metaphors include the brain as a computer, the body as a machine, and time as money (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to Smith and Eisenberg (1987), a root-metaphor is a "rich summary of an interpretive framework" (p. 367), and they can be "recognized by their ability to undergird a broad area of meaning" (p. 369). For example, "winning him over," "he fought for me," and "she slew me" all inform the root-metaphor "love is war." Similarly, ghosts, vampires, zombies, and other forms of the undead are often used as metaphors to explain our most basic existential desires, anxieties, and fears (Herrmann, 2014). Metaphors allow us to see reality in both particular and partial ways and are expressions of particular values and belief systems, while also hiding other features, including the auspices of power (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

Organizational communication is rich with metaphoric language, and scholars have utilized root-metaphor analysis to uncover their meanings. Root-metaphor analysis has been used to investigate the employee understandings of Disney as drama (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987), the metaphor of technology at Three Mile Island (Farrell & Goodnight, 1981), the use of the family metaphor at a non-profit neighborhood arts center (Herrmann, 2011b), and metaphor use during the banking crisis (Tourish & Hargie, 2012). Amernic, Craig, and Tourish (2007) presented Jack Welch's letters to shareholders as permeated with root-metaphors to support his transformational views. Linstead and Maréchal (2015) examined the metaphors of the penis, tesiticles, and semen that highlighted aspects of organizational power, control, and masculinty. Arman (2014)

examined the varied metaphors of death – including murder and sacrificial killing – surrounding the closing of a factory by a multi-national corporation. Metaphoric language in organizations often supports "particular power interests within the organization, serving both to produce and reproduce the existing systems of domination" (Deetz & Mumby, 1985).

Similarly, information technology (IT) is rich with metaphoric language. Wilken (2013) noted that metaphor use in technology is "never innocent," having the ability to shape cultural and social practices (p. 642). Over time, these metaphors mold assessments and interactions with and about technology, while hiding and limiting other possible perspectives (Herrmann, 2015). The success of the first Apple Macintosh graphical user interface (GUI) was due in part via the metaphors used: desktop, trash bin, and file folder (Cooper, 1995). As Wyatt (2004) noted, Microsoft's use of "windows" and "menus" as metaphors denote choice, openness, and transparency. Similarly, biological metaphors abound in IT. Your computer could get a "virus," so you need anti-virus software to "avoid infection." The warfare metaphor comes into play with terms such as "security," "threat levels," "network attack," and most apocalyptical, "cyber-doom" (Lawson, 2012, 2013). Big data is often seen as a force of nature that needs to be controlled, or a form of nourishment to be ingested (Puschmann & Burgess, 2014).

Do we interact with the Internet or do we "Google?" Googling as a metaphor "is promoted as our friend, and in many ways it is friendly. But it is also possibly our enemy" (Gozzi, 2006, p. 445). Is the Internet a rhizome, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest? Metaphorically, the

Internet has been described as a space ("cyberspace," "MySpace") or place ("a new frontier") that we "get on," and where we live, wander, and explore, as we "visit a site" and "surf" (Tyma, 2015). One of the most widely used metaphors to describe the Internet is online community. Like all metaphors, this metaphor is not unproblematic.

Questioning the "Online Community" Metaphor

Many online sites are referred to as "online communities," and are a central area of computer-mediated communication (CMC), social networking site (SNS) and polymediated investigations, with researchers maintaining these sites are in fact online communities (Calka, 2015). Scholars use "online community" as a metaphor for numerous online spaces. For example, online community has been used to describe a sustained network of individuals who work to maintain an overlapping set of goals and identities tied to a social movement (Caren, Jowers, & Gaby, 2012), a site surrounding popular memes (Miltner, 2014), positive anorexia, or "pro-ana" sites (Rogers, Skowron, & Chabrol, 2012), online gaming (Park & Chung, 2011), soap opera fandom sites (Baym, 1999), and sites used by investors (Herrmann, 2007b).

According to Jones (1997) four conditions must be met for online spaces to be considered an online or virtual community: (1) an array of communicators adequate enough to generate a variety of opinions; (2) a minimum degree of participant interaction; (3) a mutual public space for occupation and interaction; and (4) a minimum level of continuous membership. There is one particularly important dilemma with these conditions. Most "public spaces for occupation and interaction" are actually privately-owned

spaces. Some researchers depict online places as a new form of community using Oldenberg's (1999) third place as a framework (Graham & Wright, 2014: Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Wright, 2012). According to Oldenberg a third place makes relief available from the demanding life of work (the second place) and home life (the first place). Third places provide a sense of belonging, togetherness, and participation in the activities of a particular social group. From a larger community perspective, third places bolster ties through communication and interaction, create localized shared meanings, cultivate commitment, public discourse, safety, and security. Oldenburg (1999) suggests main streets, pubs, cafés, post offices, and other third places are the heart of a community's social vitality and the foundation of a functioning democracy.

Describing online communities as third places, however, is fraught with dilemmas (Beer, 2008; Soukup, 2006; Yuan, 2013). It alters Oldenberg's term, which is specifically situated in the local community and does not consider the geographical location of participants in SNS. While SNS share some commonalities with traditional third places, the interaction online is indeed virtual, and as such transcend space and time, something offline third places cannot do (Houran, 2006). From a practical stand-point, for an SNS to be a virtual third place it must meet three interrelated conditions: localization, accessibility, and presence (Soukup, 2006). Each of these conditions is problematic.

First, localization presents a particular dilemma, as it entails civic responsibility and the revitalization of a local or neighborhood community. While spaces exist online that are concerned with local communities, most online

spaces breach geographic location. Regarding accessibility, the digital divide, economics and education all impact availability to SNS, limiting the diversity of the population (Talukdar & Gauri, 2011). Presence, the third necessity, is the ability for members to converse, dialogue, and openly and honestly argue. As such an online third place needs to be contextually and culturally relevant to members that enhances social commitment, reciprocity, and trust. Each of these is problematized in an "online" third place (Benbasat, Gefen, & Pavlou, 2010). Asynchonicity, for example, directly influences presence and reciprocity. Trust can be severely and negatively effected by flaming and other forms of disinhibition that are provided by online anonymity and lack of repercussions (Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Relatedly, from a media richness standpoint, there are inherent technological limitations in considering an SNS a third place (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As a nominally text-based system, larger social, verbal, nonverbal and emotional cues are missing when compared to a brick and mortor third place.

As Fernback (2007) noted, "The community metaphor placed on virtual social relations is inadequate and inappropriate. The metaphor is one of fellowship, respect and tolerance, but those qualities describe only a fraction of our culturally understood ideas about community" (p. 62). Likewise, cyberbulling, sexual harassment, intimidation, as well as gender, ethnic, and other forms of discrimination proliferate online (Chawki, Darwish, Khan, & Tyagi, 2015; Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Herrmann, 2007a, Kwan & Skoric, 2013). Finally, members often have lower loyalties to their SNS and often decrease in their partici-

pation over time, stop participating altogether, or move to different online spaces (Herrmann, 2015). Unlike living in a true physical community, online participants can simply quit. While critiques about community and third places problemetize the "online community" concept, so to does the reality of economics.

The Economics of Online Spaces

The economics of technology companies problemitizes the concept of online community. The metaphor of online community disguises corporate ownership (Dahlberg, 2005b; Singer, 2014). As Baym (2009) noted, "Scholars of communication technology need to begin attending critically to questions of ownership, a topic we have generally avoided" (p. 722). Online sites, whether publicly or privately owned, are corporations or subsidiaries thereof, and are subject to the auspices of the free market. Although "the decay of an online social space cannot always be pinned on corporate ownership" (Connelly, 2009) corporate ownership and economic decisions play an important role in and is sometimes the deciding factor whether a site will continue to exist, who owns it, and what terms of service are imposed. For example, in 2010, AOL sold Bebo (Goldman, 2010). News Corp. purchased MySpace and then resold it when it did not meet financial expectations (Adegoke, 2011). Classmates.com changed its name to MemoryLane.com to become a one-stop shop for nostalgic baby-boomers (Chan, 2011). Shuttered "online communities" include the once popular Geocities, Sixdegrees, Soundbreak, Mugshot, Bahu, Capazoo, Riplounge, Pounce, and Y!360.

Finally, there is the dilemma of ownership of con-

tent. The owners of online sites can change their terms of service, sometimes finding themselves in public relations nightmares, forcing them to retract the terms until they have more input from members, users, and participants (Tyma, Herrmann & Herbig, 2015). As Baym (2009) reminds us, "increasingly people are conducting their online social activities within proprietary systems such as social networking sites, virtual worlds, and massively multi-player games" wherein they "have few rights and limited, if any, ownership of their contributions" (p. 722). Whether stand-alone companies or subsidiaries of larger organizations, the reality of capitalism problematizes online sites as communities and how we study them. Despite all these caveats, *resarchers and participants* continue to use the metaphor of community to describe online interactions and participation (Herrmann, 2015; Huffaker, 2010; Zhou, 2011). Before turning to the textual and grounded theory methods used in this exploration, a brief history of the life and death of Yahoo! 360° (Y!360), the site under investigation, is necessary.

Yahoo! 360°

Y!360, an SNS operated by Yahoo!, opened as a beta in 2005 to much fanfare, and with a promising future. "It appears that Yahoo! has a detailed roadmap of improvements that they plan to make to the service, with several becoming available after the beta launch date" (Li, 2005). Y!360 allowed users to create home pages, share photographs, establish blogs and lists, build and share a public profile, and see which friends were online. Y!360 featured a "friends' updates" segment, under which each friend's latest contribution was summarized (e.g. blog

posts, updated lists, or newly shared photos). Although not as popular as MySpace or Facebook, Y!360 had a rather large user base at 5.7 million in September 2006, growing to 15.7 million by 2008 (Rao, 2009; Schonfeld, 2007).

While Y!360 was growing, Yahoo! was going through a turbulent time. Prior to Y!360 closing, the parent corporation underwent a management overhaul, and a change in organizational direction due to years of bad design, bad decisions, and low profits (Gonsalves, 2006; Shuaib, 2009). Yahoo was losing advertising dollars to other online entities (Cooper, 2007). While Yahoo! stock was up 32%, that performance lagged behind the industry, with Google up approximately 100%, Apple up 275%, and Microsoft up 51% over the same period (Mills, 2007; Shuaib, 2009). "The company has spent its time and resources maintaining services with a huge, financially unjustified overhead; all the while, its search market share continues to dwindle" (Shuaib, 2009, p.1). Stockholders applied pressure on new management, while financial analysts and business media determined Yahoo! needed to concentrate on its core technology – its search engine – and unload unproductive services.

On October 16, 2007, Yahoo! CEO Jerry Wang announced Y!360 would be shuttered (Perez, 2009). Yahoo! stopped developing and supporting the service in 2008, leading to innumerable glitches and bugs. Y!360 service was officially closed on July 13, 2009 (Perez, 2009; Rao, 2009). During the period between the announcement and the official closing, participants continued using the site, some began transferring their blogs, photos, and friends lists to other online sites, others attempted use the new Yahoo! Profiles, which was to be the replacement for Y!

360. How members communicatively framed Y360! and its closing was the focus of this study.

Methods

This study utilized grounded theory to perform a root-metaphor analysis of participant messages on the social network's closing. As noted, Smith and Eisenberg (1987) articulate that root-metaphors are framework for interpretation that undergirds "a broad area of meaning" (p. 369). A benefit of textual analysis of online sources is the data set is online, ready for analysis. Although scholars conceive of text as written language and discourse as spoken language, CMC makes this distinction problematic. "Electronic communication, written on keyboards and read on computer screens, has many characteristics of both speaking and writing" (Davis & Brewer, 1997, p. 2). In this analysis, the data included participant blogs about the closing of Y!360. The analysis was discursive and textual (Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004).

Discourse is understood here as language-in-use and language-in-context, the recursive processes through which people create meaning and identity, while simultaneously creating social texts through rhetorical and metaphorical communicative devices (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Herrmann, 2007a). Our use of language constructs and constitutes meaning, and textual discourse analysis attempts to discover what discourses in particular settings mean for, and do to, participants. As Richards (2001) noted, "Language can only be understood, described and explained if the social situations within which speech takes place and which give it meaning are known and if this social context is preserved intact in the analysis" (p.

40). Communicating and discoursing are contemporaneous, ongoing, recursive, and interdependent processes considered here as verbs, rather than as nouns (communication, discourse) (Herrmann, 2007a, 2010).

Discursively, root-metaphors are not instantly observable, but through the use of grounded theory, can be identified (Monge & Poole, 2008; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987). In each case, root-metaphors are identified "through a semantic sorting process in which coherent patterns or clusters of meaning emerged around specific metaphorical expressions" (Koch & Deetz, 1981, p. 1). Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory, I identified possible themes, categories, and concepts that emerged from the texts and then connected these with theoretical interpretations. Grounded theory entails identifying emergent themes while comparing them for similarities and differences to existing themes. Grounded theory coding is a two-step process, according to Charmaz (2003). First, "initial or open coding forces the researcher to begin making analytic decisions about the data." In the second step – focused coding – "the researcher uses the most frequently appearing initial codes to sort, synthesize, and conceptualize large amounts of data" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 319).

Through convenience sampling via the researcher's own Y!360 connections, 64 participant Y!360 blogs were examined regarding the closing of the site. These came from a sample of users where 97 were female and 55 were male, and ages ranged from 18 to 46. Locations were fairly global: 67% were from the United States, 14% lived in Canada, 6% lived in Australia, 2% lived in New Zealand, with the remainder living in other parts of Western Europe, including the UK, Germany, France, and Italy.

Initial open coding, examining each line of the blog transcripts and describing its contents was the first step. Brief descriptions were written in the margins about what was being articulated in each sentence. Data were analyzed and developed themes, until the data analysis became saturated, that is, until no new themes or categories could be established (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For example, the terms "home," "community," and "family" recurred quite often in the analysis 32, 20, and 19, respectively). "Neighborhood" also occurred (9 times), but was quickly recognized as a subset of the larger community category. Likewise, particularly as the closing of the site got closer, terms of violence, destruction, and war became more predominant.

As the data was collected, similar phrases and terms repeated, and new information did not challenge the stability of the interpretation. In order to present how participants "spoke" about the closure, misspellings, grammatical errors, or other aspects of the texts have not been altered.

Results

Site participants utilized the metaphors of home, family, and community to describe Y!360. Each of these metaphors depict the site as a part of the private sphere of life, rather than the public sphere. The idea of work-life boundaries is a construct of the industrial revolution, which proposed there are two separate domains, "the workplace, associated with competitive individualism, rationality, and profit motive; and the homespace, associated with relational concerns, emotions, and altruistic nurturance" (Golden & Geisler, 2007, p. 520). Because metaphors

help individuals and groups to explain phenomena in incomplete and partial ways, they simultaneously hide other ways of seeing the world. Given the preponderance of private sphere metaphors used by site participants, what remained hidden were the business and economic realities of the SNS. Before turning to the metaphor of war, however, it is necessary to explicate the use of the home, family and community metaphors.

Metaphor of Home

One recurring metaphor used by participants was that of home. One post said: "Yahoo 360 was not dead. Not at all. Yahoo killed it and with it killed our homes."

While houses are insignificant edifices, homes encompass and symbolize private family relationships enacted within those spaces (Jones, 1995). Homes are rich with symbolic, shared meanings (Herrmann, 2011a). As such it is the place of nurture, stability, and shelter. "A home, subjectively defined and invested with care, is *mine* and *ours*" (Herrmann, 2011a). The members of Y!360 framed the site as home in their texts, as in the following examples.

- "Way to ruin my online home."
- "This is driving me insane! It took me forever to meet my friends in 360. Now they are pipe-bombing our homes. And for what?"
- "I am having a nostalgia right now. The 360 site was the home to my first blog. Soon it won't be. What actually triggered the sentimental yearnings is that I was just thinking about my late night conversations with friends."
- "You are closing Yahoo 360. You don't have to

force me out of my online home. I'm moving out.
Go eff yourself Yahoo."

By using the metaphor of home for their participation on Y!360, participants designated it as a sanctuary, a safe space where individuals can relax and be themselves. Home represents a comfortable, stable, and sound place without the pressure of acting in appropriate 'public' ways or interference from business or governmental institutions and intrusions (Herrmann, 2011a). By framing Y!360 metaphorically as home, members overlooked – or made invisible – the commercial and business aspects of the site. This same feature of invisibility was also apparent in members' use of the family metaphor.

Metaphor of Family

In accordance with the idea of the site as a home, Y!360 participants used the family metaphor for the relationships that developed through their online communicative practices. Related to the concept of Y!360 as a home, the metaphor of family invokes aspects of the private realm, an intimate space that provides a context for close, caring relationships. A number of users used the family metaphor to explain their interactions on the site.

- "These peeps really are my family. We have been there for one another through ups and downs in our lives."
- "If it wasn't closing, most of us in 360 would continue to be the ever-growing family it's become. No more virtual block parties in our neighborhood."
- "It's a cyber family. We have all shared laughs

and tears thru our times of friendship."

- "I have found FAMILY that I never knew I had because of yahoo360."

- "I have been blessed with having found many good, sweet and loving, witty, caring and loyal friends. Some of us have traveled the same path, never seeing each other, but knowing we are NOT truly alone. Some are closer friends than I have in my own family."

Much like the use of home, the family metaphor reifies the discourses of the private side of the public-private dichotomy. The public realm is viewed as the site of work, politics and economics, while the private sphere is linked to intimacy, emotion, and personal interests (Ashcraft & Flores, 2000). The use of the family metaphor enhances user understandings of Y!360 as an intimate place, a safe dwelling, and personal habitat. The same can be said of the use of community metaphors, which also appeared in participants' texts.

Metaphor of Community

In modern conceptions, the boundaries of home extend beyond its walls, often to the neighboring community (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). While home is place, a community too invokes a sense of shared meaning. Early conceptions of community included the sentiments of communion, kinship, and solidarity amongst people who shared a specific physical location. The essential denominator in concept of community is people who establish relationships beyond the familial, with an array of voluntary, social, and reciprocal relations bound together by an

intimacy or closeness.

- "Farewell to Yahoo 360. It has my virtual community for 2 yrs and I went in as a stranger, made friends, lost some and replaced some too."
- "I have been trying to figure out what made our community on Yahoo 360 so unique. I think it was what the Germans call gestalt. This happens when individual items, ideals, people, etc. come together, and when they are together something new is created. That is what made Yahoo 360 so special. Each person was respected as an individual, and we all had the freedom to come and go. We all felt connected. We had a feeling of belonging."
- "In this neighborhood we were all connected. We had community. Sometimes in private rooms I cybered. Sure it was 'just text,' but it was intimate."
- "I haven't seen a blogging community that was quite as friendly. I mean, my friends and I would comment on each other's pages and have these endless free-flowing conversations, and because of the message boxes the convos could involve like 5 people. That's all gone now. So is the sense of community and merely hanging out online."
- "I had family here. I had lovers here. I had neighbors here. I had a deep sense of community."

Community in an online context is inhabited by friends, as well as by acquaintances and strangers, and the nature and strength of relationships is considered a

better foundation for defining community than physical proximity. "In terms of online community, a shared space on the screen makes it easier to experience the community's existence and thereby to connect, and the shared space does indeed draw some of the necessary borders" (Gotved, 2006, p. 479). The participants viewed Y! 360 as their community and therefore acted, spoke, and blogged accordingly. Participants routinely call each other friends, family, lovers. They are living in the same "neighborhood," hanging out, conversing, and "cybering" (having text-based online sex).

The metaphors of home, family, and community highlight shared meanings and understandings, promoting a closeness, an intimacy, and connectedness among SNS members. These metaphors are all derived from the private side of the public-private divide. These same metaphors, however, hide a different reality: that Yahoo! is a for-profit corporation, and Y!360 – their home, their community, and their claims to family — is part of that corporation. As a corporation, therefore Yahoo!'s main purpose is economic profitability and the maximization of shareholder value (McSweeny, 2007).

Economic Metaphors

As noted, Yahoo! faced financial pressure from business and stock analysts, as well as stockholders, leading to the decision to close a number of services, including Y!360. It was during this time that Yahoo! began to address members of the SNS in order to answer their questions about the closure, how to transfer their blogs, use the new Profiles system, and answer other questions. While Y! 360 members used metaphors of home, family, and com-

munity, Yahoo! organizational members used very different terms: users, customers, and product.

- "Yahoo 360 was a way to create a new profile with social networking. We didn't get it right. We need the basic profile for users just to manage their identity so when they participate in other parts of Yahoo they have options to see."
- "Part of our strategy is to normalize those [multiple] profiles and collapse them into a single place and reduce user confusion."
- "I know that several users asked for 360 to be revived/fixed, this wasn't an option."
- "360 gained a strong core of loyal users (you) who enjoyed the service, Yahoo! has been reprioritizing some products to help us deliver the best possible experiences to consumers."

Yahoo! 360° members are framed primarily as users and consumers by Yahoo!. The term user does not frame members in terms of intimacy, family, and community. As utilized by computer programmers, computer designers, computer engineers and other technically adept individuals, the term user frames individuals in a one-down position (Norman, 2006). The term user characterizes a class of people that use a system who do not fully understand the computer system due to a lack of technical expertise. A user is the person responsible for "I-D-10-T" errors, the computer malfunction between the chair and the keyboard (Herrmann, in press). User depersonalizes online participants, considering them as passive recipients of technology, technologically limited, and context outside of their use of technology is not meaningful (Norman,

2006). Under the guise of "user" there is no Yahoo! 360°
community or family, an issue that arises over the term
product as well.

Yahoo!: "If a product like this is no longer a high
priority internally and does not have a clear future, it's
really best to close it down (in an orderly fashion) and redi-
rect those internal resources elsewhere."

Yahoo!: "We know that there are a lot of reasons for
you all to be skeptical, but I can assure you that we're
committed to enhancing and evolving the profiles product,
and it will remain a part of your Yahoo! experience."

Yahoo!: "Yahoo has been reprioritizing some prod-
ucts to help us deliver the best possible experiences to con-
sumers. The decision to close Yahoo 360 and transition us-
ers to profiles is part of this larger strategy."

Jim Stoneham, VP of Communities: "We have to
make sure [the product] works before turning on connec-
tions to big traffic properties. The big bang theory doesn't
work at this scale. Its like Apple rolling out a new operat-
ing system release."

Calling Yahoo! 360° a product frames participants
as users or consumers of the system. Both the products
and the users become framed in discursive economic
terms, particularly within rational choice theory (Elster,
1986). This is based upon the idea of the rational actor,
homo-economicus, the fictional, but socially constructed
self-interested economic man. Framed as a product, the
meaning of Yahoo! 360° is not grounded within the social
and cultural context of the members. Other possible mean-
ings – community, family, lovers, friends – are subsumed
under the larger managerial metaphors of economics and
consumption. While participants framed the SNS in terms

of the private sphere of life, the corporation itself was making economic and business decisions. As the closing of Y!360 got closer participants blog posts changed, and they began to use the metaphors of war and murder. They believed, in fact, Yahoo! declared war on them.

Metaphor of War

As can be seen from some of the previous excerpts, Y!360 participants were upset and saddened with the imminent closing of the SNS. Power and their own positions of powerlessness were revealed and became important issues for participants. When Yahoo! decided to close Y!360, participants realized they had no power to stop the process. As participants in Y!360, they recognized their communal and personal interests and the business and economic interests of Yahoo! did not coincide. As such, they perceived Yahoo! as doing violence to their community, and framed the actions of Yahoo! as war and an instrument of their destruction as the following examples highlight.

- "The Great 360 Massacre of 'aught 9!! So it's all said and done. We are a 360less community struggling to use this new Profiles page, which is sooooo not cool. What the fresh hell are you doing over there? Thank you, you Yahoo shits, for ruining my community. My friends are vanishing faster than I can figure out where they are leaving for."
- "This Sucks! You have blown up our community. Yahoo – you have become too ridiculous, too burdensome, too slow, less intuitive, and generally unnecessary. Yahoo, give it up and

just go out of business will you?"

- "You know, it's like Yahoo nuked an entire online community. I know this is hyperbole, but this is our Nagasaki. They destroyed it."

- "In the words of the band Time Zone, 'This is a world destruction, your life ain't nothing.' That's how Yahoo feels about the 360 community. We are the shit at the bottom of the bowl and are getting flushed."

- "I feel betrayed. I feel lost. I feel like I lost a war."

- "I've never seen such disregard for a community of people in my life. As most of you know as a Christian I don't use this kind of language...but, what the hell? I mean WHAT THE HELL? Thanks Yahoo. You murdered us. May your bankruptcy be faster and harsher than Enron's."

When confronted with the eminent closing of the site, Y!360 participants recognized the power issues involved in their relationship with Yahoo!, framing the organization as having declared war and performing acts of violence upon members of the community. This is reminiscent of Morgan's (1986) political-systems metaphor of the organization as instrument of domination. As Morgan noted, "If the power distribution in a political system is very unbalanced, the system may be denoted as an instrument of domination" (p. 273). Yahoo!'s legitimate power included the power of formal authority (managerial), control of decision processes, control of key technologies, the control of scarce resources, and dependency of others on it

(Deetz, 1992). The statements "You murdered us," and "massacre" align well with Arman's (2014) study in which participants felt their factory was being killed. Y!360 participants felt – and were – powerless to stop the closure of the SNS. The metaphors of home, family, and community were shown to be useless in the face of economic, financial, and corporate reasoning.

The political-systems metaphor focuses on conflict and power, the competing interests of organizational groups and individuals, and is generally applied to conflict and power issues in the relationship between management and labor and in superior-subordinate relationships (Deetz, 1992). As Morgan (1986) noted,

> "people begin to identify with the responsibilities and objectives associated with their specific role, work group, department, or project team, in a way that often leads them to value achievement of these responsibilities and objectives over and above the achievement of wider organizational goals. . . . As the actors in their various roles attempt to do the job for which they have been appointed, interpreting their task interests in a way that seems ideally suited for the achievement of organizational goals, they are set on a collision course." (p. 157)

While Morgan was discussing the use of metaphors within organizations, the same outcome occurred between the participants on Y!360 and Yahoo! Here, however, the members recognized a power conflict with Yahoo!, and as such they begin to see the organization through the frame of power, understanding Yahoo!'s management had interests divergent from their own. This recognition of domina-

tion led to the framing of interactions by Yahoo! as war
and the use of violent imagery ("blew up," "nuked,"
"killed," etc.).

Discussion and Limitations

This project expands the application of root-
metaphor analysis by examining the root-metaphors util-
ized at the closure of a once popular SNS. The members
participated in, created, constructed, and acted as if the
online space called Y!360 was their home and their com-
munity, virtual or not. The root-metaphors of home, fam-
ily, and community connected members and communica-
tively constituted a space of intimacy, camaraderie, and
care – all private sphere values. The use of these meta-
phors hid an important aspect of Y!360: that it was a part
of a for-profit organization. This economic component of
the Yahoo! organizational narrative was not seen, heard,
or realized under the auspices of the home, family, and
community metaphors.

Even with the two years' advance notice, when Y!
360 actually closed, participants were disbelieving and in
denial. They framed the closing of Y!360, not in economic
terms, but through metaphors of violence, such as war,
massacre, and bombings, including a nuclear attack. From
their subjective experience their homes were being ruined,
their family split apart, and their community destroyed.
Hence the anger, bitterness, and resentment is palpable
over the loss of what was constituted as a home, a commu-
nity, a shared experience. This felt loss can be considered
a form of disenfranchised grief (Herrmann, 2011a). Con-
flict occurred when the private sphere metaphors of home,
family and community ran up against the actions of the

organization based upon economic necessity.

The concept on online community conflates the difference between the public and private spheres of life (Dahlberg, 2005a; Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007). SNS are businesses, and this facticity problematizes individuals' relationships to them, as users often consider their 'place' on an SNS as a home or community. That is understandable, from a certain standpoint, given the discourses and rhetoric of technology companies' economics go unseen. Scholars studying CMC and SNS, however, do not have that excuse. Scholars must continue to examine online communities, "third places," online identities, neighborhoods, and internet homes. This is necessary because most site participants communicatively construct, imagine, and enact them as such *emically*. However, the idea of an online community, and the use of these metaphors, are a socially constructed reality.

Power is in play behind metaphors and discourses, including, but not limited to, managerialism, economics, and consumerism. As critical scholars have pointed out, organizational metaphors often conceal underlying process of patriarchy, hierarchy, and domination (Koch & Deetz, 1981). As an example, the family metaphor as used by organizations "implies consent, unanimity, loyalty, and harmony among organizational members" (Herrmann, 2011b, p. 254). Furthermore, corporate owners and managers of organizations, including those that own online sites *desire* participants to consider them as homes, and familial and communal spaces (Cothrel, 2000; Williams & Cothrel, 2000). The use of these metaphors acts powerfully to constitute a socially constructed online world that enhances participant investment and care, and hopefully – from a

business standpoint – advertising dollars. Future research could examine how organizations that own SNS develop, appropriate, enhance, and deploy these "private" metaphors and discourses to achieve greater participant involvement, which materially and positively effect the financial bottom-line.

This project advances one answer to Baym's (2009) challenge to critically examine questions of ownership regarding online spaces. The root-metaphors of home, family, and community used by members of Y!360 stood in direct contrast to larger socio-economic discourses and business decisions. To be economically viable, for-profit organizations must satisfy owner and stockholder value. In fact, businesses are only obligated to maximize stockholder profits and failure to maximize profit may be illegal (Friedman, 1970). Although Connelly (2009) suggested not all online site closures can be blamed on corporate financials, given Yahoo!'s finances at the time, economic factors played the major role in shuttering Y!360.

Finally, corporate control of these online spaces also problemtizes utopian theories regarding the internet. Early CMC research implied technological innovation would lead to equality and democratization (Rice & Love, 1987). Supposedly, through the elimination of social cues indicative of the class, ethnic, and gender cues of participants, communication would be equalized. As such, online participation could "serve to reduce social barriers to communication, and the impact of status differentials, resulting in greater equality of participation" (Spears & Lea, 1994, p. 428). These utopian theories were based upon participant communication *within* various sites. Research on existing data showed the hopes of an utopian online space

were misguided (Herring, 1993; Herrmann, 2007a; Kendall, 2000). Again, many of these studies examined communicative activity *within* online spaces. SNS and CMC researchers generally neglect to take into account the larger socio-economic, organizational, and corporate discursive frameworks *surrounding* online sites, including "the corporate colonization of everyday life," (Deetz, 1992), and socio-economic and organizational frameworks are often overlooked.

The concept of these spaces as communities and as online third places is called into question since for-profit organizations are – or own – SNS. For members of the organization – as compared to participants – the SNS is part and parcel of their employment and therefore their *second place*, rather than their *third place*. The concept of an SNS as a third place is also called into question through its virtuality. Members of a local community can walk to another café or pub if their favorite third place closes; in the virtual world this is not easily accomplished. Participants are from far-flung geographic locations, and meeting online is often exclusively how, where, and when they gather. Most, if not all, participants have unique usernames that may not be allowed or acceptable on other SNS, making identification of others difficult, if not impossible. (For example, I have only been able to track down 12 former Y!360 friends on Facebook.) Similarly, other SNS may have different services that do not attend to the same needs as did the shuttered SNS. All of these "virtual realities" complicate the idea of an SNS as a third place, while offering a plethora of research possibilities.

One exploration includes how participants of a closing SNS adopt – if they do– to a new/altered service by the

same company. For example, Y!360 became a very different type of site called Yahoo! Profiles, which eventually became Yahoo! Pulse, which itself is currently being altered (Dugdale, 2010; Menga, 2011). Another area of research can examine how participants choose a new SNS and attempt to integrate into a new online space. While Y! 360 participants were forced to move due to its closure, some SNS participants exit voluntarily. An exploration of the differences in experiences and communicative framing of voluntary exit could be worthwhile.

One of the limitations of this study is there is no examination of the internal discussions at Yahoo! regarding the closing of Y!360. Jim Farmer, the former Community Strategy Analyst at Yahoo! said,

> We invented/improved user-status sharing (what later became known as Facebook Newsfeeds) when we created Yahoo! 360°. But 360 was prematurely abandoned in favor of a doomed-from-the-start experiment called Yahoo!Mash. It failed out of the gate…. In four attempts (Profiles, 360, Mash, YOS) they'd only had one marginal success (360), which they sabotaged several times by telling users over and over that the service was being shut down and replaced with inferior functionality. (http://www.buildingreputation.com)

An investigation into the decision-making process and organizational cultures of firms that own SNS could shed more light on the reasoning behind SNS changes and closure.

As popular SNS sites continue to increase membership, an investigation would be useful to see what meta-

phors participants and management use to frame their experiences and each other. There are of course other online spaces with different purposes to be examined, including MMORPGs – massively multiplayer online role-playing games – (e.g., World of Warcraft, Neverwinter Nights), dating sites (e.g., ChristianMingle, Match.com), Newsgroups, (e.g., alt.2600) and listserves, (e.g., CRTNET). How participants and the organizations that own them frame these spaces and each other is a necessary forward step in understanding life online.

This is a study of one promising, but now defunct SNS. Other sites preceded and followed Y!360's demise. Geocities: closed. Sixdegrees: gone. Mugshot: shuttered. Soundbreak: dead. Bahu: disappeared. Tribe: done. Spaces: finished. While it might seem ridiculous to ponder the future of Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter – given their large and/or growing user bases – the business models and economics of each company is questionable for the long-term. After all, in 2006 who would have thought that MySpace would become a pariah by 2010? Or that new services, such as Pinterest, would become valuable as new online sites for individuals to connect? (Powers, 2014). In the ever-evolving world of SNS, change is the only constant, and users and participants both need to recognize that the companies that own them have differing priorities that do not necessarily engender the metaphors of home, family, and community.

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