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Social Networking Technology: Place and Identity in Mediated Communities.

Abstract

This paper explores the rise of social networking technology as instances of mediated
communities. A dialectic between collectivity and place, resulting in the grounding of
a shared sense of the past in a particular place, is at the base of all communities. In
this sense community is, by its very definition, inherently 'mediated'. We reformulate
the notion of a 'virtual community' to examine the particular modalities of mediation
across interactions occurring on Myspace. Data from two separate conversational
exchanges are taken from open access Myspace profiles. Drawing on an approach
broadly informed by the principles of Discursive Psychology (DP), we examine how
identity is constituted within interaction by drawing on symbolic resources. The
significance of place and off establishing a delicate relationship between the on-line
and off-line accomplishments is underlined. The paper develops the arguments of
Benwell & Stokoe (2006) and Dixon & Durrheim (2000) to arrive at an account of
'place identity' as the central dynamic in mediated community.

Key words:
Sense of place; place identity; social networking; discursive psychology; mediated
community

Introduction

Social networking technology is the generic name used for a range of internet based techniques for communicating online. Two main competitors in a constellation of explosive growth are Myspace and Bebo[1]. Users of these technologies are able to log on through the main Myspace or Bebo portal and build their own personal profile. These profiles consist of diverse mixtures of biographical information, personal preferences, images, weblogs (blogs) and miscellaneous text. Interaction takes place through leaving messages and images as weblogs in a predefined area of the profile. In July 2006, Myspace estimated that they had over 87 million users worldwide[2]. To put this in context, the sum total of social networks here rivals the population of most European countries.

The owners of Myspace – currently Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation – are keen to promote the idea that the networks of profiles, blogs and messages which make up the site are a 'community'. Clearly the commercial stakes of establishing this claim are high. The sheer numbers of users on Myspace have made it attractive to both professional marketing companies and aspiring artists (such as songwriters and film makers). All Myspace profiles contain generic information on biographical details such as age, gender, relationship status and so on, which is inputted by the user when the profile is created (there are other options to include more specific details, such as body-type and sexual preference). Marketers can then manipulate these details to make profiles more attractive to other users. However, attention to and tailoring of details is a routine presentational issue for all Myspace users. Profiles are connected through a series of hyperlinks that are attached to an image the user chooses to present (this typically takes the form of a distorted passport style photograph or another novelty image). Users who wish to increase the number of links to their profile need to offer sufficient details in order to a) make their profile 'searchable' by other users and b) provide grounds for other users to initiate interaction on the basis of shared interests. Thus a classic device found on many profiles is to provide exhaustive lists of favourite bands and musicians.

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[1] www.myspace.com/ www.bebo.com
[2] "Myspace to Launch Mobile Service" (http://www.guardian.co.uk/mobile/article/0,,1811243,00.html) Retrieved on 03-06-2006.

Users of Myspace most certainly attend to self-presentation in their profiles, and as such we can say that identity, defined broadly as the construction and maintenance of a particular version or versions of one's character, interests and values, is an omnipresent concern. But does this mean that we can consider Myspace to be a 'community' in a serious social psychological sense of the term? Internet and media researchers have debated the application of the term community to online interaction for some term. Rheingold (1993) popularised use of the term 'virtual community' in research that described his experiences with the first wave of internet based forums for communication (such as the San Francisco based Whole Earth 'lectronic Link or WELL) emerging in the 1980s. Rheingold (1993) defines virtual communities as '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' (p.7). This definition is fairly elastic, since it makes size ('enough people') and emotion ('sufficient human feeling') central.

Unsurprisingly the idea of virtual community has been fiercely debated (see 1995, 1997). Kevin Robins (1996, also Robins & Webster, 2001) makes recourse to a strong version of social theory (i.e. Marxism) to argue that online interaction is a privileged space of interaction that is dominated by neoliberal ideology and bears little relation to the conflicts and struggles of genuine 'real-life' communities (see also Borsook, 2000). Wellman & Gulia (1999) take a more cautious position. They note that a range of social psychological phenomena, such as tust and reciprocity, can be seen to be in play during on-line interactions, and suggest that the problem with the term 'virtual community' arises from romanticising the 'real world' notion of community:

> there is so little community life in most neighbourhoods in western cities that it is more useful to think of each individual as having a *personal community*: an individual's social network of informal interpersonal ties, ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties. (Wellman & Gulia, 1999: 185)

Wellman & Gulia argue that if we treat all communities as essentially 'personal communities', then it becomes possible to see how the specific features of online community facilitate or impair personal ties, and to compare online and real life

'networks of informal interpersonal ties' on this basis. But despite the relative subtlety of this definition, in contrast to both Rheingold and Robins, the notion of a personal community defined by social ties remains an objectivist approach that treats collectivity as something that can be directly enumerated by counting up the sum of relations and their relative strength. It leaves untouched the idea that community is something which is *felt* or *experienced* rather than 'just there'. If online interaction can properly be referred to as a 'community' then we need to explicate what Bakardjieva refers to as 'virtual togetherness' (2003). This work takes its point of departure from Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined community', which refers to the sense of belonging that members feel even in the absence of regular contact with large groups of fellow members:

> It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of the fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (1983:6)

'Virtual togetherness' may then be seen as a special case of the more general imaging of the collective-at-large that Anderson sees as critical to any dispersed group (see Feeberg & Bakardjieva, 2004). There are clear links here to Sarason's classic (1974) work on 'psychological sense of community', which similarly emphasises a sense of interconnectedness as emerging from social ties. McMillan and Chavis (1986) formalise this as in terms of membership, influences, fulfilment of needs and shared emotional content. Theoretical perspectives of a sense of community focus on community as an observable phenomena, such as, geographical place. This uses place as the connection that ties people into a shared experience of a sense of community. This contrasts strongly with the alternative sociological approaches drawn on by Wellman & Gulia (e.g. social network theory) that focus on the physical structure or formation of a community. The link between psychology and place shows how 'community' could provide an increased basis of belonging within a social group (Bess et al, 2002). The psychological aspect of the research notices how an individual understanding and feelings relate to the other members of the group. A psychological sense of community has then been used to explore a range of issues covering participation (Hunter, 1975; Wandersman & Giamartino, 1980), perceived safety

(Doolittle & McDonald, 1978) and an ability to function competently in the community (Glynn, 1981).

The re-orientation to psychological rather than sociological definition of community is useful in that it allows us to see that Myspace users may feel membership and shared emotional connection without necessarily possessing 'strong ties' to large numbers of fellow users. But it does introduce another problem, by making place central to community. As is classically said, the internet is not any sort of place at all, in the usual geographical sense of the term. In the case of Myspace this is particularly acute since there is nothing other than sets of interlinked profile pages. Other forms of online interaction, such as Second Life, do provide what might be called 'public places' by representing users as avatars who can navigate visually rendered artificial worlds. So does this mean that Myspace cannot, after all, be considered a community?

From virtual to mediated community

The difficulty we have with Myspace bears some relation to the problem the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs encountered in extending his theory of collective memory to groups whose social ties are apparently provisional and fleeting (e.g. economic or legal), in contrast with groups build around more obvious 'community' relationships (e.g. families, religious communities). In brief Halbwach's (1925/1992; 1950/1980) argues that a social group is defined its relationship to a shared sense of the past which defines its current identity. Billig summarises this well:

> It is possible for a collectivity to have its object of commemoration as the past itself rather than a specific past event. What is recalled is not an event, whether genuinely historical or mythical, but the feeling that the collectivity possesses a history (Billig, 1990:62)

Halbwachs asserts that this sense of collective history is defined by a 'collective framework' in which the present activities of the group can are located with reference to a set of values and a group identity which. The past is then continuously invoked and mobilised, typically through the use of general statements ('we have always done this') or key events ('we all remember the time when…'). Halbwachs argued that the maintenance of such a framework could perpetuate the identity of the group beyond

the loss of individual members and actual historical changes. But for our present purposes Halbwachs most interesting claim is that collective frameworks intersect with 'place' – that is the spatial geography that the groups claims as its own:

> The group not only transforms the space into which it has been inserted, but also yields and adapts to its physical surroundings. It becomes enclosed within the framework it has built. The group's image of its external milieu and its stable relationships with this environment becomes paramount in the idea it forms of itself, permeating every element of its consciousness, moderating and governing its evolution. (1980: 130)

Groups 'engrave' their image on the spaces they inhabit, which then serve as material supports for collective frameworks of memory. So deeply intertwined is 'place' with 'common past' that for group members it 'permeates every element of consciousness'. What Halbwachs describes here is certainly very close to a 'psychological sense of community'. But with a crucial difference. The relationship between the community and place is not one where place binds community relations, but is rather better grasped as a dialectic which continuously evolving. The community 'transforms' place by selecting and emphasising certain features of it as particular relevant (e.g. the particular spaces of the city that enable leisurely exchanges), and is in turn 'shaped' by place as it 'permeates every element of is consciousness' and comes to figure strongly in how the community thinks of itself. This dialectic is also mediated by a set of identities which become available as a consequence, and which serve to elaborate and amplify the relationship between place and group (for example, the 'miser' or the 'wayward child'). Halbwachs (1980) argues that this approach works equally well in relation to groups who have a more tenuous connection to the social spaces that they inhabit (e.g. market traders, lawyers). Although the features of a given court room or market site may changes, they are still seen to be shaped by the historical tradition and customs of the law or the market as they are reflected in the collective memory of the group.

Halbwachs' approach has been recently updated in Dixon & Durrheim's (2000) development of the concept of 'place identity' (cf. Proshansky et al, 1983). Dixon & Durrheim are similarly concerned with explicating the relationship between

collectivities and the social spaces they inhabit. They emphasise that identities are discursively formulated – that is, they are sets of claims and self-descriptions which persons adopt (and sometimes dispose of) in the course of everyday interaction. If this is so, then 'place-identity' cannot be equated to a cognitive entity such as a 'sense of belonging'. Claims that one's identity is grounded in a particular place can instead be treated as symbolic resources that are mobilised in interaction to warrant and ground whatever version of identity is being rendered operant. For example, Wallwork & Dixon (2004) show how pro-hunting protestors attempted to appeal against the ban on fox hunting in the UK by promoting a version of British identity grounded in a 'country way of life', now under threat by supposed governmental interference. In this way place identity, Dixon & Durrheim suggest, 'might function to underwrite personal identities, render actions or activities intelligible, express tastes and preferences and mediate efforts to change environments' (2000:36).

The concept of place-identity allows us to reformulate 'virtual community' in the following way. A collective that can lay claim to place finds in its relationship to this social space the basis for both a sense of its own collective history, and the grounds for a series of identities. Although these identities may be 'naturalised' – i.e. seen to simply emerge from place itself – they are formed and maintained discursively through routine interaction and through the use of mediating symbolic resources (see Billig 1991 on the daily practice of swearing allegiance to the flag in classroom in the USA). We will use the term 'community' to any group which is able to maintain itself in this way. However, certain kinds of communities find themselves quite literally 'displaced' – for example, living geographically apart as a diaspora (see Anderson, 1983). In such cases the dialectic of collective with place becomes further mediated by other symbols. For example, Edward Said's (1989) study of the Palestinian diaspora points to the importance of domestic objects and mementos as markers of the 'lost land'. Finally, there may be communities whose members have never had any form of geographical connection, and who have the additional task of then defining the 'place' on which their collectivity is engraved – such as the 'virtual' place of website or discussion list – and through which place identity will be grounded

Our argument is that all communities, defined in this way, are 'mediated'. That is they correspond to the following – a) a dialectic of place and collective; b) the mobilisation of symbolic resources; c) the maintenance of a collective history and d) the underwriting of personal identity in place identity. What is crucial is the *relative degree* of mediation involved in a given community. Virtual communities are not then opposed to other kinds of community in some way, but instead differ in terms of the complexity of the mediation involved and the modalities through which this occurs. For example, Benwell & Stokoe (2006) point to the range of deictic markers (i.e. adverbs and pronouns which indexically relate an utterance to time and place) found amongst posts to internet message boards. Terms such as 'here','now', 'this', 'nearby' etc all create a sense of immediate proximity, or shared space (hence these are illustrations of *proximal deixis*). Such markers are common in ordinary interaction, but they become particularly important when there is no literal shared space. Speakers are instead using conventional language signifiers, such as, metaphor and turn taking to attempt to 'recreate' a spatial reality. Benwell & Stokoe also point out that proximal deixis requires some sense of where 'here' is or what 'this' means, thus there is also a considerable amount of spatial and visual metaphors used in such postings, coupled with descriptions of imaginary spaces ('hi come sit with me').

We can then study virtual communities as particular instances of mediated communities. This means asking how existing symbolic and discursive resources are deployed by the community to define and 'engrave its form' on social space. The social space in question may be some geographical place about which the community members have some shared history. It may alternatively be a 'space' that is worked up entirely interactionally, or, perhaps more commonly, some mixture of the two. Interestingly a great many interactions between users of Myspace and related sites fall into this category. Users tend to have some knowledge of those others with whom they interact most both online and offline, with the result that the claims they wish to make about geographical place and its relationship to the community (e.g. in the self-descriptions they have featured on their profile) can be called to account. We may also examine how territorial claims to social space (whether virtual or not) constitute place identities which underwrite personal identities, and how these identities are deployed as warrants for action and expressions of emotion. In what follows we will

do this by making a close qualitative analysis of two exchanged occurring on Myspace.

Method

The data in this study was obtained from two open access profiles from Myspace. The Myspace data was taken from a search under the following settings, age (between 18 and 35, this is the default setting), gender (men and women), location in UK (any), what are they here for – networking (this was selected from a scroll down list of possible options, such as, relationships, friends etc.). The search initially found 3000 people. Most recent exchanges between these people were then examined. We retained only those profiles where the most recent exchanges included at least one identifiable sequence between two speakers (i.e. myspace users) lasting more than three turns each, and where each turn consisted of more than two sentences. This resulted in a greatly reduced sample (under 100). In the paper we present a detailed analysis of two examples from this dataset. The examples have been selected because their lexical, stylistic and pragmatic features serve as good illustrations of tendencies found across our overall sample. Although Myspace counts as a public domain, photographs have been removed and all other names have been changed in order to maintain a degree of anonymity. The time signature on each section allowed the turns to be joined together to match each turn. For the people involved with writing this conversation the replies only appeared on the other person's profile, therefore, there is no constant reminder of what has already been written.

The data was read repeatedly to identify emerging themes in the exchange between the participants. The analysis was broadly informed by principles of Discursive Psychology (DP) (see Edwards & Potter, 1992; Middleton & Edwards, 1990; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This is a broad approach resting on ethnomethodological principles, and using in the main the methods typically associated with discourse analysis (see Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), and some of the principles developed from conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992) and membership categorisation analysis (Sacks, 1992). Discursive psychology conceptualises language use as more than the exchange of information, being instead the performance of social action.

Following DP principles, we treated identity as the always provisional outcome of unfolding interaction. Identity is then constructed through the sets of self-descriptions, formulations and category-use which each participant sequentially deploys during the course of interaction. We paid particular attention to the way categories and descriptions indexed to 'place' were deployed by participants, and how these served as resources for the making of identity-relevant claims. Following Benwell & Stokoe (2006), we examined references to place as deictic markers, but, as we will show, we see these markers as instances of a mediated community recruiting 'place' as a symbolic resource to maintain and affirm current relationships.

Analysis

The analysis will focus on two of the themes that were evident in the conversation: (1) Grounding online exchanges in a shared experience of place (2) Negotiating relational identities. The extracts will not be analysed in a strict sequential order so that different segments of the speech can be used to identify themes. The first extract we want to discuss is taken from a conversation between John and Rebecca. It demonstrates how past experience of a particular place is discursively mobilised in order to ground and authenticate present constructions of identity.

Theme 1. Grounding online exchanges in a shared experience of place
Our analysis treats the exchanges (i.e. sets of postings between profiles) as forms of social action. The immediate 'interactional business' which is being accomplished in the following social action is the establishing of a relationship to a common past, as occurring in a particular. But, as we hope to show, what is at stake here is the authentication of a set of identities being worked out in the present:

Extract 1.
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1. John-5/21/2006 1:51 PM
2. rebecca!! hows kent? quite bored here now been in the computer
3. labs4 hours now coz de vin-thingy sold out bored bored very bored
4. i think i need some whisky or somethink speak 2 ya soon u crazy
5. hardcore party animal!x

6. John-5/22/2006 9:31 AM
7. ok who left the rank stuff in the kelloggs crunchy nut bowl in the
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8. fridge and then try to cover it up with some tin foil. It
9. obviously had been there a while coz it had a layer of white
10. fluffy mould covering the top of what every it was it smelt so
11. bad i nerly chundered, not quite as bad a big andrews salad but
12. still not cool. lol

13. Rebecca-6/4/2006 3:55 PM
14. i'm meeting brenda on wednesday in london! how werid is that!
15. also had a dream about the flat and u and little anthony were in
16. my dream and the flat was a disaster, everything was soo ugly
17. and there was crappy cartoon/animal wall paper all over the
18. joint. we were off to complain and then i woke up. i wonder if we
19. did her in.
20. u heading down to london any time soon? u had sun too? had it
21. over the weekend and i had a little tan! beats sunbathing outside
22. halls! this sun lasts for more than ten minutes!xxx

23. Rebecca-6/8/2006 8:19 AM
24. HAPPY HAPPY HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!xxxxxxx
25. careful on the old whiskey! wink winkxxxxx

26. Rebecca-6/14/2006 3:44 AM
27. i had another dream about our flat. this time the deco was a bit
28. better. that woman makes me nervous as to what "her" standards of
29. taste are. u partying hard mister john? thinking about an outing
30. on sat. ohhh how was alton?xxxxxxxxxxx

31. John-6/16/2006 4:02 AM
32. Of course i am party hard! every1 seems 2 be having house parties
33. which is great coz it doesnt cost me a thing! alton was rea;;y gd
34. and the ppl that just happened 2 b there on the same day just
35. made the whole day a lot more interesting. I had a dodgy dream
36. about the house well not really our flat, the three of us were
37. walking 2wards ur place when 1 of the other house on princess st
38. blew up but it didnt effect ur place so it ok. I talked to a few
39. ppl about employment as well yesterday so soon i might actually
40. start working which will suck coz i'll end up missing the wolrd
41. cup aaagggggh!! take it easy speak 2 u soon.x

Extract one shows John initiating a conversation by asking 'hows Kent?'(line 2).
From this first turn, it is apparent that John is acknowledging and making relevant the

geographical separation between himself and Rebecca. Significantly this is followed by 'been in the computer labs 4 hours' (line 3). This statement is more specific and implies that both parties have some prior experience of 'the computer labs'. There is an interesting contrast between the two relatively different geographical formulations which are invoked to the same purpose - the comparatively large scale 'Kent' to the small, specific 'computer labs'. By using the relatively flexible formulation 'Kent', John is offering Rebecca a fairly wide latitude of possible responses (i.e. there are a great many activities that might be reasonably represented as bound by 'Kent'). But the use of phrase 'the computer labs' is far more specific and carries with it the suggestion of a far narrower set of activities. Moreover, the immediate tag of a justification ('coz de vin-thingy sold out') constructs a shared awareness and experience of just what it means to be in 'the computer labs' (i.e. 'bored bored very bored').

Doreen Massey recognises this phenomenon as using the experience of place as a 'product of interaction' (1998:122). That is, rather than see 'place' as simply reducible to some geographical location, place is here represented as shaped by and in some sense the outcome of a prior set of interactions. John is then appealing to this shared sense of what has previously occurred in 'the computer labs' as a way of instigating conversation with Rebecca. The shared knowledge of place then provides for a possible interactional opening in the present, despite lack of immediate physical proximity. But this opening does not seem, by itself, to secure adequate grounds for interaction, since John goes on to mobilise another category - 'u crazy hardcore party animal' (line 3). This is what is usually referred to as a Membership Category Device (MCD) (Sacks, 1992). It is a category which comes ready-packaged with a clear set of putative behavioural ascriptions (for example, a 'hardcore party animal' might be expected to engage in binge-drinking, excessive socialising etc). The invocation of this MCD might be doing various forms of work. For example, it might serve as a bridge to the earlier appeal to shared experience. If Rebecca is a 'hard core party animal', then their shared experience might serve to jointly locate John in the same category (John appears to be pushing towards this in his claim to be needing 'some whisky or somethink'), which would in turn resolve the dilemma of why John feels it noteworthy to report his 'bored bored very bored' state.

The difficulty with using MCD's in this manner is that it relies on the individuals to whom the MCD is proposed to accede to this discursively formulated common view of the past experience. Indeed we might see that what John is offering up to Rebecca here is a somewhat over-emphasised description. If, following Dixon & Durrheim, we see the identity category as grounded in place, then if follows that the 'party animal' description is tapping into a past representation of what it meant to be a part of the community who frequented the computer labs. Dixon & Durrheim note that there is a tendency within place-identity formulations to offer a 'nostalgic conception of place now vs. place then' (2000, p.36). Whilst it would be stretching matters to say that such a short post could be characterised as nostalgic, the geographical remoteness of Rebecca the 'crazy hardcore party animal' makes for a strong contrast between the description of the present boredom and the category implications associated with the past.

We see further examples of the use of past experience in extract one through the use of 'the flat' (line 15) as a way of using place to bridge the gap between online and offline exchanges. As opposed to the 'party animal' example, 'the flat' makes a more nuanced appeal to the past. The first mention of 'the flat' is surrounded by negative implications; 'had a dream about the flat and you and little Andrew where in my dream and the flat was a disaster, everything was so ugly and there was crappy cartoon/animal wall paper all over the joint' (line 16-18). Throughout this turn, Rebecca offers an account of a 'dream' that nevertheless is situated in a shared experience of place. We might see that the potential relevancy of reporting an otherwise irrelevant dream in this way is that it displays not merely that Rebecca still thinks about her past relationships, but that the shared past with John (and 'little anthony') enters into the relative intimacy of her dream-life.

Rebecca's turn in lines 16-18 is marked by its use of extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986), such as "disaster" and "so ugly" which serve to build up the extremity of the account. The use of extreme case formulations in Rebecca's dream sequence communicates an ongoing interest in 'the flat' to the wider audience. Both cases of the 'party animal' and 'the flat' represent a range of sentiment implied through the discursive construction of place in mediated communities. The online

exchanges use a tactfully constructed discourse that seems to communicate to a wider audience through the experience of offline exchanges.

In the latter part of extract 1, Rebecca leaves three presumably unanswered messages in relative quick succession (line 42-44, line 45-50 and line 51-60). It is always possible, of course, that some other form of mediated communication (e.g. text messaging) has occurred in the intervening time. However there are various features of this post which seem to indicate that a concerted attempt is being made to both affirm their relationship and solicit a reply. In the third message the dream scenario is revisited that contains a reference to 'that woman' (line 28), presumably the landlady/owner of the flat, with a disparaging remark about 'her' standards of taste. We can read this remark as an attempt to 'populate' the shared past with other memorable persons who can be the subject of joint recollection. In recalling the landlady and her awful taste in décor, Rebecca invites John (and others who may be reading their public posts to one another) to affirm their shared evaluations and values. Dixon & Durrheim refer to such population of the past as 'locatedness' (2000). Rebecca follows the talk about 'her' with 'u partying hard mister john?' (line 29). This echoes the earlier nostalgic conception of a 'crazy hardcore party animal' (line 3). The term 'mister john' represents an affectionate use of a formal term of address (also seen in extract 2 with 'sir' and 'miss'). Using this affectionate term demonstrates a sensitivity to how the offline relationship is discursively organised. This requires managing the relationships between different members, for example, John replies to Rebecca's question 'u partying hard mister john?'(line 29) with 'Of course I am partying hard!'(line 31). This immediately attends to the nostalgic conception of 'party animals' with which Rebecca is known to be a part. It shows that the category of 'partying' is used to repeated effect throughout their online exchanges and is built into the discursive construction of their past experience of place.

This last few posts are interesting because they demonstrate both a change in the footing of the interaction. For example Rebecca refers to the flat in two ways: 'the flat' (line 15) and 'our flat' (line 27). This means that as John came to reply to these messages there was the lexical choice of 'our' or 'the' in describing the flat that offered different levels of social commitment. As Goffman (1979) noted, a change in footing in the interaction can work to personalise or generalise a statement. In the case

of 'flat', we have a generalising version in line 15 'the flat' which becomes personalised in line 27 'our flat'. John manages this transition with 'had a dodgy dream about the house well not really our flat'. The satisfies Rebecca's stake in the conversation by referring to the flat as 'our flat' and replies with a closely mirrored account that demonstrates comparatively similar sensitivity to the transition by combining the use of a dream scenario through the distance of 'the house'. It seems that the continuing success of the online exchanges relies heavily on the ability to negotiate the displayed identity to the wider audience, while all the time attending to the subtle issues in personal offline relationships.

Theme 2. Negotiating Relational Identities

In extract one, Rebecca produced three turns in the exchange without a reply, and we noted the delicacy involved in managing this as an issue. As conversation analysis demonstrates, when we ask a question, we expect an answer ('adjacency pairs'). Extract 2 shows what happens when this perceived duality of the relationship is not reciprocated and the strategies that participants use to manage their accountability in the case of non-response (cf. invocation of 'flat' in extract one). In this extract Henry and Cheryl are discussing a package that Henry has recently posted to Cheryl.

Extract 2.

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1. Henry-6/26/2006 7:21 AM
2. Hey miss, we haven't spoken in a while. I sent you a letter today
3. with your birthday card and a few other things you might like.
4. Hope you've been well and I'll see you mid-July when I move in to
5. my new flat.
6. Miss you lots by the way. Island life would be so much fun if I
7. had some of my friends over here.

8. Cheryl-6/26/2006 8:16 AM
9. helloo. indeed it has been a long time sir. ooh i love letters. i
10. am too excited. och, remember when i was going to come to your
11. island? how would one go about doing such a thing anyway? oh yes
12. mid july and the flat warming festivities shall begin oui? i look
13. forward to present buying! have you spoken to Claire etc much
14. since you've been home? damn it i have to get changed out of my
15. pyjamas. it is 4:15pm. disgraceful. talk t'you soon.
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16. Henry-6/26/2006 5:16 PM
17. Yup, when I return the festivities shall begin. Only little
18. festivities though since I am not very rich at the moment, not at
19. all really. You can bring your red washing basket. That stuck in
20. my memory for some reason. When you said "pirat ship" there
21. must've gone off a little childhood pirate trigger or
22. something... yes... Ok, well I hope you enjoy your letter. I
23. haven't gotten in touch with Claire for a little while but last
24. I heard she's been having a really really good time and loves the
25. atmosphere in Taiwan. I wish I was there actually but I have to
26. earn some money before I do any adventuring... Well, shall speak
27. to you soon miss...

28. Henry-6/26/2006 5:18 PM
29. I've taken to calling you "miss" all of a sudden. I hope this
30. doesn't prove to be a problem...

31. Cheryl-6/27/2006 7:02 AM
32. heh it shouldn't be a problem, nope. well i look forward to the
33. small festivities. my red washing basket may come with, je ne
34. sais pas. i best be off to clean before work. fun times. take
35. care sir.

36. Henry-6/27/2006 7:15 AM
37. Cool, I can't wait to be do something in Aberdeen. I'm a bit
38. bored see and I've taken to buying things. I have too much of an
39. overdraft now and will probably be living off of beans all
40. summer. Oh I got a new laptop. Well, not new but it's really
41. cool. I'm selling my old computer because it's too big. Plus,
42. laptops are much better for just carrying around and for music
43. and the likes.

44. Henry-6/28/2006 1:19 AM
45. I just had a strange dream where there was this girl and lots of
46. lego and this man who kept on saying "je ne ce pas". Hmm, I wish
47. my imagination would at least make this make sense...

48. Henry-6/29/2006 12:01 PM
49. I'm going to type a lot. I know this because I've typed
50. approximately six thousand words today at my leisure. So don't
51. blame me if you're tired...

52. I tried being sad today by listening to Idlewild's
53. Warnings/Promises then I got to the end and ended up happier than
54. ever. It seems that it's difficult to be sad when really you
55. aren't. I got my laptop today so I've just been installing things
56. on that an revelling in the fact that I can carry my computer.
57. Really, I can. It's only a couple of kilos as opposed to my
58. mammoth ex-computer. Crap, I typed that on the ex-computer which
59. is the only thing I can use the internet with just now. Do you
60. think it'll mind? I don't want dying on me before I go to sell
61. it... Gosh, I anticipate it'll die of a heart attack or processor
62. meltdown or whatever. You wanna tell me what you think of my new
63. reviews? Nobody ever tells me, that's why I'm going to print them
64. out and force them on people when I start to pamphlet about anti-
65. nuclear action. Oh yes, do you want to join me? It'll be a good
66. Sunday hobby and it'll make you feel good... I just got kind of
67. motivated to do something like that after listening to
68. Radiohead's Hail to the Thief today. Oh, you should read my
69. review. I really like that one. I've meant to write about that cd
70. for months now. Anyway, did you get my parcel? I don't know if I
71. put either too many or too few stamps on it. I'm not very clever
72. in terms of doing practical things. Anyway, I'll abandon this
73. absurd paragraph...
74. Hope you're doing well over there. I am happy today because I
75. finally started doing reviews again. I hope I do a good many
76. during the summertime.

77. Cheryl-6/30/2006 4:12 AM
78. haha those comments were hilarious. i especially liked the one
79. about the dream, how bizarre. i got your package on wednesday. it
80. made me smile a lot. thanks. i'm in the middle of writing you
81. back and trying to think of things to send you. my mind is a bit
82. of a blank at the moment though so it may take some time. i
83. watched thumbsucker - i remember you said you saw it - it was
84. excellent. i really enjoyed it but it was weird. can you send me
85. a message with your address in it, your writing gets a bit hard
86. to read near the end! heh oh how d'you spell your last name as
87. well....do...something or other. je ne sais pas. well i best be
88. getting ready for the day. lookng forward to seeing all you guys
89. again. i got a postcard from claire. it looks so nice there! how

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90. jealous am i. sigh. anyway i will talk to you soon. hope you're
91. doing well over on that there island.
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Extract two begins with a turn from Henry where he addresses Cheryl as "hey miss" (line 2). The first reply from Cheryl mirrors Henry's formal term of address 'indeed it has been a long time sir' (line 9). By providing the opposite expression to the term 'miss', as in 'sir', the two speakers are connected in a seemingly affectionate formality (cf. Extract1 'Mister John'). However, for John this term of address is delicately used to discursively manage the transition between online and offline. Henry then asks Cheryl, "I've taken to calling you 'miss' all of a sudden. I hope this doesn't prove to be a problem…"(line 29/30). The fact that this is included in a separate message seems to give the question a serious tone that Cheryl orients towards in her reply, "heh it shouldn't be a problem, nope" (line 32). This suggests that even in the early exchanges of a online exchange the negotiation of the offline relationship is at the forefront of interactional business. The final use of the term 'sir' (line 35) is another example of Cheryl mirroring Henry's language, and demonstrates her acceptance of his term of address and subsequent questioning of it in line 29/30.

As extract 2 continues Henry peppers his posting with formulations which appear designed to convey a sense of emotional depth and complexity, as provided for by statements such as, 'its difficult to be sad when you really aren't'(line 54). One possible reason for this construction of a 'sensitive' identity is the management of a pressing interpersonal concern, 'did you get the parcel?'(line 70). The discourse is organised to disguise the interpersonal concern of the parcel, whilst maintaining a displayed identity of the relationship with Cheryl and the known social relationships between Henry and Cheryl. We may observe here that the negotiation of personal concerns is conducted subtly through the discourse, while continually attending to the displayed identity the discourse is promoting to other members. This means that to have clarified one's position in a mediated community is not enough to determine an ability to avoid accountability for a range of issues. To that end the ongoing negotiation of personal interaction is cautiously constructed in a wider 'social' sense of online exchanges.

As we noted in extract one with Rebecca's three turns, in the absence of a reply, tricky interactional work has to be done. In extract 2, there are three sets of messages from Henry that do not immediately elicit a response. Henry has also not received confirmation that his parcel has arrived. The first (lines 37-43) concerns what he wants to do when he returns from his current place 'the island'. The second (lines 44-47) is constructed as a dream sequence and with his use of 'je ne ce pas' (line 46) mirroring and presumably directly indexing Cheryl's' use of the same phrase in line 33, suggesting that the girl he dreamt about is Cheryl. After no response, his third message begins with an immediate account for his continued correspondence 'I'm going to type a lot. I know this because………' (line 49). He then proceeds to give an account of his recent activities, in this case purchasing a new computer. After this perhaps deliberately mundane account, he asks Cheryl a specific question 'you wanna tell me what you think of my new reviews?' (line 63). Henry here uses a circuitous approach, where the delicate business of asking for direct evaluation of his own work is embedded in a prolonged discussion of other 'safer' matters, such that any 'off-line' implications of such a request are downgraded. This is shown in the following lines when Henry invites Cheryl to share in a joint activity offline; 'Nobody ever tells me what they think, that's why I'm going to start printing them out and force them on people when I start to pamphlet about nuclear action. Oh yes, do you wan to join me?' (line 65), and then a reason for her to do so 'it'll be a good Sunday hobby and it'll make you feel good' (lines 66).

The final bit of business done in the last turn (and arguably his first reason for writing) is a renewed request for confirmation of receipt of his parcel. As it is regarded as common courtesy to register acceptance of such things, Chery's failure to adhere to this normative procedure creates some interactional difficulty. Henry immediately mitigates his question by the following 'I don't know if I put either too many or too few stamps on it. I'm not very clever in terms of doing practical things' (line 71). This attempts to downgrade any implied emotional investment in the request. Henry's relational identity to Cheryl is negotiated between different contextual situations to conceal the attempt to achieve concerns of a personal nature. The problem Henry faces is how online exchanges keeps offline relationships inherently locked in a transitional stage of constant negotiation. This is due, we would argue, to a reluctance to expose personal issues as such in front of a wider audience.

It is now interesting to consider Cheryl's reply, which attempts to answer the questions posed to her with the formulation "haha those comments were hilarious" (line 78). Cheryl continues, 'I got your package on Wednesday. It made me smile a lot. thanks.' (line 79). She also accounts for her lack of a response in the meantime, 'I'm in the middle of writing you back and trying to think of things to send you. My mind is a bit blank at the mo so it may take some time.'(line 80). The term 'a bit blank' serves two important discursive functions: Firstly, it acts a 'softener' for the apparent lack of an accountably accurate description (see Edwards, 2000) and secondly, it deploys a set of mental terms related to memory (see Locke & Edwards, 2003) which serve to render action as non-intentional. For example, in terms of writing her reply she explains the delay as her mind is " a bit blank" (line 82), but a few moments later Cheryl remarks on a film they have both mentioned as, " I remember you said you saw it" (line 83). What is striking about these two functions is Cheryl's distancing work from Henry. This is most poignant in line 85 where she asks for his address and again in line 86 'how do you spell your last name as well'. The prior turns, in particular from Henry, have pointed to a close relationship between the participants. However, Cheryl's displayed lack of specific (and mundane) knowledge related to Henry – his address and, more poignantly, his last name, demonstrate to the audience, that their offline relationship is perhaps not as close as Henry's prior turns have suggested.

Extract 2 shows how the subtle organisation of the discourse surrounding personal issues seems to rely on the negotiation of the relationship between online and offline. Finding a sense of 'locatedness' in the fluid social landscape of online exchanges requires constant interactional work to be done on the particular past experience and the contextual situation in which it arises. In mediated communities, the attempt to represent the past experiences of many people into a variety of social situations is an omnipresent concern. This diversity is represented in the discourse as the ability to achieve personal goals while considering the displayed identity to a wider audience.

Concluding Comments

In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle (1995) described how early adopters of what we would now call internet based social networking were forming communities on-line

that seemed to supplant and far exceed the boundaries of their own face-to-face communities. Turkle offered up the claim her participants made that 'RL is just another window' (i.e. experience of the 'real' world does not qualitatively differ from opening up a new communicational channel on a computer) as emblematic of new forms of social experience. Over ten years later, with the hype around 'cyberspace' and 'virtual communities' beginning to settle somewhat, we can reformulate Turkle's position. All communities are faced with the task of constructing a relationship to place, which effectively mediates the social relations of community members. In this sense mediation – whether electronic or not – is a structural feature of both off-line and on-line communities (Brown et al, 2001). The question is then around the modalities through which mediation is conducted, and how this resources identity.

In this paper we have focused on communities which tend towards what we might call the 'immaterial' pole of mediation. That is, a considerable part of their interaction happens through electronic means. We have tried to show, by drawing on the work of Benwell & Stokoe and Dixon & Durrheim and by using two detailed examples, how 'virtual communities' of this sort are nevertheless still bound by a shared sense of place and by identity categories that are indexed to place (i.e. place-identities). We have demonstrated some of the complex interactional means by and through which place identities are mobilised, and how place serves as a symbolic resource for managing current social relations. In particular we have shown how a shared sense of the past is critical to establishing certain kinds of identity-relevant claims, and how the off-line and the on-line can be delicately interwoven.

But already the nature of such virtual communities is changing. For example, a recent development in social networking technology known as Facebook[3] requires users to have a predefined offline social network, such as, college, work or school. Here RL 'place' seems to loom very large over the mediated network. Indeed we might go so far as to say that having a presence on Facebook serves as a symbolic resource for ordinary face-to-face interaction, rather than the other way round. Such communities may then represent a pull back towards the other direction of the mediation-place continuum. Whether or not this is the case it is at least indication that currently

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[3]Web address: http://www.facebook.com/

emerging forms of mediated community have complex and nuanced relationships to online and offline modalities of communication simultaneously.

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