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The Impact of internet social networking websites on the gay community: Behavior and identity

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The Impact of Internet Social Networking Websites on the Gay Community: Behavior and Identity

Thesis
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of the graduation requirements of
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Authored by
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Abstract and Introduction

While Internet social networking technologies may support the sense of community among members of the gay community, the specific forms and structures employed (such as interfaces and workflows) may also impact behavior and identity among this group. Social networking website design can exert a mediating influence upon the culture of a site by supporting certain behaviors more than others; this influence can be analyzed in an active and structured way that takes into account the culture of the community it addresses.

Chapter 1: Old Media, New Media, Other Media

I will draw upon the literature related to the questions of new media vs. old media, with an emphasis upon social networking as new media. Social networking is examined as a major player in “New Media”, and placed within a cultural context. A context is established for employing media analysis to these sites. Introductory thoughts are presented on interface as idiom and environment. Social networking sites as a media, and particular websites specifically, may attract and retain certain types of users. The media may play a role in influencing how those users behave and communicate through it. Literature related to personals ads are used. Consideration of some of the ways social networking media shape and bounds user interaction is presented.

Historical context will be established and compared to the present, and the impact of this new medium's existence will be discussed. What is different about this new media and how it mediates will be considered. While this new medium offers increased visibility, there are drawbacks as well. Suggestion for further study will be offered on issues such as decreased "going out" to meet new people and its associated impact of possible decreased alcohol consumption.

Chapter 2: Social Networking Sites as Cultural Mediums/Mediators

A site-wide typology will be created and presented. Typology analysis will be suggested to begin assessment of the influences of particular types of sites, viewing design decisions as categories of mediations that contain assumptions about users and support certain user behaviors and goals but not others. These mediations can impact the culture’s identity (self-identification), communication, and behavior (sexual behavior, communication style and communication content). Frameworks are presented for the analysis of the culture of the site. These categories will be created from identification of commonalities in primary sources (networking sites) and through inference of how design decisions relate to certain usage patterns; they will also be related to current or past issues that users have reported in “tech media” (for example, facebook’s terms of service change). Site design may segment users from each other and the mainstream culture. Sites may also influence a users or the public’s sense of community. I will suggest further study on the decline of gay institutions and physical communities.
Chapter 3: Common Elements of Social Networking Sites

Each of the interface elements (chat rooms, instant messaging, web-cams, profiles, pictures, advertisements) and services (overall site design) employed by these sites are defined and discussed briefly in turn. Primary sources will be used to identify common elements. Techniques for analysis of these components as well as overall site design are discussed, including component maps, walk-throughs and actor-network theory in a distributed environment. Each of these will be applied or expanded from HCI and/or media analysis literature. Use of component maps will be suggested and briefly discussed. The use of actor/network theory in a distributed environment will be briefly discussed.

Chapter 4: User Goals and Site Goals

The place of (and impact of) social networking websites regarding a marginalized subculture is examined. Literature on the gay community’s use of social networking technology in Asia will be referenced. Sources for this topic will include the literature related to marketing and specific communities. I will seek to examine whether site designs are primarily influenced by community desires, technological factors and constraints, or by marketing considerations. Ethnographic walkthroughs are discussed, and the competing motives of communities and site providers are examined. “Walk throughs” will be employed to analyze motives.

Chapter 5: Virtual Personas and Real Communities

I will examine the question of virtual communications impacting real life. Virtual personas are examined as a concept, and the sense of community on-line is considered. Boyd and Stone will be employed. Studies on efforts to combat HIV through new media will also be referenced. Community-oriented sites will be studied and compared. Some key questions related to self-identity and community identity online will be considered.

Chapter 6: An Analysis of Gay.com

The website gay.com will be analyzed using the above proposed methodologies in order to identify cultural mediation via media analysis and other tools. It will also be analyzed in terms of component analysis, ethnographic walkthrough, and virtual personas in the real community. Conclusions will be summarized.

Chapter 7: Analysis of Other Gay Networking Websites

Other websites, such as downelink.com and gayfunchat.com, will be analyzed in the same (but abbreviated) fashion as gay.com. Where differences are identified, these will be expanded upon in an attempt to understand any relationships between design decisions and these differences. Conclusions will be summarized and compared to gay.com to identify where differences exist and how they might be correlated with design decisions.

Chapter 8: Impacts Upon Sexual Activity

In examining whether these sites impact sexual behavior among users (and if so how), I will refer to studies and literature and also use inference. Site designs contain assumptions about user behavior that may ultimately impact that behavior. Further study
will be suggested regarding questions about increased anonymous sexual activity as well as the impacts of greater selectivity and negotiation forthrightly up front in relationship formation.

**Chapter 9: Conclusions and What Could Be**

In the last chapter, conclusions related to the above will be summarized and patterns identified based upon the above work. Suggestions will be made regarding what these sites could be in specific terms. Greater community responsibility will be suggested in specific and implementable forms.

**Appendix with Informal Survey**

An appendix and informal survey are presented. The survey will ask questions about user expectations, behaviors, and perceptions of self as well as the gay community. Any changes in these over time will be correlated with motives and usage patterns of online social networking services.
Abstract

The hypothesis of this thesis is that social networking website design can exert a mediating influence upon the culture of a site by supporting certain behaviors more than others; this influence can be analyzed in an active and structured way that takes into account the culture of the community it addresses. Evidence will be offered by case study, demonstration of specific mediations, and analysis. This hypothesis will be tested with specific reference to the gay male community.

The scope of this paper will be limited to the analysis of gay-oriented social networking websites as new media, in general and through specific examples. I will present frameworks for categorizing and analyzing these websites that consider the mediating influences associated with site design. In the last chapter, I will propose community-enhancing design.

The method of analysis first takes into account the nature of new media. It then discusses the concepts of cultural mediums and mediators in terms of site-wide typology and specific forms of mediation. It then identifies common elements of gay social networking sites and their associated usage as well as the design decisions that are related to them. Next user goals and site goals are correlated to these design decisions. Virtual personas and real communities are discussed as a concept. Using the proposed methodology, gay.com and other sites are analyzed and compared. Conclusions are drawn from the results of this analysis and evidence presented. The impact of social networking websites upon sexual activity is discussed. Finally, conclusions are summarized and recommendations are cited related to what these sites could be.
Acknowledgments

While any shortcomings in this work are my own, allow me to mention that I owe a great debt of gratitude to many sources and individuals. Foremost to my “room mate” and life partner of over 16 years Lee Griffith, who supported me throughout my collegiate endeavors with tolerance, constructive criticism, and dare I say love. His commitment to applying his exceptional intelligence towards helping individuals in place of his own economic gain has inspired me to apply my own average intellect in the same spirit. Had we met online, my view could be no different.

I would also like to acknowledge my Mother, for “raising me right.” I was fortunate to have been taught that “doing good” is first and foremost about intelligent empathy (not following a rulebook).

I would also like to acknowledge RIT for providing me with the opportunity for an outstanding education, as well as the chance to work with outstanding professors. Several thought provoking challenges to this work were presented by the same, which I hope to incorporate into future study. The views presented here are my own.
Chapter 1
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Introduction
While Internet social networking technologies may support the sense of community among members of the gay community, the specific forms and structures employed (such as interfaces and workflows) may also impact behavior and identity among this group. I seek to identify some key elements of the media and design decisions (along with their associated impacts) that are relevant to the changing nature of gay identity and community.

The hypothesis of this thesis is that social networking website design can exert a mediating influence upon the culture of a site by supporting certain behaviors more than others; this influence can be analyzed in an active and structured way that takes into account the culture of the community it addresses. Supporting evidence will be offered by case study, demonstration of specific mediations, and analysis. This hypothesis will be tested with specific reference to the gay male community.

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Since the technical details of IT implementation create the platform for an increasingly significant new media that holds special appeal to marginalized communities, this media is important to these users. It is also important to IT professionals when they consider the question of where IT ethics can be employed to the benefit or detriment of a community. This work is new in that while it draws upon traditional fields such as media analysis and human computer interaction, it presents a framework for assessing and analyzing the degree and type of mediation created by the implemented form of social networking sites. An active approach to assessing the impact of particular sites as well the new media in general is suggested that could be employed constructively in the design and refinement of social networking sites.

Research will be derived and developed from existing literature, primary sources, and analysis as well as inference. Specifically, media analysis related to general media analysis, the works of McLuhan, new and old media sources, actor-network theory, and CMC literature will be references. Publications related to current events, such as news related to cultural changes and issues from credible sources will be referenced. Gay studies literature related to gays and technology, gay history, gay culture, and identity will be used (mostly US, some in Asia). HCI literature related to ethnography, assessment of usability, conducting “walk-throughs” and human centered design will be used. Social networking literature, including the works of danah boyd and Stone will be referenced. Studies and research related to sexual behavior, particularly online for gay men, will be used. Literature related to communication studies and issues related to communication will be consulted.

Gay oriented social networking sites themselves will be referred to as primary sources in identifying relevant components and designs and in performing analysis. Inferences and analysis will be employed in the arguments, and speculations will be
clearly identified as such. Original typologies will be constructed to assist with analysis that draw upon primary sources.

In addressing the question of social networking sites as media, I will draw upon the literature related to the questions of new media vs. old media, with an emphasis upon social networking as new media. Social networking is examined as a major player in “New Media”, and placed within a cultural context. A context is established for employing media analysis to these sites. Introductory thoughts are presented on interface as idiom and environment. Social networking sites as a media, and particular websites specifically, may attract and retain certain types of users. The media may play a role in influencing how those users behave and communicate through it. Literature related to personals ads are used. Consideration of some of the ways social networking media (singular and plural) shape and bound user interaction is presented.

Historical context will be established and compared to the present, and the impact of this new medium's existence will be discussed. What is different about this new media and how it mediates will be considered. While this new medium offers increased visibility, there are drawbacks as well. Suggestion for further study will be offered on issues such as decreased "going out" to meet new people and its associated impact of possible decreased alcohol consumption.

In considering individual sites themselves as cultural mediators, a site-wide typology will be created and presented. Typology analysis will be suggested to begin assessment of the influences of particular types of sites, viewing design decisions as categories of mediations that contain assumptions about users and support certain user behaviors and goals but not others. These mediations can impact the culture’s identity (self-identification), communication, and behavior (sexual behavior, communication style and communication content). Frameworks are presented for the analysis of the culture of the site. These categories will be created from identification of commonalities in primary sources (networking sites) and through inference of how design decisions relate to certain usage patterns; they will also be related to current or past issues that users have reported in “tech media” (for example, facebook’s terms of service change). Site design may segment users from each other and the mainstream culture. Sites may also influence a users or the public’s sense of community. I will suggest further study on the decline of gay institutions and physical communities.

In analyzing the common components of gay social networking sites, each of the interface elements (chat rooms, instant messaging, web-cams, profiles, pictures, advertisements) and services (overall site design) employed by these sites are defined and discussed briefly in turn. Primary sources will be used to identify common elements. Techniques for analysis of these components as well as overall site design are discussed, including component maps, walk-throughs and actor-network theory in a distributed environment. Each of these will be applied or expanded from HCI and/or media analysis literature. Use of component maps will be suggested and briefly discussed. The use of actor/network theory in a distributed environment will be briefly discussed.

In considering user goals and site goals, the place of (and impact of) social networking websites regarding a marginalized subculture is examined. Literature on the gay community’s use of social networking technology in Asia will be referenced. Sources for this topic will include the literature related to marketing and specific communities. I will seek to examine whether site designs are primarily influenced by
community desires, technological factors and constraints, or by marketing considerations. Ethnographic walkthroughs are discussed, and the competing motives of communities and site providers are examined. Abbreviate “walk throughs” will be employed to analyze motives.

In examining the issues related to virtual personas and real communities, I will examine the question of virtual communications impacting real life. Virtual personas are examined as a concept, and the sense of community on-line is considered. Boyd and Stone will be employed. Studies on efforts to combat HIV through new media will also be referenced. Community-oriented sites will be studied and compared. Some key questions related to self-identity and community identity online will be considered.

The website gay.com will be analyzed using the above proposed methodologies in order to identify cultural mediation via media analysis and other tools. The site will also be analyzed in terms of component analysis, ethnographic walkthrough, and virtual personas in the real community. Conclusions will be summarized.

Other websites, such as downlink and gayfunchat, will be analyzed in the same fashion as gay.com. Where differences are identified, these will be expanded upon in an attempt to understand any relationships between design decisions and these differences. Conclusions will be summarized and compared to gay.com to identify where differences exist and how they might be correlated with design decisions.

In examining whether these sites impact sexual behavior among users (and if so how), I will refer to studies and literature and also use inference. Site designs contain assumptions about user behavior that may ultimately impact that behavior. Further study will be suggested regarding questions about increased anonymous sexual activity as well as the impacts of greater selectivity and negotiation forthrightly up front in relationship formation.

In the last chapter, conclusions related to all of the above will be summarized and patterns identified based upon the above work. Suggestions will be made regarding what these sites could be in specific terms. Greater community responsibility will be suggested in specific and implementable forms.

Mediation

To begin any analysis of the impact of Internet social networking websites upon the gay community, it is necessary to define the base context that will underlie the interdisciplinary methodologies employed. Social networking websites loosely belong to that imprecise class of artifacts indicated by the term New Media. While there are many views and disciplines that attempt to understand and analyze (as well as implement) these sites, the integrative and interdisciplinary nature of media criticism (along with human computer interaction) lend themselves well to the integrative and interdisciplinary nature of the new media artifact called social networking.

We see interdisciplinary analytical techniques breaking the old specialization taboos and being brought to bear upon IT questions in disciplines that are in fact becoming core to information technology. “Scholarship concerning SNSs [social networking sites] is emerging from diverse disciplinary and methodological traditions, addresses a range of topics, and builds on a large body of CMC research”(boyd, 2007). This is in part because usage cannot be separated from the business goals driving the technology, and the usage and nature of IT spans multiple domains. HCI for example
makes somewhat technical the question of interface analysis, but grounds such technical analysis in contexts such as ethnographic research. In considering the impact of internet social networking websites upon the gay community, while many tools will be used, the underlying context for their application in this paper will be media analysis.

It’s somewhat revealing that many an insightful and scholarly text related to media analysis, however well conceived or heavily researched, will avoid direct and linear definitions of the basic terminology involved, from media to medium to mediation. The texts that do provide definitions tend to offer dry and verbose litanies that net little more in the end than some obvious characteristics regarding distribution, representation, and the affirmation that we know what “it” is already. Other sources launch into discussions of Foucault (Poster, 2006), Chomsky, politics, or cultural criticisms as if these were themselves the definitions. A third group attempts to use history as the basis for their definitions, citing early humans painting hunting scenes and genitals on cave walls, which ultimately end up bringing about distributed networking service architecture through various teleological arguments (see (Schramm, 1988)). It seems that everything employed in the service of any significance may be called media. In an IT context, this broad use of media terminology is in fact justified, since the fundamental use of IT technology is to serve as media in just such a broad sense.

*Media* seems to encompass any material artifact that has been somehow manufactured or distributed through the utility of some constructed means, as well as the means of distribution. All symbolic or simulated representations that are either captured or somehow manifest through agency outside of the human brain itself, and by extension all technology would belong in some sense under this massive category. Working in reverse from definitions of communication that posit media as that “something between” which enables communication, we can intuitively arrive at an inductive meaning of what media is. Levin and Bruce (2001) describe technology’s use as a media for learning, inquiry, communication, construction, and expression. The concept of use here is not insignificant, and implies a purposive application with intent. Still, there is the question of meaning beyond utility as a feature of what gets defined as media – it is inherently artistic.

Familiarity with particular materials and contexts create a popular understanding of what is media as well. What is considered media is cultural. An advertisement of simple instrumental intent and meaning could still be considered media in a sense beyond the instrumental, expressly because it is an advertisement and uses a medium traditionally associated with media. Language may be instrumental but it is also symbolic, holds meaning, and is conceptualized as immaterial until somehow captured and conveyed. What is employed in this may be referred to as media.

The plural and general usage of the singular term “media” has been seen as less academic and precise than the specific application of the singular “medium”, although this convention has slipped even in academic circles (Merriam-Webster, 2007). When used in plural here, I am referring to the common understanding of “the media” as providers of the means of representation and conveyance for content as well as the content itself. The term “medium” is easier to limit, and is used to refer to the more physical context upon which representations are rendered or the means by which content is enabled, represented, or conveyed. Thus in the technical sense, the media provides the infrastructure and the medium is that infrastructure that content is rendered upon.
To complicate matters, there is also an artistic sense in which the word “media” may yet be used. In this artistic context, media is functionally equivalent to medium. Dictionary.com defines art as “the quality, production, expression, or realm, according to aesthetic principles, of what is beautiful, appealing, or of more than ordinary significance” (Dictionary.com, 2006). Whatever meets these criteria is, at least in an artistic sense, a media. A toaster is considered media if someone presents it to you as art. Media is called media when understood as a mechanism for conveyance of meaning or significance in a particular context.

Even in the midst of such complexity, I expect clarity will be best served by mindful but popular usage of these terms. The progressive elaboration and drift of terminology related to media are natural outgrowths of the creative nature of media application, which naturally extends terminology into further layers of abstraction. All IT activities employ the physical media of Information Technology such that this physical media becomes a medium for the communication of data and information, and what the user interacts with can reasonably be understood to be a medium. Media as well as medium, in all senses of the words, are inherent.

As one might expect given the above, the terms “old media” and “new media” are used more as connotations, indicating the presence of intangible qualities rather than as proper descriptive definitions. Nonetheless, a composite of those connotations may be defined and relevant aspects highlighted. This ambiguity must stand in opposition to what Mark Poster refers to as a “totalizing effect” if it is to offer insights that do not minimize previous models’ contributions to the discussion of media (Poster, 1990). New media is not simply an extension of old media, but neither is it a revolution that sweeps away the old analytic models and methods into the dustbin of history.

Old Media

Old media is used to refer to traditional methods of content conveyance, even as new media has impacted them. In this category one could include newspapers, magazines, books, radio and television. What is striking about this categorization is that it does imply a binding identification with particular mediums themselves based upon the date of their popular adoption within industrialized western democracies. It is not just popular notions that divide old and new media by familiarity and novelty. Middlebury College’s Associate Professor of Film & Media Culture Jason Mittell responded to an article by Denison University’s Tim Anderson by saying that “…most departments don’t have a clue what ‘new media’ is, just what it is not. It is the curricular other” (Anderson 2008).

This cannot strictly be extended to imply that the functionality technologically determined by the limitations of the device could reliably be used as the sole determining factor for old or new media categorization. A DVR could be seen as a new media accessory for the old media device of television. Simply having a DVR would not be sufficient to transform a television into a new media device. It could be viewed more as new media life support for old media technology. Performing the same tasks via and for the Internet (as those provided by a DVR) would, generally, be considered utilization of new media. Here we see that the device does matter in the categorization of old and new media. A DVR may or may not be considered new media. The television is not considered new media. Television on the Internet is at least arguably new media.
Functionality matters less than the device, at least in regards to popular categorization of old and new media.

In addition to the date of popular adoption for the associated device, the roles of the parties involved are often used to determine categorization. Old media was designed around a model of passive content consumption from a central distribution point for “consumption” by a generalized audiences (see (Logan work in progress)). It may be that the technology of the time was invented this way and therefore the media model conformed to exploit it for practical reasons, or that the society which gave rise to this technology arrived at that given solution due to their existing paradigms. Television could have been utilized in other ways and incorporated into other technologies, but the form that survived and prospered followed this distributive model with its associated roles.

Old media models a relationship that represents aspects of culture or discussion of it in much the same sense that paintings are created for the public to view at a museum or sermons are created to be heard at church, even if that “museum” or “church” it is delivered from is the consumer’s own home or car. Old media does not pretend to be culture or even so much a platform for it as it seeks to represent, comment on, or convey it. Old media offers a slice of the pre-baked culture pie to consumers, who are themselves a part of the culture independent from media. The media picks the flavor and the consumer picks the media. If you don’t like the way it is made then you have to go somewhere else. Everyone gets the same slice. Each “channel” is likely owned by another producer and is discreet from the other channels available, even though they may be offered through the same device or medium. The services involved in this were the domain of the producer and not the public, to embed and distribute as they saw fit. While content may be shared among producers, the channel is completely packaged by the producer.

It can be argued that there is really nothing new under the sun. Even in this model, one could write editorials or call in to talk shows in an effort to control some portion of the content. One could boycott a station or their advertisers, or select what premium stations one wished to subscribe to. Even in this case, though, there is a centralized authority of control that determines what gets knocked off the air (or page) and what gets extra time. The gatekeepers of old media owned the pie, and expense prohibited individuals from buying any large slice without their approval.

Old Media and the Gay Community

Specifically in terms of the impact of “old media” on the gay community, the examples we could site include newspapers, film and television, radio, and more interestingly personals ads, video dating, and “party lines.” While one could arguably include real world gathering spaces such as bars and campgrounds, these are beyond the scope of this paper. What is relevant is the relationship of old media to these consumers and vice versa.

Suzanna Danuta Walters identifies the explosion of gay visibility in print media, television and film, and politics as belonging to the 1990s (Walters, 2001). While the end of this decade corresponds to the beginnings of the adoption of the Internet into mainstream usage, what Suzanna is largely discussing precedes it and belongs to the category of old media. The Internet came on the scene after the media change in
visibility, not before it. This being the case it would be reasonable to conclude that the Internet was not the initial causative antecedent to gay visibility in media.

In old media, when gay characters were finally presented, these characters were largely presented in less complex and rich terms than their heterosexual counterparts. Either these gay individuals were presented as just other member of the dominant culture devoid of any gay culture whatsoever, nearly asexual heterosexuals with a fashion-like twist, or as showcase role-models who are ineffectual and victimized, while just trying to “get by.” The relationships of gay characters never took any dominant focus, and lacked the same elements straight characters had that involved viewers and readers in their struggles as whole human beings. African Americans and Hispanics were almost never gay, perhaps out of fear that this would be seen as a negative portrayal of a minority. These minority communities themselves might have stronger taboos against homosexuality as well. Yet according to a survey by New American Dimensions from 2007-2008, “In California, 4 out of 10 same-sex couples are racial/ethnic minorities” (NewAmericanDimensions, 2008).

Beyond stories related to impressions about and issues salient to the gay community (which will be discussed in the analysis section), it is clear that old media has been employed as an enabler for members of the gay community to meet, communicate, and find each other. While there was a time when this type of mediation was seen as somewhat unseemly or the resort of the unlovable or socially inept, it has entered wholesale into straight and popular culture. Advertising ones self for love or friendship has entered mainstream culture as a direct result of the enabling technologies of old media, and, if truth be told, their economic motives. As with all such media trends, it may reflect the fearful, isolated, and selective fulfillment-seeking nature of the overarching culture that gave rise to the change, or it may have played a role in shaping it.

Old media’s drift into the more egalitarian and interactive mode of modern media could be said to have begun largely with the success of “self advertisement”, be it for love or for political and philosophic affiliation. Consumers have looked to the media when they were concerned about their culture, but also when they were seeking fulfillment of their own place within that cultural mythos. A dominant theme within old and new media has been, naturally enough, relationships.

Personals ads were a significant evolution in old media for the gay community, be they in mainstream or gay media. Ads tend to be written differently according to gender and the population density of the advertiser’s location (Gudelunas, 2005). According to Thorne and Coupland (1998), “…dating ad texts are modeled on the ‘small ads’ paradigm, which principally serves to sell second-hand consumer goods. The genre is reductionist and promotional and relies heavily on readers’ intertextual awareness of the genre’s scripting. Probably in consequence, only marketable attributes of ‘advertised goods’ are referred to and these tend to be restricted to a set of familiar labels and categories…” (p. 235). These authors go on to refer to two late-modern processes as maintenance of the “protective cocoon” and the pursuit of the “pure relationship.”

Pure relationships are defined as contemporary cultural phenomena free from traditional social anchors, such as the procreation of children and extended family networks. The pure relationship is cultivated only for what it can ‘bring to the partners involved’. The protective cocoon involves a psychological mechanism for the filtering of external dangers. Dating ad usage by lesbians and gay men can be
seen as an effort towards building pure relationships and a protective cocoon outside of dominant heterosexual family and institutional structures. (p. 236).

These characteristics transfer over to new and social media quite in tact, and are perhaps inherent in self-advertisement using any medium. (Thorne and Coupland, 1998).

While old media was not a place where those relationships took place, it did convey the commonly held beliefs and stories about how those relationships unfolded and their significance within the culture at large. Old media reinforced and set expectations about life stages, roles, the actors involved, and what a person ought to expect as well as what will be expected of him or her. It is only natural that consumers would turn to the same media that set those expectations for them in order to fulfill them.

In the case of the gay community, while it was clear that they were not part of those stories and that Clark Gable would not be dating Frank Sinatra in the culturally sanctioned world, the stories of love and friendship nonetheless translated to their experiences. Gay lovers might have meant happy heterosexual couples that kept their sex lives limited exclusively to innuendo in any public context (with the expectation that this represented what everyone ought to want to be), but this presented small obstacle to the truly gay couples watching. The homosexual male merely identified with the heroine in many such cases and accepted their “affliction” as something that must never be identified.

Homosexuality in modern America could be argued to have emerged into a self-conscious community largely in tandem with the establishment and evolution of communication networks starting in the late 40’s. In the excellent book Contacts Desired, Martin Meeker proposes communication as (perhaps) the central thread that makes queer history a unified and recognizable phenomenon. Meeker (2006) makes the point that “…before an individual might ‘come out’… in most instances he or she would first become ‘connected to’ the knowledge that same-sex attraction meant something, that it had social ramifications, and that it had a name” (p. 2).

Looking at communication networks as a cornerstone of a community’s history, and acknowledging the fluctuating nature of visibility and community within a greater context, we arrive at a much less confusing (albeit more complex) history than is offered by most alternative approaches. Rather than recruitment via a disease model without precedent that spread out from the cities due to mobility and disassociative work conditions that undermined family life, we can acknowledge the connection with and exposure to homosexuality’s significance in a context of emerging self-awareness that is consistent with the history without getting caught in the trap of supposed conversion or radicalization.

A more traditional view does not emphasize the media so much as the “space” where communications occur, although this space may itself be viewed as a form of media. Viewing gay culture more as a resistance movement forged by diverse peoples, the emergence of gay community may be seen as a “de-assimilation” process. Murray (1996) in American Gay identifies four factors that led to our emergence:

1. An awareness of our distinctiveness as a group.
2. De-assimilation from the mainstream culture and the development of separate institutions.
3. The primacy of egalitarian same-sex relationships rather than emulation of male/female relationships or pederasty.
4. Emphasis upon exclusively same-sex relationships rather than bisexuality.

(p. 2)

There can be little doubt that media may have heavily influenced the course of the first two factors. The third factor may have in fact been influenced by the desire to make such targeted media palatable and acceptable to a wider audience. In addition, this change may have been influenced by other media of the time - media that was associated with the sexual liberation movement, psychology, and the legitimization of personal romantic fulfillment as an affirmation of independent choice. The tenets presented by the media that were employed in the sexual liberation movement were easily transferable to the effort to justify homosexuality. The practice of exclusive homosexuality may have been a consequence of the very identity formation and legitimization of the gay community, but this is speculation.

The question of identity is never worked out in a vacuum, be it the identity of a group or of an individual. Knowledge of the world and of one’s self is developed through interactions with the world. Transactions and relationships are the fundamental means of extracting the knowledge in the world. Changing the space where those transactions occur ultimately changes the learning.

Media have an impact upon individual identity as well as community identity. When the medium is seen as representative of a community, or is the contact point for one’s initial exposure to a community, the question naturally arises of who belongs to that community. Associations exert a subtle influence that is not always immediately obvious. The tendency of most individuals is to attempt to assimilate in an effort to gain acceptance and to develop friendships. Few people actively research the labels used to identify a community in an independent fashion, but instead they are likely to form impressions based upon what is put in front of them. For example, some believers assume there is a common understanding of the term “Christian.” However, within the Christian community there is a great deal of diversity in belief, behavior, and emphasis. Whether any one position represents the genuine Christianty is open to historical and theological debate. When one person considers the black community, they may immediately think of inner city Harlem, while another may think of South Africa, or another still “soul food” or the political ascendancy of Barack Obama. Whether reducing people to stereotypical labels is empowering or dehumanizing, it is a common practice that the media are poised to exploit. The very nature of mass media is suited to garnering the highest ratings by appealing to the lowest common denominator of some theoretical community. Just as CNN executive think they know what the public wants, gay.com executives think they know what the gay community is.

The relationship of self-identity to community identity raises challenging questions. When defining community, is self-identity more important than identity according to others? The relationship of a group towards the larger culture (how they are perceived and how they perceive the greater culture) is in part what defines that group. If it is valid to view gay people as a community at all, it must be in terms of their affiliations within the greater community as well as to each other. Even if we accept the dubious proposition that we are completely defined and formed by the environment, the opportunities surrounding us, and our affiliations, we still tend to view these as tools of
self-expression. The very subject of gay history resolves down to a history of gay identity and cultural mores, attitudes, and standards. Our relationship to these is a personal one, but one in which we are not lone participants.

Being gay is an individual identity question within the context of a cultural view, not just “a behavior.” Although it has obvious behavioral elements associated with it, these can be viewed and interpreted quite differently by different cultures. The presence or non-presence of a community is largely a cultural phenomenon. Gay may mean “feminine man” in one culture or context at a given time. The defining characteristic of gay man might be identified as “not interested in the other gender” somewhere else.

One of the fundamental debates related to homosexuality is a debate about the nature of individual identity. In its most simplistic terms, the essentialist school proposes that homosexuality is inherent and innate - an immutable part of who we are. This raises several questions about the history of homosexuals. The school of constructionist thought presents the contrary view. According to constructionists, gay identity (as well as heterosexual identity) is a creation of the culture. There is nothing innate about these concepts, even if there is about the biological drive. The problem here is that in de-emphasizing the organic foundations that gave rise to institutions and customs, there is an inherent implication that terminology is neither oppressive nor grounded in anything much beyond conventions which are shaped by irrelevant forces. (For a broader discussion of the essentialist vs. constructionist argument, see Dubermanm, Vicinus, et al. (1989) Hidden From History: Reclaiming Gay and Lesbian Past, especially the chapter by John Boswell, “Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories.”)

As an example, does the exposé of Larry Craig on CNN have anything to do with the gay community or not; and if so what? We are left unclear as to whether Larry Craig is gay or bisexual or experiencing a moral lapse (regardless of his personal clarity that he is not any of those things). We are also left unclear as to whether what he was doing was gay or just perverted. If there is problem here, is it that he might be gay, that he was lying, or that he was in a (presumably) monogamous heterosexual relationship and cheated? The determination of what is the real story here – the lead and the hook – depends very much upon the eye of the beholder. The reporters fail to tell us what we have learned and why we should care, since that would be bound to anger some of their following. Such questions did not plague the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde for “practicing” homosexuality, as evidenced in letters from prison to the editor of the London Daily Chronicle.(Wilde, 1989, p. 958-969).

The unspoken is the hook for this story, but only so long as it remains safely unspoken. No consideration is given to what forces shaped his self-identification, and if it matters more than his identity according to others. Members of the gay community debate if he could be a gay man struggling with his identity and if he is part of the gay community or not, but the fact is that none of us could know, even though we all seem eager to contextualize the unpleasantness in a manner that supports our world view and perhaps our politics.

Perhaps the Kinsey scale is an effort to get around such irresolvable questions of self-identification and to establish purportedly objective criteria for measuring identity. However, inherent within the existence of such a measure is the assumption that there is something there to be measured. In any case, it is likely that many of us will fill in the
gaps of our actual knowledge about this situation with our own assumptions based upon
cultural identity generalizations and definitions.

Historically, the relationship of media to identity has been subject to the “old
media” rules. Small and independent (of the mainstream) publications started to break
those rules back in the 50’s, but distribution remained a challenge. Gay identities were
either inserted covertly into the mainstream media or regulated by such media.
Mediation was seen as a responsibility.

Historically, gay media have been small and countercultural, addressing
themselves to brave members of the gay community. Gay voices had the choice of going
to alternative media or being silenced if not assailed – which itself communicated
something. The result of this was visibility, which contributed to identity formation.
These media were normally periodicals designed by homosexuals for homosexuals.

The degree and manner of cultural mediation associated with historic media may
be examined in terms of types of media (mainstream and alternative). The first mediation
that is apparent is censorship. Censorship is a characteristic of print media and broadcast
media that is revealed in choices regarding if a story is told, who tells the story, and what
perspective the story is told from.

The history of gays in the media is not merely a story of gay media outlets,
however, but one of mainstream outlets as well. The mainstream media’s treatment of
homosexuals made it clear that their stories were only to be told in a particular way by
ostensible heterosexuals. On the occasion that homosexuals did tell their stories
themselves, these presentations were often offered as warnings of an unflattering nature.

Despite this state of affairs, on occasion “hidden messages” were communicated
through mainstream media. One such example can be found in the “code words” or
allusions placed in personals ads for various ‘friends’ under pretexts such as seeking
models. Coded approaches could still be used to communicate identity, as in personals
ads for models written by physique enthusiasts. While the structure of personals ads
generally followed an innocuous form, stating ‘advertiser seeks target with goals,
followed by comment and reference’ (Thorne and Coupland, 1998, p. 239), reading
between the lines of this format, coded appeals could be included.

Personals advertisements developed from the concept of “selling yourself” in the
same way that companies were selling soap. There is no intermediary matchmaker as in
traditional arranged marriages, but there is a medium involved. That medium itself is
controlled. It is an arguable point that the rise in personals corresponded with the decline
of culture, and was merely a symptom of the increasing sense of isolation.

Beyond framing or avoiding deeper questions while exploiting them, another
apparent form of mediation can be found in examining advertising in general (not just
personals). Gay people in this country and in this era have been stereotyped as having
certain propensities and characteristics. Gay men are less tied down and have fewer
family or relationship obligations. Gay men are less concerned with conformity to
mainstream values and perceptions. They are often early adopters or setters of trends
since they have more free time and/or expendable income and can follow their whims.
They are not tied to traditional roles and expectations of how their life is expected to
proceed, and have greater mobility. In brief, the marketing stereotype is that gays make a
good target market as trendsetters with expendable income who are free to indulge their
whims and break convention.
Mainstream media has largely been driven by advertisement, which rigorously seeks to control the impressions the public gets about the advertisers. Advertisers sort consumers based upon niches and sell branding which panders to individuation and lifestyle mythologies. Advertisers don’t want any real controversy but focus instead on intangible and affective ones that feel significant but are essentially meaningless. Advertisers traffic in stereotypes (McLuhan, 1970).

According to Jean Kilbourne’s Can’t Buy My Love (1999), “Industrialization gave rise to the burgeoning ability of businesses to mass-produce goods. Since it was no longer certain there would be a market for the goods, it became necessary not just to mass-produce the goods but to mass-produce markets hungry for the goods. The problem became not too little candy produced but not enough candy consumed, so it became the job of the advertisers to produce consumers. This led to an increased use of psychological research and emotional ploys to sell products” (p. 71).

The key here is the emotional and psychological ploys that became associated with advertising. While people may be viewed as goods or human resources, personals ads are considered a service. While society hesitates to present relationships overtly as products, they do not hesitate to present advertisements for them as services. The advertisements presented by the service have taken on the characteristics of other advertised services, perhaps in part due to the convention of the media or its nature. The irony is perhaps that it is considered acceptable to attempt to manipulate people into spending money for something they don’t really need but it is still not considered acceptable to mislead or manipulate people about relationships. Yet, this happens. The same medium and tactics are applied and it is okay because of the medium. This is considered different than entering in to a crowded subway to shout such an ad. This acceptability itself is a type of cultivated mediation.

Meeker (2006) defines three key innovations: the emergence of the homophile movement in the 1950s, the mass media treatments of homosexuals in the late 1950s and early 60s, and the popularization of do-it-yourself publications from the late 1940’s to the 1970s. Scattered throughout his book, Meeker illustrates these innovative phases with multiple examples. The timeline below is taken from material throughout his book.

part 1

Publications of the homophile movement.
1929: the book Well of Loneliness by Radclyffe Hall
1951: the book The Homosexual in America by Donald Webster Cory
1951: the book Women’s Barracks by Torres
1952: the Homophile Movement. Assorted groups within the “homophile movement” began meeting. These groups included:
- the Mattachine Society, which put out Mattachine Review in 1955
- Daughters of Bilitis, which put out The Ladder in 1956
- One, Inc., which published ONE in 1953
1952: the book Spring Fire by Marijane Meaker as “Ann Aldrich”
1955: the book We Walk Alone through Lesbos Lonely Groves by Marijane Meaker as “Ann Aldrich”
1956: the book *Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?* by Edmund Bergler (psychiatrist)  
1958: the book *We, Too, Must Love* by Marijane Meaker as “Aldrich”

**part 2**

The 1960s saw a massive increase in publishing about homosexuality. Many of these works reached hundreds of thousands instead of a much smaller audience. “...media outlets in competition with television gave Americans increasingly extended peeks into the arenas of deviance, illegality, and activism that television executives and censors refused to broadcast...” (Meeker, 2006, p. 112). More was being said by a wider group of people, from fringe radio to publication. By the mid 60’s, enough writing had been produced that writers could start referencing one another.

1962: *Sixth Man* book by Jess Stearn  
1962: book *Faggots to Burn* by Matt Bradley  
1963: book *We Two Won’t Last* by Marijane Meaker writing under the pseudonym Ann Aldrich  
1963: NY Times front page article on homosexuality by Doty  
1964: Life Magazine publishes the article “Homosexuality in America” by Paul Welch, which leads to media coverage of the media’s coverage. One response was Guy Strait’s 1964 report in Citizen’s News – a parody called “Heterosexuality in America” depicting four KKK members.  
1964: Look Magazine photo spread of Jerry Reed, tough-looking “admitted homosexual.”  
1965: book *the New Homosexual Revolution* by Ken Worthy  
1965: play *LIFE: a Do It Yourself Disaster* – vaguely homosexual undertones in part  
1966: book *The Other Men* by Lee Dorian  
1966: book *the Half-World of the American Homosexual* by Tor Erikson  
1966: book *the Homosexual Explosion!* by Roger Blake  
1969: Esquire magazine article *The New Homosexuality* by Burke

**Part 3**

Small-scale “do-it-yourself” publications that did not always represent clearly articulated goals or lofty non-profit idealism flourished in the late 60s and 70s. Mass media influences became secondary to targeted media in terms of leading the change. Guidebooks were one area that flourished – a type of “Let’s Gay Chicago” as it were. These publications could be as frank and specific as the publisher liked, and more quickly and directly responsive to their readership (p. 197-258).

Most of these media were selected because of their positive relation – in some degree – towards homosexuals, which in general makes them uncharacteristic. It would indeed by wrong to view this “list” as simply a growing crest that rose along the lines of a linear progression that swept culture onto a new wave. What it reflects is a change from near invisibility (and a commitment to contempt) to greater visibility and more holistic
debate. What it also reflects is the establishment of communication networks that
ultimately fed upon themselves in a fashion that created more points of connection and
greater synergistic feedback from diverse areas ranging from psychology (the Kinsey
report) to fashion (actual photos of “admitted homosexuals” in their native habitat as
opposed to line drawings or one dimensional representations of deviance).

Meeker’s typology gives a helpful perspective on the role of media in the
development of gay communal identification in the middle of the 20th century. Mediation
once took the form of small efforts at forging a community identification, then took the
form of engagement with popularization, and finally took the form of building up
resistance with the aid of advances in “do-it-yourself” publishing. Mediation is now
taking a different form, which is the subject of the next section.

New Media

New media, as might at this point be obvious, is largely associated with more
recently popularized devices and networks of technologies. While these devices do offer
new functionality and are associated with more recent models, popular notions
of what constitutes new media are largely defined by the particular “magic box” whose button is
being pushed (if by remote control). New media includes websites and services provided
through computers and networks. While television might be provided directly through a
satellite dish, it’s still old media. On the other hand, satellite radio, while simply
providing a range of radio stations (however vast and whatever the regulations), could be
considered new media. The reason for this is that the consumer had to go out to purchase
a particular new device in order to participate or consume this media.

New media generally has the characteristic of blurring the role-based boundaries
created by traditional distribution systems. Consumer and producer can be bound up in
more fundamentally synergistic and interactive relationships. The medium itself may be
more directly responsive and personal. A network of consumers who are also producers
might shape the direction and content of the media in a collaborative real-time fashion for
the benefit of all users. Users may have direct access to (to borrow a term) the means of
production themselves, without having to gain the approval of any gatekeepers or wait in
line for their five minutes of media. These are, admittedly, idealized overstatements.

New media, while possessing unique characteristics and possibilities, is not an
entirely new entity with a clear break from old media. In fact, nearly all of the old media
have been used as the raw material for and been fused into new media (Bolter and
Grusin, 2000). The degree to which this remediation is possible is unique to the new
medium. The first chapter of New Media: A Critical Introduction makes the point that
“...the computer as a ‘medium’ is able to simulate other media” (Lister, Dovey, et al.,
2003, p. 50).

This is only part of the change. New media do not simply represent old media in
new forms while adding functionality. New media serves to mediate access to and our
relationship with media in unprecedented ways. Much has been made, quite correctly, of
the positive aspects this change in relationship with media can bring to bear.
Unprecedented accesses to information and in many cases unprecedented input into
media have resulted. New media have made realistic possibilities that were hardly
imagined in relationship to old media.
This unprecedented mediation also possesses a potential dark side, which will be addressed more thoroughly in the mediation section later. For now, suffice to say that in this process the role of the consumer has also been re-mediated. Users have been offered much more flexibility and many more possibilities through the interactivity provided by new media, but at a cost. The very interactivity and freedom being lauded is entirely provided and controlled by an unquestioning and all-powerful gatekeeper presented as an interface. In some instances, this gatekeeper may possess far more sophisticated and unassailable control over access to virtual content than traditional gatekeepers held over “real” content. One assumes the role of user in relationship to new media content entirely at the discretion of impersonal gatekeepers, and there are no other avenues to pursue or arguments to be made.

Social Media

Social media have been a driving force in the adoption and popularization of new media. While new media have been shown to be not-entirely-new, the evolution of new social media has largely come unto its own as a distinct and emergent domain of force. Social media is one area where the advantages of new media may be fully exploited. Social media have also integrated themselves with culture (or been integrated into culture by us) in a way that the rest of new media have not as of yet.

Social media is intimately associated with the relatively recent prevalence of the coupling between media and our relationships in several forms. In no other area is the synergistic power of new media felt so keenly by many of us on a daily basis. Media is now being used directly by popular culture every day to form new relationships, to maintain those relationships in new ways, and to evaluate our neighbors’ suitability for relationships with us. This can be done semi-privately and independently with little effort (or thought), and is not seen as extraordinary.

Social media is often presented as a transparent window devoid of mediation, since the content is supposed to be provided by the users according to their initiative and self-expression. Chris Brogan of Advertising Age’s Power 150 and President of New Marketing Labs sees a challenge to maintaining transparency when product placement enters social media. He suggests putting a disclosure page on your site to address this (Brogan, 2008). This suggests that advertising can have an impact upon this transparency.

Advertising is not the only thing that can impact transparency on social media sites. There is also the interface, as well as the subtle influence of the overall site design and manufactured culture. Evaluating sources and the quality of content can have an impact upon the transparency of social media. The built in filters and weights created by the site design must be considered, along with their cultural assumptions.
Finally, simply yielding to human nature is not going to elevate discussion into the realm of honesty or truth. Media still serves to reflect and reinforce our view of the world and ourselves, much as myths and customs do in other cultures. Media still tells us stories about our life stages and our relationship expectations. The difference is that we are now more empowered than ever to personalize those myths or tell our own versions. We are also free to adopt any role within those stories we choose for ourselves. The myths, once again, belong to all of us.

Old media may have had social characteristics that were directed towards a particular community, but what it presented was once again a “slice” of the pie to those who expected they would like it. The entire community and its cultural assets were parcelled out in fragmented fashion through slow mechanisms that were centrally controlled for distribution. While this could serve as a beneficial filter for clarity and evaluation of content, it ultimately was little more than presenting a “portrait” of a community’s people and assets. New media affords real interaction with the range of that community.

This can be problematic, however. While it is a simple matter to dismiss the cultural impact of a fringe publication, it may not be so simple to dismiss the fringe members of a community who could be posting and interacting all over the Internet. Simply by taking full advantage of their ability to make their presence felt, they can achieve greater visibility than the “soft spoken” (and otherwise occupied) majority. Few mechanisms exist to evaluate casual communications and content on the Internet, but they are likely to be seen by a great number of people. In this scenario, we see a new “influence economy” developing (UniversalMcCann, 2008).

Video dating does not pretend to be a community but an instrument. This is also true of the new medium of text messaging. Social networking on the other hand, particularly when directed towards marginal communities, may be perceived as representative of that community. It is not merely a piece of paper that gets passed around within that community, but in essence the words of that community itself. It is, to some extent, the very community it seeks to serve.

The empowering capabilities of new media involve trade-offs that have yet to be fully appreciated. New media does not merely “discuss” art, government, culture, and all the main pillars of a community. New media in essence becomes doorways into these things, and ultimately becomes so bound together with them so that for all intents and purposes it “becomes them” for many consumers. For an isolated gay man or lesbian with little support or information, it won’t be long before they go to gay.com to learn about homosexuality. For parents concerned that their child is homosexual, it won’t be long before they check to see if they can find a profile for their child there. It doesn’t take any familiarity with the community or understanding it to locate that site. It must be definitive; after all, the domain name says it all. On the other hand, if one dislikes homosexuals and believes they have never met a homosexual, one does not need to suffer the potential scrutiny involved in a trip to the local library in an effort to try to understand them. One could access the ever present and semi-private Internet.

New media does not free us from the powerful forces of old media entirely so much as it re-mediates those forces in ways that can be more beneficial or, yes, more insidious. New media presents itself as social and as an enabling medium that creates a neutral environment. In this new environment, there are structural filters that have been
incorporated into the practical aspects of usability and prioritization experienced by the user. Some of these are due to the technological characteristics of the medium, and others are derived from the economic basis for its existence. It is worth considering which is which.

Social media attempts to resolve Arrow’s paradox, that averages can make everyone unhappy while claiming to represent everyone (Carroll, 2002). It does not stop at providing content that gives focus and structure, or even at providing a common space that supports interactivity with other users as well as content. Social media also affords individual users the freedom to control their own experiences and express their individuality. Social media also allows users to filter through content and users based upon their preferences and desired attributes while presenting a representation of themselves over which they have full control. This issue reflects the tension between individuals and the undifferentiated mass of “other users.” In the case of new media, there is a third tension – that of the interface.

New media is not just about content, but presents users with an entire environment composed of differing regions and landscapes that have been knitted together through a common framework. Beyond the shortcoming of the system as a whole, the spaces and regions available each contain their own cultural assumptions and control mechanisms. The social and selective nature of these spaces can serve as a benefit or a hindrance. The mechanisms involved with creating this benefit or hindrance will be discussed in more detail in the mediation section.

Mediation

The concept of “mediation” refers to standing between, perhaps to enable and perhaps to manage. In the application of IT, all communications and interactions are mediated. In fact, all interactions are at once media-mediated, technologically mediated, and computer-mediated. Mediation has the potential to influence the accessibility, organization, form, prioritization and ultimately context of content and how it is utilized. When that content is people, who are producers and consumers, it has the potential to influence identity and identification. When all you have is communication, and all communication is mediated in an environment that blurs the line between words and actions, mediation of communication is mediation of community.

It is perhaps obvious that interfaces provide the tangible medium designed to enable the very interactivity which is the basis of new media. These interfaces themselves are creating an interactive medium that has an impact upon the way new media is used and what roles are being brought into play in this emerging environment. The field of IT seems understandably caught up in debates about what the future will bring, and innovations in interface will no doubt change the way we will interact in the future. We do not need to wait for tomorrow or speculate broadly, however, to assess the implications of a given interface or how it is being used today. Two tools at our disposal are media analysis and HCI.

Media analysis and HCI cast light upon and elucidate the meaning and nature of IT. As clearly as a study of these fields requires some familiarity with IT to truly understand them, any study of IT that does not learn from these interdisciplinary analytic techniques is incomplete. IT informs HCI and media analysis by providing technical context to current application. Media analysis combined with HCI provides interpretive
context and insight into ways one could analyze the meaning and significance of interfaces and IT within a larger cultural context.

Interactivity in new media is all about planned choices. “…Whatever merits these ideas have, whether visionary or opportunistic, they have been subjected to methodical enquiry from within a number of disciplines which we need to attend to if we are to get beyond these broad characterizations of interactivity”(Lister, Dovey, et al., 2003, p. 41). Interfaces both enable and circumscribe the limitations of user choices and have been designed based upon a number of premises and perhaps assumptions.

The first premise is that the user has a goal that can be served by the media. This goal may be a business goal or a personal goal, but it is tied through the media to the business goal of the site provider or the site would not exist. Personal goals are more amorphous in nature than business goals and belong more to the realm of advertising and recreation than to the well-ordered world of business objectives.

In reflection upon this premise, one might be informed by studies of traditional media that indicate, particularly when it comes to entertainment in a personal context, “opinions about the media, and particularly the evaluation of them, have far less to do with media use than do the time available and the prevailing norms”(Fuller, 1996). From this it would be fair to conclude that recreational social utilization of new media may involve choice, but stated impressions about how well a given interface serves a user’s needs weigh less as a determate in their utilization patterns than might be expected. The factors that weigh upon users might have more to do with available time, habituation, and ease of use, or even investment and perceived future utility. Even as a recreational activity, a more rewarding site or interface might languish for lack of visibility. The best product does not always win simply because it is the best product for the consumer. A consumer may become habituated to the culture of a particular site, and have cultivated a presence there.

HCI can be utilized in the form of satisfaction testing, comprehension of interface (cognitive friction and mapping the interface to known models), and ergonomic design. While HCI has traditionally focused upon discrete functional goals and assigned roles for users, it does not have to be and is in fact not always utilized this way. Ethnographic analysis can extend role definitions and heuristic analysis is universally applicable. A combination of ethnographic research, inferential value mapping and analysis, and walk-through comparisons could be utilized to determine the success of an interface in assisting users to achieve their stated or underlying goals. Exit interviews with open-ended questions would provide an opportunity to assess satisfaction with intangibles.

The second premise is that the user is granted access to and some measure of control over a neutral (if shared) media space through the interface. An ideal interface simply disappears like your awareness of your own body under normal circumstances, and the user finds that through this vehicle they are able to participate in their virtual environment almost as if by mere will and natural extension of thought (ala McLuhan). Any process of selection or manipulation should be centered within the user’s sphere of influence.

In the case of new media, there are many cases where instead of media existing within the serial concept of an overarching society, the user must operate entirely within the environment created by media in order to utilize it. Arbitrary rules can be created and enforced on the fly. Interactivity is computer mediated, and no interactivity with the
media may be allowed outside of the space controlled by the media. It makes the laws of the universe it lives in rather than obeys the laws of the neutral universe like old media did. It determines the ground for its own existence and to some extent meaning.

The content “space” is inexorably tied up with the interface in a way that ultimately leads me to conclude that the interface is the medium, since it is the gatekeeper of all interaction. There are ways in which sites are designed to be intrusive, and ways in which they are intrusive subtly. The space they are intruding into is, in essence, the media. If that media is used to represent the user, the space intruded into is identity. A user who wishes to change roles from those offered by the interface may be without recourse.

While one can always “move” to a new location on the digital frontier, one cannot always move to an area of any significance. While one can step outside of the particular mediation they object to, one cannot circumvent the status quo or do much to modify it. On the digital frontier, it is in fact valid to say that while you can jump ship, if you wish to stay, then “resistance is futile.” Unprecedented power and control as well as surveillance may be implemented in an overt, structural, or sneaky fashion, without appeal or oversight since it is enforced at the technological level. We have our choice of enforced mediation, but that very mediation itself is unassailable. Interactivity is tied up with mediation that can enforce or allow whatever range of options the producer chooses in ways that old media cannot.

Fuller in Media-Mediated Relationships (1996) quotes Introduction to the Cultural Environment Movement at the beginning of chapter 1: “…The cultural environment is the medium into which our children are born and in which we all live and learn. Until recently, it was primarily [sic] hand-crafted, home-made, and community-inspired. It is not that anymore…” (p. 1). It seems commercial motives and mass-mediation, while promising greater freedom and personalization, may in fact produce a feeling of being caught up in something manufactured. This is really more a question of who does the manufacturing and why, than it is a question of what is manufactured. The technology does not have to leave us feeling this way, and it doesn’t in some cases. Therefore there is a difference, at least at present, in what is available to users.

Quantifying that difference can be difficult. Old media created “spaces” for us as well, although they were encapsulated within the natural environment. Some characteristics of these were technologically determined. Paper has an interface as well. Paper lends itself to the conveyance of linear symbolic speech or pictures through visual representations. Paper sits on the table underneath the content as a passive medium that obeys the laws of the natural world that we are used to. Paper will not argue with you, or present you with an instructional video, or ask you to click here to speak with a representative. On the other hand, you can rip the page in half, make a photocopy, cut out the letters to make a ransom note for your neighbor’s cat, or turn it into a paper airplane if you like. It might not be a good idea (especially the ransom note), but the paper honestly has no opinion and ultimately no say in the matter. It’s interface is very “old media.”

Popular board games represent a successful subset of old media that are said to possess interactivity. Interactivity was in reality encouraged by the medium and structured by the rules of the game, but it was not so much an attribute of the game or functionally provided by it. The interactivity obviously came from the users while the
The players relate with each other through the game. Playing Monopoly using a cardboard media places the players in relationship to one another across that board. Surprisingly, most Monopoly players have not elected to eschew the setup and mental calculations required by the classic “old media” Monopoly board game in favor of the trouble-free interactivity of the animated “new media” Monopoly game on their computers. One reason for this could be the artificiality of the interface. This interface forces all players into a relationship with the computer that supersedes their relationship to each other. You can’t make deals with the interface. To an extent the interface is denying users the more social and interactive experience that makes the game fun. The human element seems somehow diminished by the interface, not enhanced by it. Creative wheeling and dealing are beyond the simple rule enforcement role of the interface and a user who steps outside of that design will find using the game awkward and unrewarding. The game, in a sense, plays itself, and is reduced down to so many uninteresting permutations of “planned choices.”

The interfaces presented by many social networking websites do not underlie new media or sit on your screen like a piece of paper. The website taken as a whole and the content you are trying to reach are not neutral spaces like pieces of paper or telephone lines. They possess a subtle flow to them, as well as prompts and cues that are designed to lead down certain paths. They assume a role in a way that old media do not, and in many ways impose a role upon the user. While the interface is not designed to lock the user into a “fun” game with rigidly structured rules like Monopoly, it does impose a structure upon communication and discourage certain kinds of creativity. There is a role that the interface is designed to fulfill and stepping outside of that role is entering into frustrating territory. What is insidious is how the unused (or unusable) portions of human capacity are not visibly present or tangible; they are simply diminished and obscured. The loss may be felt, but not immediately identifiable. What is also not presented by the interface is what it cannot do, nor the fact that you are simply out of luck if you wish to do it.

HCI investigates the technical role of questions of interactivity. No other field has gone so far in considering the implications of interactivity, as it exists in new media and offering recommendations. HCI principles may be applied to determine what behaviors an interface supports and what behaviors it does not. These weights, along with the business interests of the proprietors, will ultimately translate themselves in some form into an influence upon content and environment.

The place of an interface, which is referred to here in the most general sense, is analogous to the place of our own bodies in the real world (see McLuhan). The Internet is a landscape of mediated communications, interactions, and ideas. Some of these ideas are inherent within the structure of the social networking sites themselves. Other ideas are more characteristic of cultural assumptions, mores, taboos, and expectations. All of them are directly or indirectly manufactured in this designed environment. These can often be revealed by an analysis of interface and site component choices. To an extent, an interface reflects an idiom. The idiom may be too quickly reduced to “interaction”, as if interaction were an atomistic concept of the Newtonian universe.
Advertising

When exploring the issues of mediation and roles, a fundamental force to be considered in both old and new media is advertising. Advertising is the major source of revenue for many media outlets, and represents an uneasy truce that has been struck between consumers and producers traditionally. According to the Media Awareness Network, “The amount of advertising and marketing North Americans are exposed to daily has exploded over the past decade; studies show, that on average we see 3,000 ads per day. “ The challenge is to get noticed and cut through all of the clutter. Advertising exists in the familiar ambient, as well as in stealth endorsements, name ownership, through cross-merchandising, product placement, and most importantly here in the form of digital advertisements and targeted advertising (MediaAwarenessNetwork, n.d.). Advertisements target specific segments of the community in an effort to sell goods and services. Media catering towards specific segments of the population holds greater appeal to advertisers that see a given segment as their market.

The gay market hit the Internet earlier than most other attractive market segments. “Advertisers don’t casually decide to target gays. They spend significant amounts of money to conduct research on the market and to find out how their products are faring… More advertisers are seeking the gay audience on the Internet, ever since a major gay-market study in 1997 found that gays are large online subscribers (51.5 percent use for gays compared with 15.8 percent for the general population)” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 39).

Advertisers make mighty efforts to understand their markets, since this will help them to make their goods and services appealing to them. New media provide ample opportunity to gather such information. Along with the more common appeals to “self-image” and the “American dream”, community-oriented sites provide a perfect forum for the projection of idealized or enticing representations of that community. Advertising is accepted as a hegemonic force even by marginalized subcultures in the representation of their place within larger community.

Many of these advertisements say quite a bit about the advertisers’ view of the community they are seeking to address. Gay men are apparently deeply preoccupied with overpriced underwear, swimming with groups of manic supermodels in Cancun, and throwing pretentious dinner parties. Strangely enough, I have had the pleasure of none of the above. While the form in which mass-mediation takes place is easy to identify, it can be more difficult to see what it obscures, subsumes and replaces.

In addition to the gold mine of “consumer intelligence” offered by new media, advertisers can exploit the interface design decisions of social networking services in ways that have never before been possible. In essence, advertisers can jump right into your world, stop you from whatever you happen to be doing at that moment, and grab you by the jacket in obnoxiously intrusive ways that could only have been dreamed of heretofore. Interactivity can enforce roles upon consumers and assume contexts that are self-serving for the producer. This makes media analysis all the more important.

Annoying people have invaded “my” community’s dot com screen, and refuse to go away. It’s not enough to tell them that I am not interested or to place me on their do not call lists. I have to leave the area (the web page) entirely, since they have taken over the interface and used it against me. What can I do? I can’t threaten to call the police and I suspect any complaint would result in an email letting me know that advertisers cannot be discriminated against (which is false). I can’t get together a posse of my
neighbors with pitchforks to chase the monster from our midst. I have spent thousands of dollars for a powerful system to accomplish my goals, but I still can’t research computer-mediated communication without taking advertisers along with me. Advertisers have more say over what is prominent about my community at my community’s site than I do, and media providers still determine what is acceptable based upon their financial benefit.

Sponsored mediation has crept into our small daily communications and personal lives as well through the medium of new media. Advertising is everywhere, and at times it appears as if manufacturing and service have become a mere subset of it. Individual communications have drifted into mediated forms. New conventions are being established and accepted. Blackberries append “sent by Blackberry” onto the bottom of our messages. Instant messengers have advertisements flashing constantly. Advertisements are creeping into my most intimate communiqués and condolences. The transitional moments of our lives are being captured by Samsung (complete with logo on the LCD), encoded using proprietary formats developed by and for the interests of the media, and uploaded to YouTube so they can be shared with friends. AT&T brought us the 2008 presidential election, as opposed to those fine gentlemen and ladies I read about in school years ago, I think on a scroll. MSNBC encourages us to blog about our independent views on their web site, along with everyone else in the world.

The majority of communication is now mediated and takes on the characteristics of the medium and marketing. This is part of why we need to look at IT in terms of media analysis. I break with McLuhan in questioning the motives of our modern day “artists” and in deconstructing the meaning deliberately. It is imperative to question the motives and challenge the meanings, lest our priorities and quiet thoughts are drown out by the incessant drumbeat of advertising.

The Opposite of Advertising

“But to have such stories told, we have to ensure that our new digital communications readily permit such messages to be meaningfully heard”

(Chester, 2007, p. xix).

It is my belief that the opposite of advertising, at least at the level of motive, is the traditional if discredited model of community service. Advertising must by its very nature limit the values given priority to the exclusively financial. Financial gain is the only end seen as legitimate for those who sell advertisement. In contrast to this, community service compels those who employ it to treat financial gain as a means of fulfilling higher values, and fundamentally distinct from the true and worthy end. Publishing was once viewed as an academic activity with an air of dignity about it, reserved for important matters. This led to exclusivity and elitism, and some surprising financial blunders committed by otherwise educated people. Peer reviewed academic institutions with a sense of responsibility to the public good have not functioned without occasional missteps or financial backing, but they have indeed functioned for most of our collective human history. Such institutions brought us Unix decades ago, which is now at the core of the most reliable personal computers sold to the public. In stark opposition to this stands the philosophy espoused by companies such as Microsoft, which brought us Windows Me and Vista.
The influences of mediation are by no means limited to the ubiquitous advertising enabled by ubiquitous computing. Old media took forms of mediation that were culturally determined and not simply financial. For example, libraries mediated content selections and filtered their organizational systems based upon academic criteria. Libraries have also traditionally operated under the established auspices of a public service. The library was the first massive media effort offered to the public in any modern context. Libraries mediate based upon their practical constraints, traditions, and values. It would be considered a breach of trust to allow libraries to hand over their operations to advertisers. Meanwhile they are losing out big on public financing, with ever shrinking hours of operation and resources. Part of the justification for this is that our community no longer needs a library, since everyone has access to the Internet. An unintended “revenge effect” of the potential promise offered by the Internet is the present loss of an institution that offers the same promise today.

According to Simon Rosser, Ph.D., professor at the School of Public Health's Division of Epidemiology and Community Health and principle investigator in University of Minnesota’s 2007 study:

With the exception of London and possibly New York, gay bars and culture are changing. On almost all measures, we’re seeing the same trend: decreasing number of gay bars/clubs, decreased attendance at gay events, less volunteerism in gay or HIV/AIDS organizations and, less gay media, resulting in an overall decline in gay visibility…The biggest reason for these changes, we think, is the Internet. Traditional gay communities have become much quieter now that most gay men are online. It's really a worldwide trend (e!ScienceNews, 2008). The Internet mediates by financial considerations almost exclusively, which means advertising. Markets are trusted to ultimately serve the community interest, and consumers to mediate them through their selections. Knowledge and community identity have been commoditized. Values that cannot be commoditized will be obscured and overwhelmed by those that can.

Type “gay” in to a search engine and see what comes up. You might think the first thing in the list is the most definitive, if you don’t know anything about the subject. The problem is that the Internet isn’t anything like a library in terms of how content is evaluated or organized. No academic has done the work for you, so you are left to your own preliminary judgment. With a social media, you may find yourself in an environment where the most determined or loudest advertisers for their given philosophy or opinion dominate a sea of unfiltered non-sense. One could apply the term “white out” for this excess of unevaluated information. In such scenarios, users may turn to familiar sources in an effort to cut back the noise. These familiar sources may be selected casually as a new type of catch-all filter, which ultimately rules out competing views.

After being confronted with indecipherable babble, one may turn to their church or other interest group without ever seeing clearly their position reasonably contrasted against competing positions. Regardless, thanks to new media, it is in fact possible to leave the box created by such natural filters. What confronts one in the effort however is not to be underestimated. People might feel they have completed diligent research when they have done nothing of the sort. This is one solid reason why massive amounts of information and pseudo-information can never become a substitute for good education. Individually earned education must mediate in such a commercially saturated, egalitarian
environment. Furthermore, it must assume some of the responsibilities formerly supported by culture.

**IT and Media for Humans**

We have established that new media sees information technology as its backbone and that a good deal of information technology’s artifacts could rightly be classified as new media. While the IT domain of knowledge exists within the contexts of various business models and is largely treated as an enabling and instrumental technical basis for the production and instantiation of artifacts, the medium itself is a key component in what makes new media different from the old media. In general, the specific forms that technology takes and the business goals that are being served are considered to be outside of the domain of IT or the scope of IT experts. Such issues revolve around non-technical questions of interpretation. Just as IT has a place within business and business has a place within society, so does IT have a place within our multi-cultural and democratic society, and perhaps even within the context of the destiny of mankind. As “corny” as that sounds, keep in mind the faith that advertisers have in their media and the expense and effort they expend in an effort to influence consumers purchasing behavior through it. Any conscientious professional is still apt to reflect upon the further impacts of their efforts in relation to their values and the welfare of future generations. Businessmen and academics are, despite appearances, still human beings after all.

In any such effort it would be appropriate to bring to bear in the analysis of modern IT forms the tools of media analysis since this is how it is being used. The artifacts and processes as well as the philosophy of Information Technology have been utilized and instantiated in many forms. Information Technology is viewed as the technical enabler and skill set behind most forms of new media, including social networking web sites. The dominant economic model being supported by IT in this modern age is that of new media. IT does not simply provide functional possibilities in an inert instrumental sense as a technical field serving other fields. The very emergence and presence of new media shows the radical influence Information Technology has had on the structure and direction of media itself. IT does not sit underneath the new media in the same sense that paper sits underneath the printed word on the newspaper. The very interactivity of this new media is fundamental to what makes it new.

Bright people such as Cisco Systems’ Media Solutions Group’s Senior Vice President Dan Scheinman understand this. “A lot of you should go spend time on Facebook and MySpace. Spend time to understand why social media really does matter…” (Ogg May 2, 2007). It does matter. Social media is IT and media for humans. It cannot properly be understood as merely one or the other. IT enables new possibilities and even new cultures, but it also plays a role in shaping them.

IT assumes a business goal. HCI assumes a goal of enabling a business goal. The user is supposed to benefit. IT managers are not machines. Many businesses have experimented with the possibilities offered by new media in an effort to discover and exploit new business models that integrate with their higher values and aims as human beings. These businesses never have problems recruiting talented staff to work for them. Many of them succeed; some of them do not. The humans who work for these companies often feel that they are getting more than a paycheck, although the paycheck matters. Many of these employees feel they are better people because of the choices they
have made about how best to utilize their skills and devote their energies. These businesses can become true communities that benefit larger communities. We can learn from them as well as from textbooks. There are many goals and roles that can be bound up with our practice of IT. What if the goal is for you to grow as a person? How well suited are these techniques and paradigms to serving a community instead of a business? We will never know if we believe it would be out of range for us to explore those questions.

There was a public service announcement many years ago on the television that asked, “It’s 10 o’clock – do you know where your children are?” This was no doubt designed to provoke worry or perhaps guilt, but it must be admitted to be successful on some level since it is easily understood and still memorable. The question today might be “Do you know where your children are on the Internet?” I think such a statement brings home the cultural impact of new media. Until recently, many parents couldn’t tell you where they were in the new media, not to mention their children. Fortunately this is changing. Those of us with knowledge about IT are not as likely to succumb to sensationalism or panic in relation to new media, but neither should we gloss over its dangers.

The admonition “Don’t talk to strangers” is hardly compatible with the culture created by new media, or honestly realistic. Parents seem to need to be ever more vigilant with each further advance of new media. This is not just perception, but it should be noted that new media actually benefits from a fearful view and isolated approach towards our neighbors. When the world is scary, we tend to flee to the safety of mediated relationships. New media can become a cocoon in ways that are both comforting and disturbing. Anonymous socializing amongst the masses can take on antisocial characteristics rather quickly, and breed an environment in which deception is expected. Given the nature of new media, the question could be extended to “Do you know who your children are on the Internet?” Our children may not be the same charming ladies and gentlemen we know when they go online.

Children tend to be a group upon which we project our anxieties anyway, which is understandable, but they are not the only ones swept up in new media’s wake. One could just as well ask if they know where IT is, or their culture in relationship to IT. Is new media playing a role in what we are becoming, and if so what is it? These are questions that need to be asked from time to time by responsible members of society, and the answers do matter. Our participation in new media must not be reduced to mere panic or generic appeals for censorship. We must approach these concerns with an attitude of responsible engagement and participation that brings community oriented voices and values in to focus in the conversion on and about this emerging medium. Commercial interests and technical gurus do not speak for us all.

The tensions between commercial interests, cultural identity, and values are playing themselves out through new media but frankly the serious thinking on the matter isn’t getting a lot of attention on the popular media. They’re too busy making advertisers happy. The questions raised by the remediation of our culture into new media merit reflection as well. Our lives are largely being “absorbed”, and the lives of others “shared.” The new media is where our dramas are working themselves out, where art is taking place, where knowledge is being shared, and where we are debating ourselves. Is this inevitable? Is it preferable to these things happening in our town square?
Gay Media and the Gay Community

The gay community is composed of individuals of various backgrounds, with various interests, and with a wide range of views about the way the world is and the way it should be. The emergence of new media has presented these individuals with an unprecedented opportunity to form communities, share their experiences, and examine their identity within the broadest context. Comparing what is available on the average television set or radio station for this community with what is available on the Internet produces a startling revelation—the gay community has established a larger and more significant presence in new media than would have ever been thought possible through the agency of old media. There is no doubt that visibility has increased due to the privacy, accessibility, and interactivity offered by new media. Gay media has not “outed” the gay community to mainstream media as of yet, but it has come close. Gay media has presented a window into the gay community that did not exist before.

Unfortunately, with a few notable exceptions, this seems to have arisen largely out of the perception that the gay community is a desirable market for advertising. The members of the gay community do not control gay media—it is fundamentally motivated and designed to serve the financial interests of its proprietors. In this regard, the image presented largely represents the motives of media owners while obscuring the community. Gay social networking sites are new media creations with motives tightly integrated into the old media paradigm. While these sites are presented as community focused, this claim is largely a marketing tactic. This will be discussed further in later chapters. The mediation offered through “customer service” is significantly distinct from the mediation offered through “community service”.

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Chapter 2
Social Networking Sites as Cultural Mediums/Mediators
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Social Networking Sites as Cultural Mediums/Mediators

The Most Transparent Medium?

To mediate is to occupy a middle position, to act through or as an intervening agency, or to exhibit indirect causation, connection, or relation (Merriam-Webster 2007). The verb form (to mediate) is to engage in or to become an indirect or intervening agent, which suggests an intentionally ambiguous and almost bland or passive functionary role in the relationship; yet, mediation is a position that holds at least the potential for some type of power. When considering mediation, there is the possibility of some degree of confusion when identifying the actor(s) and the acted upon. The power relationship is not explicitly inherent within or defined by the term itself. Mediation is in essence a functional definition that is often applied to an implemented material presence.

Cultural mediation could therefore be understood as the functional occupancy of a middle position between individual members of a culture while they are engaged in the practice of their cultural activities. It could also be understood as the occupancy of a position between a given subculture as a whole and another (perhaps overarching) culture. Cultural mediation implies that there is culture present, and culture is in essence an abstract concept that members of a given community may or may not be aware of, even though they are influenced by it on some level. The space that the mediator exists in is a symbolic and transactional space that is networked, dynamic, and interdependent.

Defining culture itself is no trivial exercise. Merriam Webster does so thusly:
Culture:
5  a : the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations
   b : the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also : the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time <popular culture> <southern culture>
   c : the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization <a corporate culture focused on the bottom line>
   d : the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic <studying the effect of computers on print culture> <changing the culture of materialism will take time -- Peggy O'Mara>

Social networking sites, though constructed by their originators for their own purposes, are often presented as existing with the goal of behaving like utilities that offer a service for the benefit of a particular group of enthusiasts, participants, or members. Users are presented with an attractive “space” where organic relationships are expected to develop as a natural consequence. Like a “hot spot” that people visit so they can mingle with the “in crowd” while enjoying the scenery, the value of the space is at least partially in the presence of other persons of interest. Social networking sites are nothing if not
interactive. The users, as well as what person(s) they wish to engage with, determine the nature of the interaction. The location and selection of these person(s) themselves is a key value and a matter of choice. What is communicated and the personality that is projected is at the discretion of the user(s).

In this scenario the media are little more than transparent enabling spaces to be employed by users in order to express themselves, fulfill their wills and achieve their ends. What is communicated is a mirror of the user. The idea is that these sites don’t mediate, but only reflect. If this is the case, then these sites should accommodate users rather then the users accommodating them. This should be a testable assumption, with some degrees of subtlety around it. The site itself may be viewed as an actor and the behaviors of the users may be considered.

One such test with a positive result was recently found in the story Facebook to let users give input on policies. The general story is this: Facebook changed its policy to indicate that the company owned the information and content posted, even if users left the site. The users mobilized, forming a site on Facebook itself to protest this policy change. At the time of this report the protest group had risen to 139,600 members. Facebook reverted to their original policies and promised to give users a mechanism to influence future policy decisions. According to the article, “If more than 7,000 users comment on any proposed change, it would go to a vote. It would be binding to Facebook if more than 30 percent of active users vote” (Ortutay, 2009).

It is not clear if this user activity on the site (which was allowed) created the stir or if the media attention from outside was a more persuasive pressure, but Facebook administrative officials are now unambiguously using the language of transparency and ownership in their communications with users regarding site policy. One thing to keep in mind however is that 30% of the current active user base at the time of this article was roughly 53 million people (Ortutay, 2009). I doubt the likelihood of 53 million people bothering to speak out against much unless it is so flagrant that its negative impact goes without saying. If 52 million speak out and are right – what happens? Regardless of these concerns, this overall turn of events is positive on three counts:

1. Users reactions were validated by the site: The users largely by their statements claim to have reacted to a perceived injustice, based upon an inherent sense of ownership, community welfare, and concern for their rights. The investment in the community mattered to them enough to take the move seriously. The medium enabled this but only to an extent, even if in the final analysis the larger press became a more significant advocate for the users.

2. Users were given policy ownership: The site is allowing input into these policies themselves by the users of the site.

3. Administration was expressing the language and philosophy of transparency: The administration is actively engaging the language of transparency and presenting this transparency as a philosophical basis for their policies while acknowledging the sense of ownership that the users feel for the community.

There are many ways of not passing these three tests. For example, a site may violate all three of these tenants by engaging in censorship (as Facebook has done in the past), or dismissing users with “business” tactics (as gay.com has done frequently by suggesting a free month of service to placate users who felt they were not being
considered in modifications to the site). Sites may also fail these tests simply by failing to acknowledge users’ ownership.

Censorship and dismissing users with “business” tactics are often symptoms of a lack of accountability towards the community. The absence of an overt infrastructure to express and get input regarding a site’s philosophy in terms of the end users experience indicates a lack of transparency towards the users and ultimately a lack of community orientation. If users can’t vote, or wouldn’t want to vote on the site’s design, then why would they feel their philosophy about the community of that site made any difference? If you never know what’s being done to you then why have an opinion about it? If users don’t have an opinion about what is being done to them, but are left only with the option of going somewhere else, then in essence all that is left is shopping for communities owned by other companies that more closely match their style. Time will tell if communities in cyberspace will be more like fashion statements or vibrant commons.

Advertisers take the approach of sorting customers. Placing users into the sorting mechanisms of the market reduces involvement to brand identification in place of ownership. Participation in the new institutions and social networks becomes a matter of membership in its rawest form, and the consumer is ultimately made passive except for their performances and gestures carried out as insignificant exercises of commentary oriented towards other users already in the same social categorizations.

The gay community is understood in this paper as a diverse subculture within a greater culture. That greater culture has a different way of dealing with that subculture in real life than on the Internet — a way based upon citizenship that ultimately leads us to greater good (ideally). Analogs are found throughout our history. The implication is not that gay people or culture “off line” serve as examples of the realization of our highest ideals, or of liberation from mediation. The salient point is that the rules have changed, and that these changes have largely been directed by market forces that are even less concerned with our ideals (even in philosophical terms) than traditional institutions.

**Meeting People in the New Millennium – How Is It Different?**

The millennium may be thought of as an approximate milepost to indicate the shift towards widespread utilization of the Internet by the general public. Among the first adopters of this media were disproportionate numbers of the gay community (or at the very least gay men) (Kilbourne 1999, p.39). While surfing the Internet, chatting, and sending emails might not at first appear to indicate the birth of a new chapter in gay history, it is my contention that the widespread adoption of the Internet signaled just that.

The communication networks established through the agency of the Internet are unique. Indeed, there are valid criticisms directed at this very uniqueness, some of which are no doubt temporary and related to the state of the technology currently. For example, some contend that this medium is inherently geared towards immediacy. There are also more complex arguments contending that the Internet suffers from its own egalitarian nature and massive participation (see page 117 of *The War of Desire and Technology* by Stone (1995)).

Despite these criticisms, there are some overriding positives associated with the medium. Perhaps most obviously, as already discussed, is the opportunity for massive-scale participation and distribution (assuming your content or channel can be found amidst the vast netscape). Less obvious questions also arise in the context of the Internet.
One such beneficial question raised is about what identity and community mean in such a space. Is the way we view and form identity itself changing with the frame of this new medium? Is the medium the message even if we occupy it?

The history of gay identity is rife with many of the very questions raised by virtual identity, community, and communication. Two related factors contribute to this. First, the gay community has historically been associated via collapsible and ambiguous linkages at least outwardly, perhaps using coded communications. Secondly, gay individuals have largely been forced to reject the cultural canons related to notions of identity and gender roles. For some gay men, the gay sensibility related to identity is one of epicurean self-discovery. The consequence of this is a perversity-tolerant polymorphous orientation towards identity and community that embraces independent-minded pleasure seeking as part of the quest. This aligns well with the Internet, and the Internet allows such people to find each other.

It seems people are more interested than ever in getting assistance with meeting other people of similar interests and backgrounds. This may be a symptom of “real” culture’s condition that is being exploited and perhaps served by new media such as social media. This may likewise be a symptom of individuals finding that they are lonely as a result of uncovering their “true” selves. What good is it to know you are a homosexual if you’re the only one? There is an old Welsh triad that comes to mind, however, in light of this approach to self-discovery. There are three things a man is – what he thinks he is, what others think he is, and what he really is. Aside from reflecting on the multi-dimensional nature of identity, my question is – if we remove any of these “legs” (whether their proportions agree with the other legs or not), is the identity still legitimate? It may be that all three occupy the same “space” on the Internet, but may not be visible at the same time. The question is from what angle you view them – if you are able to view them.

Compared with other interactive mediums, such as newspapers that offer the possibility of editorial response, social networking sites on the Internet give even text itself a different quality. “The older metaphor of reading undergoes a transformation in a textual space that is consensual, interactive, and haptic, and that is constituted through inscription practices – the production of microprocessor code. The boundaries between the social and the ‘natural’ and between biology and technology take on the generous permeability that characterizes communal space in the most recent virtual systems” (Stone, 1995, p. 121).

That interactivity and communal permeability doesn’t come from nowhere – it comes from (and is bound to) an interface that is manufactured. While proximity and accessibility limitations seem to fall away due to enabling technologies supporting these sites, the participants are interacting with each other through an interface that creates or destroys the fundamental units of power - that enable and to some extent ultimately are their transaction. The rules of the road are most deliberately manufactured yet they act like the laws of physics in the real world. Whatever quality text or other representations take on, the modality is bounded by the interface, as is to some extent the perspective one can take on it.

The scale and type of communication become virtually extended, or not, as design decisions. Business decisions related to these design decisions are less driven by the cost of production or pushing the product out to more users. In place of this, these design
decisions are largely viewed in terms of marketing strategy and intellectual property. Someone owns the connection.

There are different filters that get applied by users as well as by the site operators. These filters are manufactured as well. The owner defines the totality of the environment or space offered up, and if they do not include something, the users may be hard pressed to attempt to get it in. The filters are suited to the medium, and targeted where the operator decides to aim them. Truly/fully independent utilization of the system is impossible.

Meeting people in the new millennium is different for gay people because of social networking websites. Gay people are increasingly using these sites to find each other before and if they ever meet in the real world. For reference, one need only refer to the marketing materials of sites such as PlanetOut.

SNSs (social networking sites) are different than gay bars because they create a different space. The experience of being there is different. The common experience of sitting together, drinking a beer (or a coke) and dancing, being with people, and seeing someone walk through the door has been replaced by a simulated experience of these things. Often the only participation is speech. Common activities that express or practice social nuances often become more awkward and tend to be deemphasized. Sitting with your friends while being around other people takes on a different form. Equivalents can be contrived, such as creating private chat rooms while “lurking” in public ones, but they are not the same. No cue is spontaneously given by dress or nonverbal communication, but one is given by screen name or profile choices.

SNS are different than gay campgrounds because the activities are different. Creating a “camp fire” chat room is not the same as hosting a real campfire. No one takes responsibility for getting the wood or the safety of the fire. While animations of natural settings may be pleasant (assuming you have the bandwidth), it is unlikely that anyone will take cover from the virtual rain by ducking in to your conveniently near-by tent to play monopoly (or whatever). Taking a stroll through the grove, you are unlikely to run into a lost colleague who needs a bite to eat. They also won’t see the book you are holding and ask about it.

SNS are different than using the phone. While they are similarly limited in modalities of the communication channel (unlike campgrounds and bars), phones are passive mediums that tend to emphasize traditional conversation. In addition, the chance of successfully meeting persons of interest and fulfilling your goal (be it “hooking up” or falling in love) is determined by different factors and subject to different statistical conditions, not the least of which is the number of users. All expressions are efforts entered into the system in both cases, and therefore largely controlled by the user, but speech is a more natural and spontaneous activity than typing. There is some sophistication possible through the modification of tone of voice, etc. which does not translate in any equivalent sense to emoticons.

SNS are different than personals because there is the possibility of further vetting in various new forms before proceeding with the meeting (if that is what is desired). Social skills in this venue are somewhat contrived and there is a degree of paucity to the communication. However, out of all these comparisons, personals ads come the closest to the nature of what is experienced on many SNSs (although the networking sites are not
so limited). Ads take time to run, and could potentially be read by anyone. The only people reached are those who read the publication.

In each of these cases, it would be reasonable to say that the medium impacted the communication that occurred through it. The presence or absence of this medium may also have affected the behavior of the user in some sense. A larger question is if the presence or absence of a medium impacted the way users communicated or viewed themselves and their relationships in general. While we can clearly trace an impact upon society from the presence of television, it seems we can only speculate thus far on the impact of Internet social networking sites on the general populace. A more manageable question might be the impact of social networking sites on a particular community. If the medium impacts the communication as well as creates the space for the discussion where community is seen as happening, it is logical to conclude that the medium impacts the community’s discussion or non-discussion about itself.

These cases indicated a change in societies methods for and attitudes towards meeting people and maintaining contacts indicated by and associated with all of this. People are everywhere and we interact with them constantly, but more and more people seem to be on a recurrent mission to “meet people” as if it were an activity like shopping. We need to meet the right people – our people – new people - then our social lives will be complete. The key to a healthy social life is concocting clever advertisements and fulfilling ever more specific requirements through programming our requests rather than sociability or being a good member of a community. Building a better mousetrap becomes more important than developing good social skills. We don’t have a responsibility towards a greater community – we have a niche that serves our own personal whim of fulfillment. Annoying elements and people may simply be discarded. Enticement via self-promotion becomes more important than grappling with society as it is, let alone working for social change.

This reflects a sea change in our society that has come in many waves. Traditional families were a unit of production that existed in a tribal context. Extended families functioned to solve the problems of existence in a different world. Mediated in part by romantic literature, a major fracture in this structure occurred with the renaissance. One could risk the wrath of the family and the scorn of society, choose to follow one’s own heart, and marry for love. While it was a fanciful choice, it was one that had its proponents (see John Boswell’s *Same Sex Unions in Postmodern Europe*, 1994, p. 39).

The death knell for the extended family came with the industrial revolution and the shift towards the nuclear family (Koschorke, 2000). Subsistence was no longer the driving force shaping societies now impacted by birth control, mass manufacturing, mass media, and increased mobility. This is the first service-oriented society, and at the heart of it was the nuclear family. Women left the home to work. Children became the part-time responsibility of teachers and day care workers while the parents worked. Our neighbor’s hunger became the responsibility of social services. Our broken bone became the responsibility of massive and impersonal hospitals that functioned like a business. In the midst of this, women discovered they were still expected to do all of the housework and childcare while absentee husbands were free to drive off after their day’s work was done.
An ever-increasing pace was required to keep up, largely as the result of the propagation of laborsaving devices that ultimately became requirements instead of free-time producers. Leisure became an industry, including family leisure. Family time was commoditized instead of a practical requirement. Media became associated with recreation and lifestyle advertisement. Long standing friendships and family relationships had to give way to the requirement to move for a job. We became increasingly lonely and isolated in cities of thousands, tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands. Population density is a side effect of industrialization, but paradoxically so is alienation. Some found refuge in the anonymity, including those who had been labeled “sexual deviants.”

The media carried messages of the civil rights and the women’s rights movements, as well as the “sexual revolution.” As women started asserting their equality and freedom, the structure and stages of heterosexual relationship formation could no longer be taken for granted. In addition to the impacts of urbanization and political liberation, relationships were being impacted by technological developments. The impression that technological development is having an impact upon relationship development is not recent. For example, technology critic Jacques Ellul (1964) comments on “…the suppression of community relations, for which technical relations are substituted” (p. 334).

If the rise of the city creates an urban space, the rise of the networked computer creates a space of its own. A space (be it my space, your space, or our space) could be said to be itself a type of mediation for more than proximity and opportunity. Spaces do not bound in the same manner that interfaces do. Social networking sites are not simple recreations of space in the same sense that new bars are. Social networking sites are a new type of space that exists within a greater space. A gay Mecca like LosAngeles is not the same as a gay Mecca like gaywired.com. In both cases, the space itself becomes symbolic and presents a certain power (Wertheim, 1999).

Not all spaces are given equal weight by individuals. Entering or leaving them is a choice. As teenagers come to terms with their place in the world and confront the “undifferentiated ego mass”, they can come home from the “fake” interactions of real life with people they are merely forced to tolerate, to the comfort of “real” relationships with individuals they have never met from other countries – real people who were met through the icons and profiles they created for the world to consume. As society gets scarier and less humane, many of us are indeed withdrawing into a “real” social life online to supplement either a vacuous or pathetic “fake” social life where we are forced to interact with actual humans face-to-face.

In so far as technology creates an environment or space in some significant sense, this environment could impact culture, identity and behavior. The intersection of media, IT, and community is where social networking happens. This is part of what makes the space new. What also makes it new is that it can become more fully a world unto itself, with new capabilities and limitations as well as new relationships.

A fundamental risk in this space comes from a lack of transparency. Transparency is a social concept that has to do with forthright authenticity regarding motivations and clarity that makes genuine choice and responsibility possible due to visible structures, systems, and associations. The question of transparency is often in contention with an attitude of instrumentality. When that instrumental view is not
articulated and contextualized with respect to the users, manipulation replaces transparency regardless of the pleas that what is happening is “simply business.” This risk is heightened in social networking sites because what is being marketed is in fact individuals’ identities, and greater opacity is possible due to the nature of the very medium itself.

Transparency can also refer to cultural fidelity and individual ownership. The types of transactions supported and those discouraged, and the terminology built into the space are inaccessible to the user on one level yet, they exert an influence. The cultural assumptions are woven into the fabric of the site. Simply relying upon the fact that there is a membership agreement that few will ever read, and that can be changed at any time, is not being transparent.

The new communication networks play a role in the way we meet and relate to people in an even more pervasive and far-reaching manner than the previous networks did. Every step of the way – from finding people, to getting to know them, to framing the relationship - can take place on the same site. Identities are discovered, forged, and presented in this space. If we view social needs in the same way that Maslow presented his Hierarchy, it becomes apparent that from the base of the pyramid to near the tip, all may be placed upon social networking sites for many people. Without access to modern communication networks, we may feel insecure for our physical selves and hopelessly alone in terms of our love and belonging. For some, self-esteem is incumbent upon network popularity. In an effort to achieve self-actualization, some of us are turning to my space. Along a similar vein, grumble theory assures we will always be looking for new “buddies.” (Maslow, A. H., 1965). We may view some as occupying the summit of the networked world while others languish at the base, but the truth is the entire world is still made up. Only the people who utilize it are real, not their online presences. As the title of a recent film about Bob Dylan suggests, “I’m not there”(Vachon, Goldwyn & Haynes, 2007).

There has been a cultural shift towards instrumental and mediated approaches to befriending. This had led to increased emphasis of the artificial. If the sense of community is real, we would do well to ask where it comes from and where it leads. Social networking sites did not arise from community traditions and are in many ways changing them.

From a brief survey of the history of social network(ing) sites, it becomes apparent that different communities exist at different sites. Boyd (2007) provides an excellent history. From this, I interpret a correlation between different design approaches and different types of communities. Friendster in 2002 was designed so friends could view the friends of their friends. From this one would speculate the development of a clique mentality could be prevalent. The design was not oriented towards “searching for people.” As a result of design, some users could have viewed the site as a type of popularity competition with all that entails. MySpace in 2003 allowed users to individualize their page. This could have encouraged either the creation of the “coolest” page in an effort to impress friends and potential friends, or presentation along the lines of the “photo Christmas card” of the family. My space was an area to formulate an online presence, rather like a business card. This could have supported or encouraged a culture of “link trading” people who wanted to look hip. Facebook in 2006 had much in common with myspace, except that it ultimately emphasized networks while remaining
Facebook also made it easy to share large numbers of photos. Facebook has developed the hallmarks of alternative media to a much greater extent than many other major sites. As a result, the culture created can more easily be diverse, dynamic, and user-centered.

In a nutshell, the new (as opposed to historic) forms of mediation have created a new friendship and relationship space, and tend to lend themselves to particular cultures based in part upon their structure. Transparency has become increasingly important but also complicated by layers and components, as has ownership. Social networks do not simply multiply existing behavior but also influence and encourage or discourage it. Extrapolations from old media are not sufficient to consider the degree and type of cultural mediation present. Regardless of what caused it, the way we are befriending people and making relationships has changed. At the very least, it is clear that marginalized communities are significantly impacted by the widespread adoption of social networking sites. Indeed, the very dynamic of “meeting people” has changed as a result of the medium.

**Basic Types of Sites – Broad Categorization of Sites As a Whole**

While detail is reserved for later chapters, at this point it is useful to establish some broad categorizations of sites as a whole for consideration of the question of cultural mediation. The nine categories I propose below represent my attempt to crystallize distinctions salient to the question of mediation types and to provide a suggested starting point when considering mediation. The first categorization is based upon keeping in touch or meeting new people. Boyd differentiates between sites designed to keep in touch with existing friends and sites designed to meet new people by referring to the former as network sites and the latter as networking sites. Boyd’s distinction is valuable, though SNS could refer to either. For my purposes, I will use the abbreviation SNS for social network sites and the abbreviation SNgS for social networking sites.

“On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily ‘networking’ or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. To emphasize this articulated social network as a critical organizing feature of these sites, we label them ‘social network sites’” (boyd, 2007). I tend to emphasize the “ing” sites (she tends to emphasize the other) for two reasons in this particular context. Firstly, it makes sense that the gay community would be looking to “find itself.” Secondly, by looking at meeting new people we are more likely to be able to identify clear indicators of novel effects in a demonstrative context – one that could demonstrate direct correlations between the medium and effects, be they of causality or otherwise. If social networking is not about meeting new people but instead about chatting with people you already know, then isn’t social networking really just a fashion accessory to your existing life?

The truth is that all of these categories for sites are a matter of degree – they might better be called scales with exceptions. There are sites that emphasize both finding new friends and maintaining friendships, but generally one tends to be more supported by the design than the other. Most sites today tend to fall more to one side or another of these categories, but that is no guarantee this will not change.
SNgS sites in the gay community tend to be used for “hook ups” more than SNS sites. By “hook up” I mean anonymous or nearly anonymous casual sexual encounters. Dialogs on these sites are more likely to consist of cybersex communications than political debate. The motives as well as the usage patterns differ from person to person, but there is a difference in each as relates to an SNS site as opposed to an SNgS site.

While I have not yet been able to find statistics regarding whether more gay people are gathering on networking or network sites, it is obvious that the sites which proclaim their affiliation with the gay community by and large are SNgS sites. The SNgS sites tend to emphasize the niche – in this case homosexuality. It may follow that a feature associated with gay identity is the desire to find others of the same community, not just to keep in touch with existing friends and contacts. It is less likely and less frequent that sexual orientation tends to come out on the SNS sites. However, are people “just chatting” more on the SNgS sites or additionally hooking up for sex? It is also possible people are going to the SNgS sites to find just friends. Some go for the excitement of the chat rooms without any intention to “cruise” themselves. The SNgS chat rooms often give more permission to be playfully risqué or “really really gay.”

The SNgS emphasis and structure are less suited to keeping in touch, at least in the gay context. Many adult homosexuals have a myspace page and a twitter account for public consumption where their orientation may be presented in an acceptable and perhaps understated fashion. These same users then may go to participate on an SNgS site under another screen name, perhaps obscuring their real names. Professional concerns are often cited as the reason for this. To some extent this is an accommodation by the user of a site’s structural decision. These sites are not designed to show you the latest snapshots of their pet or blog about their dieting experiences.

SNS sites, on the other hand, are so designed. On SNS sites you will encounter greater prominence of structural elements such as blogs and photo galleries that do not allow nudity. The word prominence was chosen deliberately here. SNS sites tend to police more for profanity, with some exceptions. The mediation here is designed to keep the experience “nice for everyone.”

How do you tell an SNS from an SNgS? One key indicator is tight integration of “personals” style functionality into the rest of the site. If personals functionality is not cloistered off into its own separate area, chances are the site designers are considering this a key theme of the site as a whole. Since personals are about meeting people rather than staying in touch with them, personals functionality is a characteristic of SNgS. Another overt indicator is in the tone of the advertisements. Sexually explicit advertisements tend to be more prominent on gay male SNgS sites.

The second categorical distinction I am proposing is between sites that are open to all and sites that are closed. A fully open site allows anyone to join, while a fully closed site will not allow you to see who or what is there much less participate in anything but the most general terms. If you must be a member of Lambda Delta Tau to get through the door, then you are looking at a closed site. Open and closed status is not related to charge or no charge – it is a matter of who can join and who cannot.

The third distinction is between sites that charge for membership and sites that do not. A site that is fully paid for by advertisements and completely functional without the user spending a dime is free. A site that won’t let you view or participate in anything without paying is a fully charge site. Many sites have general members and premium
members with different levels of access and/or different capabilities. One strategy of the hybrid site is to allow general members to see profiles but not to respond to them. Another strategy is to cripple general members from the really “juicy” content, while whetting their appetites with free content. Spectators are using an open viewership but closed participation site, while crippled members are using the open commons hosted by a semi-closed site. In either case we see how the structural decisions related to the interface can be invoked deliberately to mediate the users decision making about membership. Free sites may be more open to user anonymity and therefore tolerate or foster more controversial content (due to the cover of this anonymity). The alternative view is that, given the accountability provided by lack of anonymity, more controversial topics may be addressed since inflammatory or obnoxious input can be attributed to a real person who ought to be embarrassed.

The fourth distinction is between sites that are customizable in terms of content and presentation, and sites that are not. A site that offers you free web space with scripting capability is completely customizable, at least as far as your area of it goes. A site that enables you to assemble your page from a collection of modifiable widgets is fairly customizable, even though you have no control over the interfaces themselves. A site that allows you to pick a theme to place around and behind your blog post is somewhat customizable. A site that looks the same whatever you do and does not allow much more than editing a form about yourself is not customizable.

The fifth distinction is between sites that encourage customized networks and those that simply label chat rooms or allow labeling on profiles, and leave you to sort your way through them. A buddy list is a type of customized network, but the ability to search for key words such as “Rod Stewart” to find likeminded individuals is not truly network customization. Custom network sites go a step further by recognizing that there are networks within networks. Customized network sites provide functionality and structure for users to cluster the resources of the site around their own designations of themes or affiliations. Simply allowing someone to start a chat room about baseball cards is a start, but custom network sites allow these affiliative themes themselves to be managed in a structured way.

The sixth category is between sites that provide affordances for participation in the operational details and those that do not. If a site provides a transparent membership agreement and provides a visible and coherent structure for members to participate in shaping it, this site has provided affordances for participation in at least that operational detail. If the site is responsive to user requests or changes in the interface, this also qualifies. If a site treats their operational details as business concerns that the users have to take or leave, and the participation of users in those details is seen as a negative, then that site is not transparent and does not support user ownership and therefore fails this test. That site has boxed users into the framework of consumer units and does not want them to leave said box.

The seventh category is between sites that are community owned and sites that are market owned. This is a financial distinction. If a site uses advertisements to fund its non-profit status, it may still be community owned. If a site is “for profit”, it is business owned. Nearly all social networking sites are market owned.

The eighth category is between sites that are heavily moderated and sites that are not heavily moderated. A heavily moderated site may prevent any new content from
appearing before it passes their approval process. Chat rooms with Sysops, moderators, and “owners” that can kick people out and ban them are somewhat moderated. Sites without the ability to delete garbage content, boot out troublemakers, and intervene when needed are few and far between because ultimately these nuisances will end up destroying the site and driving people off. The real distinction here is how it is practiced (the degree of invasiveness and the transparency as well as ownership of the criteria chosen), and how frequently it is exercised. A site that rarely deletes content or kicks people out because another member is upset is not heavily moderated. A site that bans specific acts, such as insertion of commercial advertising, may also be lightly moderated, but this introduces a complication. If those specific acts are not determined by the members of the community, this risks becoming heavily moderated.

The ninth and final distinction is if the site allows users to mash up services from other sites or not. Most sites don’t want you to use their competition too conveniently and on their dime. An antisocial orientation towards other sites might prevent users from posting links to them as part of the terms of service. A much more social orientation towards those sites might allow you to aggregate and customize the services of multiple sites in the “container” of your choice – which may have even been developed using open source code.

All of these categorizations reflect different site structures and philosophies that bear upon the way the site mediates. Each category exerts a different influence and attracts a different user (or retains them). It’s not enough to throw all of the gay people in the world into a chat room, telling them to have at it. This mediation helps to make the experience comprehensible and beneficial, even though it raises certain ethical questions. Design decisions are community-impacting decisions. A philosophy of transparency will go a long ways towards moving the sites closer to community driven configurations.

Identity is defined in different ways by different cultures, but there are several common elements. Individual identity is seen in Western cultures as having largely to do with your history and individual personality characteristics. Characteristics that influence choices are seen as more significant, but what those characteristics are is a matter of opinion. Affiliation is seen as one of these choices, with few exceptions. An African-American person may or may not view himself or herself as part of the “black community.” While racial background and skin color is not a choice, the sense of community and affiliation to some extent still is. If someone enjoys yachting, this being a behavioral choice that they make themselves, they may likewise view themselves as a “yachting enthusiast” or simply as someone who likes yachting. Therefore, even in the Western context, affiliation is important to the sense of community identity, even if it is seen as a choice.

Regardless of the impacts of such mediation upon our identities, there is yet to consider the impacts upon the brands of social networking sites themselves. “The whole area of digitally authenticated reputations, and the ‘reputation capital’ that accumulates or is affected by the opinions of others is an area that combines economics, game theory, psychology, and expectations” (Ludlow, 2001, p. 71). This applies to the site as well. A free market is, in theory, all about choice. Social networking sites are particularly vulnerable to public impressions, at least of their target audiences, if they are to stay economically viable. Many have not. Consumers are no longer wide-eyed with wonder at the possibility of such sites, and eager to get on board. Consumers are willing to
compromise and tolerate a lot, but they are no longer fools just off the boat either. The Internet is accessible to almost everyone and if companies fail to manufacture what it is that we really want, so long as the business plan is sound, there are thousands of potential creative entrepreneurs graduating every year who might just chose to put down their X-boxes long enough to change the world. Manufacturing communication networks of vast scale has never been so easy within the history of mankind.

Non-market alternatives now have an opportunity to reframe the relationship between site operators and users based upon traditional concepts of community activism. Non-market production has become much more viable, at least in the social arena, as a result of the Internet. While non-market is no panacea and remains subject to a number of traditional countervailing forces, the very viability of it presents a degree of change that can ultimately impact market-based production. According to Benkler (2006), “...the emergence of a substantial non-market alternative path for cultural conversation increases the degrees of freedom available to individuals and groups to engage in cultural production and exchange, and that doing so increases the transparency of culture to its inhabitants” (p. 293). The same characteristics of the Internet that have been exploited for commercial interests may be utilized by alternative sites to subvert those commercial interests. One cannot claim to represent the African American community in a commercial context, for example, and truly expect to “get away” with simple exploitation. The position of the media itself has been changed in that legitimacy is at the discretion of an audience capable of manufacturing and selecting alternatives.

Types of Mediations – Subtle Influences on Identity and How Change Happens

I have presented an argument that social networking websites are far more mediated than traditional venues, even though they have been offered as neutral spaces for individuals to gather for unhindered visits. Yet, in the new reality of the virtual world, all communications are at once bounded by, created from, and extended through the agency of the medium itself. There are no artificial bounds to be shirked off, only rules to be enforced or not enforced. Authenticity is manufactured and conveyed in sincerity while deception and manipulation are manufactured and conveyed in the same way but with a different motive. Typing a lie might not be as bad as living a lie, but the virtual world’s very “reality” is constructed upon such keystrokes. Aside from the changes in this communication space and its nature, users are mediated in new and different ways, which need to be identified specifically for the argument to progress.

In a sense, a new language has been created with a disturbing air of artificiality to it. We must speak it to communicate. This language uses an alphabet of clicks and keystrokes that has been constructed to communicate within the new realities being created. Users are the variables fed through the static interfaces provided, and all interactions are fundamentally transactions in the truest sense of the word. Manipulating interfaces to express oneself and to interact with other members of the community is the expected pattern of community members.

As we accommodate the language, we also accommodate means of expressing ourselves in relating to others. Innocent communications with no substance lead to patterns of behavior that can overtake the non-virtual with the virtual. Minor adjustments made to our lives, like our profiles – white lies in our photos or age field – hold the potential to bleed over into our real activities and lives in ways that are not so trivial. A
trifling vanity may take on a life of its own, empowered and broadcast by the power of technology. Like television, this new medium seems to be taking more and more of our time and ultimately our lives. Who knows what we would be doing and whom we might be doing it with were it not for the allure of this “neutral” force spreading out into every corner.

The purveyors of this culture tell us it is a transparent mirror, reflecting our will and granting us a magical wand with which to fulfill our desires. They tell us our community is being “upgraded” by this enabling technology. Finally, we are sold a universe based upon customer service with us, as the customer, at the center.

Understanding and identifying mediation in this space can be reduced down to learning the language of these clicks and keystrokes, reading between the lines for assumptions, and considering goal achievement in terms of what is supported and what is not. Power structures, sorting of individuals, and tactical opportunities from an end user perspective may also be applied to flesh out the picture. Mediation is contextualized when one identifies correctly the forces in play and the role of all actors in a network. Indirect mediations may be teased out from direct ones, such as a company policy or “code of conduct”. Identification of the range of possibility along with the actors and relationships possible can lead to a holistic comprehension of the sum of the parts. I created the following distinctions to use as a starting point when considering types of mediation, and suggest employing them after categorizing the site.

*Legal mediations* abound in cyberspace, and one of the most profound of them (discussed later in metaphors) is the shift from socializing as citizens to socializing as members. Legalese not possible in real life communications has crept into social networking sites through user agreements and terms of service as well as through court rulings. Approaching your communications as a citizen has different implications than approaching your communications as a member (or a customer for that matter). Many sites risk recasting their members as something other than citizens. A member is subject to the authority of the owner in a way that they would not be if they were simply viewed as citizens.

While legal precedents such as the Napster rulings apply to everyone, terms of service do not. These rulings and terms, however, seem to have been influenced by the perceptions of the Internet promulgated by business owners rather than citizens. Dangerous precedents have been set without the kind of public debate and the traditional checks and balances that citizenship in non-net contexts were thought to have merited previously. For now, suffice it to say that if sites like Napster must police themselves, it must follow that they have culpability as actors.

*Modal mediations* are limitations in terms of communication channels themselves. If a site allows text chat but no voice chat, this is a type of modal mediation. Messages tend to differ based upon the characteristics of the medium, and certain messages and ways of communicating are more appropriate to a given channel than others. Communication is a behavior, and changes in communication constitute changes in self-representation strategies. In modal choices we may see technological limitations or convention, or we may infer some degree of assumed motive on behalf of the users. For example, video chat usually means you want to see someone for some reason. It could further be inferred that the choice of not supporting video chat might be because it is thought that users do not want to be seen for some reason.
Since the gay community is diasporic by its very nature, the written form is of great significance. While the written form is said to de-emphasize physical aspects, this is not the case in the de-centered world of gay communication. The Internet presents a hybrid mode (see Mark Poster’s The Mode of Information (1990)).

Terminology particular to the gay community has been brought to various modes of communication, and new terminology has been created suited to new modes. Most SNgSs have incorporated what they view as terminology that is significant to the gay community. On many sites, users are encouraged to specify whether they are “top”, “bottom”, or “versatile” explicitly within their profiles, thus essentially disenfranchising gay men who may not even engage in anal sex. When a site asks a user to list HIV status, “no answer” may speak volumes, or at least other user may assume that it does. A refusal to answer a question about HIV status may be a principled stand against discrimination, but such may not be the assumption of other users. In essence, including these profile categories forces the subject to have come up in a mechanical way and makes them important. Such quandaries did not arise in earlier media environments, which indicates that these traditional modes are being employed in new ways. For further analysis of how visibility is impacted by modality, see Verbal and Nonverbal communication in computer mediated settings (Duska and John, 2000).

Economic mediation in this context is essentially commoditizing. The service based approach to “buying community” and “hiring friends” is itself a form of mediation. While a bar may have a cover charge and you may be going there to meet people, the online version of this is more closely akin to shopping for an escort who might say no. The site may make this explicit as part of its marketing campaign. The net result is commodification of humans.

The Microsoft “I’m a PC” campaign was designed to counteract the horrible stigma around Microsoft that Apple was quite profitably exploiting. I would expect no less from a commercial (after all) produced by Microsoft. However, I am not a PC and neither are you. Neither am I a Mac nor a Solaris nor a toaster oven. I worry about the future adjustment of the little girl who told the world she was a PC and she was 3 and ½. PC could equally stand for Personal Commodity as Personal Computer in this context. While its fun to pretend, it isn’t fun to define yourself in terms of what you own or base your self-esteem and self-image on brand affiliations. The subtler implication is that PCs would want to be around other PCs, which in this case would actually mean PC owners presumably and not their devices. Affiliation, status, fun, and ultimately love and belonging cannot be derived from an acceptance of commodification as a way of life or road to personal fulfillment. Upgrading your bank account is not remotely the same thing as upgrading yourself (which is good news for me). Whenever I feel like I am being commoditized, I now have the urge to proclaim, “I am NOT a PC!”

We have been trained to refer to software, even web-based community software, as a product. Few people think of television programs (with the exclusion of DVDs) as products, and even fewer refer to telephone conversations as products. A bar might be viewed as a service in some sense but a common gathering area would simply be a “commons” – which is nothing at all like a product. We may go there to meet people and to buy products but we are not a product. When visiting our friends’ homes or calling them on “their” telephones, we are using privately owned property with a common understanding that is based upon social convention developed organically by the users of
that property in common, over many years. The owner does not have the right to impose upon you the way you are to conduct yourself beyond normal social conventions. A bouncer could be sued for keeping someone out of a bar because they refused to divulge personal information that was irrelevant. With material objects, ownership and use of a product was transferred with the purchase. Despite the analogy so often made to the material within the digital environment, the media itself has changed the nature of these concepts.

In Outing Planet Out, Campbell (2005) referred to the “Janus Headed” nature of the corporate leadership running Planet Out. One face (a face of concern for the community) was presented to the gay community, while another face was presented to the advertisers, which largely viewed the members as walking wallets full of cash. The rearticulation of the motives behind their advertising adventures and surveillance for information to sell to the advertisers was clever and revealing. Since it was in their interest to collect certain information to sell, rather than asking people for this information in the context of selling it, they considered the motives of their quarry in order to manipulate them. Members were presented with incitement and encouragement to complete their profiles so they could be more successful in meeting people (p. 673-674). This is not transparency. Nor was it community ownership unless you defined it as owning the community.

The appeal of gay markets on the web has led to an increased online visibility, but make no mistake that this visibility is skewed by the motives of advertisers. Rather than a real community emergence, advertising presents fantasies for the shallow. “More advertisers are seeking the gay audience on the Internet, ever since a major gay-market study in 1997 found that gays are large online subscribers (51.5 percent use for gays compared with 15.8 percent for the general population)” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 39).

Behavior supporting mediation is a term that I use to describe what behavior is supported by a site’s design and what behavior is not. While a software package or site might be able to do a particular thing, the ergonomics of the interface reveal what the designers expect users will really be doing with it. (Note that this is if the interface is well designed. An exception to this is the multi-component television ‘system’ that takes three remote controls and five button clicks to make watchable; many users will find ways around this, such as purchasing a special remote that is more supporting of the “TV on” behavior.) “Feature creep” continuously multiplies the capabilities of devices live VCRs/PVRs, but in reality most of these features are quickly forgotten and rarely used (Norman, 1988). The play button is nearly always a well-supported feature because it is prominent, achieves something desirable reliably, is relatively nuisance free, and is easy to comprehend. Some web sites offer great features but ultimately leave most users employing basic functionality over and over again. Design plays a role in this phenomenon. Simply putting a link somewhere to a feature is not the same as supporting it.

Sites are designed to be used in particular ways. It might take twenty clicks to complete a particular task, and only two clicks to complete another. Walkthroughs are usually conducted based upon expected representative samples of users and their theoretical goals. That means the sites are designed with expectations of what the users’ goals are. To analyze how well a goal is supported by a site’s design, one could go
through the same process. This is in essence reverse engineering some hidden assumptions about the users made by the site owners.

If the design of the various components and of the site itself supports the behaviors sought by the users, it is more likely to encourage this behavior. If the design does not support a behavior, it is likely to discourage this behavior. Capabilities offered by the site are a factor in this assessment, but so is the degree of nuisance introduced when using them.

Sexual behavior is not usually factored into the design of traditional media, although the marketing of phone sex has certainly adapted the telephone to that purpose. Yet it is clear that there is a sexual charge to the very interactivity of the space created by some gay social networking sites. If the site sorts users based upon sexual proclivities and/or agendas as an overt identification, then this could be viewed as a support for those proclivities and agendas. Tactically, segregation into geographic areas indicates a stronger likelihood of the intention to meet in real life. Sorting by location supports dating as well as “hook-ups.” Sites that separate long term relationship seekers and friendship seekers from “hook-up” seekers structure the initial impressions, contextualize the meeting, and intervene in the stages of relationship formation by inserting these labels as cues. Match.com might support both “hook-ups” and relationships, but the structure itself provides that support as a design decision. Other design decisions may only support “hook-ups.”

The prevalent view of SNSs is that they are analogous to telephones. Asking if a telephone supports real relationships is on its face moot. Yet, the question does arise, in fact, if instant messages can support or nurture genuine relationships. A telephone does not present the paradoxical richness of channel and inflexibility of interface. The interface is inexorably fused with the flow of communication, and guides as well as limits behavior quite unlike a phone. While a telephone gives the user the illusion of standing next to someone to hold a conversation, a website can present the user with a far more convincing illusion of free expression while influencing the nature and content of that conversation in much more sophisticated and subtle ways. While a call may be made from one’s own home, unless the web site and technology employed to connect with other people was designed by the end user, the user will always be routed through a landscape of prompts, cues, and cues that appear abstract or ethereal but are, in fact, channeling the user through the constructed processes of a third party with commercial interests. The service is not simply transporting waves across a wire, or the user into some mythic cyberspace existing as neutral and impersonal background.

The space between is where mediation happens, and this is now as much the domain of the software environments as the participants. One approach to identifying mediation in this space is to compare the simulations of real life relationships and scenarios with the very real life equivalents that they seek to simulate. Essentially, when a space is remediated, the obvious question is what has changed? Captology is the planned use of computers as persuasive technologies in an effort to change people’s attitudes and behaviors (Barnes, 2003, p. 12). Identifying the inadvertent equivalent of this begins with finding out what has changed.

Mediation of identity embodiment includes any elements that either enable the reflection of, or influence the presentation of, ones self. While community identity is itself largely performative, the medium of social networking sites tends to foster the
unitization of identity as the base currency or essential transacting unit of a social economy. The representation of an individual is associated with that individual in ways that a mere photograph would not be, as it is more deliberately constructed and presented as a proxy or golem in a more immediate and interactive fashion (rather like a vehicle or automaton driven by the user). The form of embodiment itself is a type of mediation, be it chat text and profiles, webcams, or graphical avatars. The nature of the medium impacts the way we see identity since it impacts the way we represent it. This form of mediation is nearlyuniversal in social networking sites.

One key consideration in the construction of identity is the differentiation between the “real” and the fake. The danger and the wonder of this new world is that it is actually fantasy and reality at the same time. People are real and not real at the same time. Our thoughts have power to reach out and effect change but they remain as ephemeral and abstract as ever. Maps on google do give us good directions, and when we order a book from Amazon.com it does arrive. When we engineer a new system, we do experience new capabilities, even though largely all we have just engineered is thought itself. And yet, the map is not reality. What of the person? The person in the virtual landscape is a ghost derived from the living, breathing being behind it. In some sense, we all acknowledge that we are 1s and 0s in this new medium, and yet we are quick to proclaim that we are not 1s and 0s. Is this a “new reality” that we have created, or is it merely a golem-like simulacrum?

The nature of virtuality is one of simulation of the natural. This is not a piece of paper that I am writing on right now – but I am writing…. or am I? I am recording my thoughts but am I actually, really, writing? Perhaps authoring is a better term. I am authoring something very much like a paper but it’s really not. Who cares? I care, because virtual paper and word processors have made my life easier and I can produce better documents faster. Another party cares as well - Microsoft, because they sell the software. Where is this document really – how do I posses it? Why do I unthinkingly refer to it as a document, when it is in fact not a document at all, but a simulation of a document? Where am I as I edit it?

Along with the freedom of self-expression and the benefits of entering into community as this golem, there are mediations with it. I am unwilling to accept the premise that networks are mere tools, and therefore any addition to or extension of our existing capabilities is simply another offering that empowers us. Social networks are change agents.

Embodied identity is also concerned with the construction of community identification. Clarifying how it is constructed is the first step in discerning how it is mediated. The feelings and behaviors of community members are at least as important as the labels applied to them in identifying what constitutes a community. There are many people who share common struggles but do not view themselves as a community, even if they work together in relationship to those struggles. Individuals may see the logic of coordinated action in a particular context or situation and respond to this, rather than a sense of community.

Sites that emphasize construction of one’s identity through proxy or rendering of some sort have different characteristics than sites that emphasize communication (real-time or delayed) as ones primary embodiment. Social networking sites tend to emphasize self-reported identity, which is another form of identity embodiment mediation.
Identifying how self-reported identity is treated and the priority it is given can be useful in identifying this type of mediation. One’s structured relationship to others may also be viewed as an expression of identity, such as in your buddy lists and memberships.

McLuhan (1964) conceptualized any medium as an extension of our bodies. No where is this more appropriate than in the virtual environments created by the application of information technology, where representations of self are projected into a participatory environment which simulates “real life.” The immersive and interactive experiences of the virtual environment model themselves fundamentally upon our bodily experiences and ways of interacting in the real world, socially and otherwise. He held the belief that the message was not the content media presented, but the changes in society caused by and contained within a medium. This is a natural explanation if you believe that media is not a means of expression but a means of doing things. With sincere respect to McLuhan, I will not be going so far in this paper. I do believe, however, that conceptualizing interfaces as extensions of the body is an appropriate analogy. The concepts of extension and amputation can prove provocative of insight and do merit consideration when identifying mediations. (McLuhan can communicate with what I would characterize as a playful ambiguity at times. I suggest a more straightforward introduction to those not acquainted. See Gordon (1997)).

Self-reported identity is seen as more significant than other-reported identity, and these may not match. The way we define others may be influenced by our own sense of identity and the standards of the community we belong to. While the community at large may say, “this woman is black”, the individual herself may say, “I am Haitian.” If the individual decides to call herself black, it may be for the benefit of the external community and for the cohesive affiliation of the internal community. Obviously, the “black person” in question is also much more – perhaps she is a Roman Catholic reared in a middle-class suburb, an environmentalist, a counter-cultural shopper, and perhaps a lesbian who loves the blues. Yet, this is not what people see when they meet her. Does any of this matter when she goes to a baseball game? Probably not to most of the people she will encounter. Yet, when many of us go “on-line” to socialize, we feel this medium allow us to express ourselves more fully and authentically than other media. The assumption is that the chosen presence or absence of these overt cues and indicators allows for a more authentic and holistic view of the individual.

In the Western egalitarian view, a sense of independent self is central to culture; culture is seen as comprised of autonomous individuals who collectively direct their individual volition towards certain endeavors, or share certain tendencies. Transcendentalism aside, it is of course impossible to separate a person from the raw elements that compose them, the forces that they interact with, or the environment and culture in which they exist. Defining the individual is nearly a metaphysical problem when one considers all that is involved, and the fact that it changes over time.

This problem of definition is compounded for the term “culture”, when culture is said to be fundamentally a collection of these individuals. What constitutes identity and what does not seems to be anything but an academic question, much to the relief of academics, with the exception of psychiatrists or philosophers. Sociologists avoid the mess by taking a functional view and a structural view that emphasizes the characteristics of interest to their particular questions. My question is, are we different on line?
One of the problems with self-reported identity is how it is communicated, or not. Another problem with self-reported identity is that it can be just as fictitious (albeit in different ways) as other-perceived identity. We choose to use labels at particular times and in particular ways, though at other times our labels choose us. The word Christian probably means different things to the citizens of Iraq right now than it does to the citizens of Iowa. In Iowa, many people may see Christian as what they wish to be, while in Iraq, many people may see Christian as what they wish not to be. Christian charity may be appreciated in a different way than Muslim charity in both locations – even if it is the exact same action taken.

In real life, we choose labels in a different way than we do in virtual life. In real life, we have different controls and filters in place when we relate to people. There are different mechanisms that are used. Expectations are different. The dynamics of constructing identity and controlling it differ significantly. There are positive and negative aspects to the constraints and dynamics of both forms of constructed and perceived identity – real and virtual. In essence, this results in different cultures from different identity negotiations.

McLuhan also presented the concept of Cliché in a way that can be useful in considering cultural assumption regarding groups, from “the public” to “that minority.” Ironically, iconic representations may better serve as means of elucidating the motivations of those who construct them than pictorial realism (McLuhan, 1970, p. 203). In the symbolic space of digital networks, Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory critique applies to an even greater extent. “We routinely discuss signs apart from what they are signs of, representations apart from what they represent, meanings apart from matter, and ideologies that mask realities, so that the world we inhabit now seems to be composed exclusively of linguistic, textual, and interpretive acts” (Lister, Dovey, et al., 2003, p. 296).

Identity is an artistic thing and information technology is a type of science; each is influenced by the other – as is explicit in the consideration of media. We are all artists now and the art created is identity. Like the mediums of clay or oil lend themselves to particular art forms, so the new media of social networking sites lend themselves to particular ways of representing. HCI acknowledges that new media is not like electrical wiring. Electrical wiring doesn’t have to do with our sense of identity. When considering electrical wiring, we are rarely unclear as to where user interaction stops and where system action begins.

**Role supporting** mediation refers to the relationship of a user to the site and to other users. Particular roles are supported or not supported in a manner similar to particular behaviors. While an identity refers to who you are, a role refers to what your purpose, status, and expected means of relating signify. When we enter into a social networking site, we may identify mediation by looking for signs that we are viewed as consumers, community members, people looking for “hook-ups”, or leisure seekers for example.

**Sorting mediation** refers to the various ways in which people are categorized, be they economic or by self-identification factors. The field of marketing conveys signals to potential customers that facilitate a self-sorting response. Appeals to the wealthy (advertisement for a Caribbean cruise for example), tend to be designed so as to be
ignored by the poor or perhaps even to exclude the poor. Labels are only the outward expression of this sorting.

*Cultural assumptions* may also function as a type of mediation. Identifying assumptions in structural elements, such as the prominence of particular types of functionality with associated presumed goals, can begin such an inquiry. The advertising associated with a site may also reveal some cultural assumptions related to the target market as the advertisers understand them. Analyzing media messages related to identity and behavior, as well as how they are communicated (transparency or otherwise) is the next step in understanding these mediations. The orientation of the site towards the community itself conveys a message. When messages are identified, one may ask if they are influenced by the characteristics of the medium, originating from the community, or coming from the motives of the site operators.

In Media Mediated Relationships, Fuller (1996) makes reference to the cultivation theory of George Gerbner and Larry Gross to justify the notion that “extensive use of electronic media… can ‘cultivate’ a distorted social reality”(p. 24). Cultivation theory is concerned with the over-arching impacts of mediation, in part due to the repetitive behaviors associated with consuming it. In time, this media can come to replace primary sources (Gerbner and Gross, 1976, p. 172-199). Using “personals ads” can become a social habit, with associated ritualized patterns of behavior. The structure of social networking sites can organize interactions in a particular way—a way that may become a primary source about how the community is expected to interact. If one fails to identify the mediation of the site itself, it would be logical to conclude that what occurs on this site (from performances of identity to patterns of interaction) is in fact constituting a primary source. How that community is expected to interact is a cultural assumption.

Instrumentality can be a culture killer, and the acceleration of technology has led to the acceleration of an instrumental view of the world which has alarmed traditionalists and impacted culture. The online jungle is not neutral—it’s manufactured. Instrumentality strips away and discards other values and purposes that real culture protects. Real culture has safeguards and customs to protect these values in traditional mediums. Traditionally, the media has occupied a place in the culture (as medium). In social networking sites, the media subsumes all mediums, for purposes as diverse as art and banking. Social networking sites are not mere instruments in the traditional sense, but targeted environments that subsume culture.

*Limitations of power* are another form of mediation. Identification of the limits of power is a large subject, but generally speaking one may work from the overt to the less overt and indirect. For example, an overt limitation of power is signaled by the presence of moderators. In fact an entire cottage industry seems to have sprung up for just such purposes. Outsourcing this “dirty work” introduces another degree of separation from responsibility for the business. It also converts the messy questions about moderation into less messy questions about ‘doing business.’ One such business is called emoderation.com, which offers “24 hour protection” from being offended or having the conversation hijacked. (See part three of Communities in Cyberspace, Smith and Kollock (1999), for further discussion of *social order and control*.)

*Political mediation* from social networking sites does not refer to actual governmental institution or legal systems, since we are only concerned with mediations carried out by the site itself in this paper. While such institutions are no doubt mediators,
they are not the mediators we are concerned with here. Site-based political mediations may be influenced by and parallel to actual governmental institution and legal systems, however.

In first sense, political mediation refers to the type of regulatory orientation the site takes towards members, and embeds in the site’s operational design. These site-created regulatory philosophies may have been assimilated from (or forced upon the site by) the larger culture; the operational approach of the site may even encapsulate the larger culture’s view of “proper citizenship.” If the site operates in accordance with democratic or fascist principles, and fosters that climate, this constitutes a type of mediation. Political mediation in the first sense is the reflection by the site of the political views of its operators.

In the second sense, political mediation refers to the more indirect influences exerted by the site upon concepts such as participation, individual rights, and ownership in the community. An indirect hindrance to participation, for example, may be found in overly contentious message boards about terms of service that bury comments from thoughtful users in a sea of petty gripes. Seeing this climate, a user may conclude that the means of participation are not serious enough for them.

In the collection Resisting the Virtual (Brook & Boal, 1995), Richard E. Sclove’s “Making Technology Democratic” states that “Contemporary technologies contribute indirectly to diverse social ills, and in particular conspire in subtle ways to significantly hinder participatory democratic decision making” (p. 87). Much has been made of the democratizing effect of IT, and this is in some senses true – but if this is true, the potential for denuding democratization must also be acknowledged to be present within the same media. Decentralization and independent production are touted. Along these same lines of thought, we must also consider the prospect of greater mediation and the potential that what is produced is made less visible and significant due to the sheer volume produced. In this new medium, the fundamental question remains, if change happens in the political mediation, then how does it happen? Historically, debates about our society and culture have often become debates about our media.

Ethical mediations may be defined as a particular variety of cultural assumption that merit specific consideration. The ethical frameworks that users bring to a site are mediated, to some extent, by the site design as well as the culture of that site. These may be discovered in the same manner as cultural assumptions.

Ethics, while having ideals as their basis, focus upon social relationships and policing or otherwise addressing “bad behavior.” The definition of bad behavior, the particular ways of addressing it, and the particular roles different actors are expected to play in addressing it are all features of an ethical framework. Ethics play a role in defining what is considered “out of bounds” and what isn’t. Ethics have not translated literally to address the complexity of new media, or to contextualize its significance in human relationships.

Social networking media introduces ambiguity into the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary, and therefore into ethical distinctions. There is a lack of clarity regarding what the rules really are and who the actors themselves really are. The site serves as an environment for interaction between actors who carry out performances of their identity, but each of these interactions is in a real sense unavoidably manifest through interactions with the site itself. The “physics” of these performances have been
considered elsewhere, but what is noteworthy to the consideration of ethical mediation is the presence of a phenomenon similar to car and driver becoming one.

Car shoppers cannot be expected to perform the complex calculations used by engineers to determine the predicted death rates associated with the latest model car (considering force vectors, strength of materials, etc.). Patients cannot be expected to assess how sincere a doctor is about her Hippocratic oath from a two-minute conversation about tonsils. This is where the credibility of specialists and watchdogs come in. Social networking site chatters cannot be expected to reliably recognize mediation of their ethics. The tools and skills that we have learned can be applied to ethics, along with our expertise.

A proactive approach to design is perhaps more beneficial in the area of ethical mediation, but little has been promulgated regarding this in the literature of social network design. This is not the case in other fields. While one could easily find grievous ethical issues in other fields, progress has been made. Literature supporting the design of televisions to be watched while driving would be quickly rejected by any well-run organization. Training manuals encouraging managers to take advantage of cultural insensitivity would likewise be condemned. These are imperfect analogies, but serve to demonstrate that an awareness of the risks involved in neglecting social responsibility must be taken seriously. Each of these related fields have become, in essence, ethically aware to some extent. How much more should ethics be considered when automated systems are taking a central role in our lives and becoming irreplaceable, and we are forced in to accommodating the very inflexibility of their design?

_A Goal achievement mediation_ is a type of behavioral mediation that has to do with how one knows a goal has been achieved, and how one articulates and pursues that goal, based upon their experience of the site. In a similar vein, walk throughs of the site based upon various goal orientations may be fruitful in identifying the presence of the above mediators, and comparing how strongly they are felt for a user of one goal as compared to another. How goals are influenced, formed and articulated is _goal achievement mediation_. How well the goals are supported is _behavioral mediation_.

All of these types of mediations impact how identity is conveyed and the way change happens on a site. Considering each of these mediators in turn when analyzing a site may help to answer the question “are users and cultures being mediated?” Identifying what types of mediation have the most emphasis is fundamental to any such analysis. If these mediators are considered valid, and if it can be demonstrated that the orientation of them is associated with differing behaviors, then it is logical to conclude that either these features are associated with and attracting certain types of people, or that they are influencing members to become those types of people (or both).

**Revenge Effects – Unintended Consequences**

Overall, cultural mediation is not formed in smoky back rooms by sinister conspirators. The impacts of technology upon culture have been inestimable, but rarely were these impacts the same as what was directly envisioned and intended by the inventors. Futurists could once claim a reasonable chance at predicting the outcomes of the changes wrought by technological advancement. In recent times, however, the scale and synergistic nature of modern technological expansion have made such claims less credible, unless they are confined to highly specific contexts.
Edward Tenner’s classic Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences (1996) applied the term “revenge effects” to the unintended and unpleasant consequences brought about by our clever technology. For example, a lot of technology and good intention went into the creation of modern football helmets. The “revenge effect” of mandating the wearing of these football helmets was that players started using their helmets as weapons, which led to some more serious injuries and rough play (p. 276).

One revenge effect of social networking is the *bemused wasting of time*. The Emperor Nero was said to have fiddled while Rome burned. If Nero were alive today, I suspect he would be fiddling on Facebook. Are we fostering a generation of “Neros” who fiddle with endless illusions online while Rome burns? Though we may feel like we reaching out as we stoop over our keyboard, are we in fact disappearing into our own fantasies?

Another revenge effect is the *absorption of existing reality into this new reality*. In New York and other states, those who are not online now must go to the library (during regular library hours) in order to get their tax forms. Working people who earn minimum wage and who are entitled to tax return checks may not earn enough to afford a car or to the take the take time off for the trip to the library. Increasingly, real institutions are being absorbed into virtual media.

A feature of this is the erosion of real world institutions in favor of online alternatives. One point in case – email is (at the very least) a contributing factor towards the erosion of the post office’s ability to do business as usual. The US Postal Service lost 2.8 billion dollars in 2008 (AssociatedPress, 2009). Books have been written about how email changes the way people communicate. Love letters via email are not the same as love letters written by hand. Scams have been enabled through email in ways that they could not have existed by letter. The economy is being rewired in ways that were not anticipated. News networks are proclaiming that print newspapers are going the way of the dinosaur as The Seattle Post Intelligencer switches to an online only format (Richman and James, 2009).

The emergence of community has benefited heavily from the mobility and freewheeling egalitarian changes in society introduced by technological advances, but this has also produced new hurdles to the formation of identity. I do not agree that niche communities are formed simply by a learned process of disassociation from mainstream culture as some monolithic given – as if culture existed within some package that was barely human or natural. Culture is far more complex and vibrant than that, be it “gay culture” or otherwise.

As the book Amusing Ourselves to Death (Postman, 1985) warned, certain media have a tendency to reduce discourse to entertainment or to give it a “show biz” quality. Priorities in the context of serious discussion may ultimately be remediated into entertainment choices. As relationships go online, they can risk taking on similar characteristics.

Gay bars were never meccas for the self-actualization of gay men, and neither are chat rooms. However, there is much more associated with social networking in all of its forms and implications… as well as much less. It is not beside the point to ask if real relationships are suffering as a result of too much emphasis upon virtual ones. Is there a direct relationship between the increase in virtual friend-time and the decrease in real
friend-time? With unfettered exposure will come increasing alienation, and a tendency towards a ritualistic search for human “products.” We are rushed. We are shopping. We are searching for ‘matches’ that will fulfill our personal idea of who we think we should be.

*Enforced roles* are another unintended consequence. The impersonal nature of commercialized mediums lends itself to further “forcing” of particular roles upon the user. Compare, for example, the experience of Internet use with the placement of a personal ad in the newspaper. Imagine if the person you called to place the newspaper ad demanded that you sit through commercials, wait for them to call you back to validate your phone number, and refused to place the ad without first having you tell them what your income was and the number of people who live in your home along with their ages. Now imagine if this person said that you had to use their form to place your ad, answering the questions they have determined for everyone so as to make searching easier for their advertisers to collect personal information about you… all to serve you better. There is a small section of the form where you could enter whatever you want, but you were required to fill out the rest of it first. Imagine if this ad “auto-renewed” for your convenience every week, although you could cancel at any time – when they were open, after being placed on hold and transferred to their cancellations department in India that was set up to prevent you from canceling… for better customer service. Imagine if you had no choice about the auto-renewal; you were simply informed about it (and many other things) through a rambling 10 minute “lawyer speak” recording which you could choose to simply “agree to” or “disagree to” in total, the latter of which would mean you could not use the service. While newspapers could not get away with this approach, this is the experience of many who sign up to use social networking sites.

The *rewiring of our brains* is also an unintended consequence. Use of the Internet is changing our economy, our relationships, our self-image and the image we have of others, and it is rewiring our brains. (See the Excite article Scientists Ask: Is Technology Rewiring Our Brains (Ritter, 2009) as well as the article UCLA Study Finds That Searching the Internet Increases Brain Function (Champeau, 2008). It is noteworthy that these two articles, relying on the same study, arrive at contrasting conclusions about whether this “brain rewiring” is an advantageous or ominous development.) If society and relationships and people “exist” and “interact” and “work” and “love” and “grieve” and “organize” on the Internet, the question naturally arises – where is that? What is this environment like? What are the rules? What impact does breathing the air there have on us? On our government? On our culture? On our relationships and the way we view and maintain them?

Perhaps the greatest unintended consequence is the development of *new stages of relationship formation and community building* that have arisen. If we look at the stages people go through and the transactions that occur, in pursuing relationships, we see differences at nearly every stage in both content and organization when they happen “on line.” The differences are becoming knit into normal life. There are also new stages of community development and new tactics being tried here. Social intervention, such as in the HIV crisis, has taken on new forms that as yet are not up to the new challenges being offer by the new media. (More will be said on this later.)

In summary, identifying revenge effects is an exercise in cultural criticism, as well as media analysis.
Metaphors, Myths, and Texts – Types of Cultures

Another tool to apply when considering and identifying mediation is to look for metaphors, myths, and texts. Metaphors can be used to illustrate differing modes of community formation, membership, and interaction. Myths imply a shared or common storyline with shared archetypes. Looking for mythologies can help to reveal some of the shared cultural expectations, familiar storylines and frameworks that help to bind a community together. These mediate like cultural assumptions but in a more rich and dynamic fashion. Finally, texts are useful as concrete representations of established methods of encoding and decoding culture or some aspect of it.

One example of a metaphor for community is exclusive clubs vs. citizenship. A site that tends more to the exclusive club metaphor will doubtless have some type of membership agreement. While private clubs are legally allowed to discriminate based upon “exclusive” criteria, this would be viewed as odd in most social contexts. The average bar, for example, would be seen as odd for demanding that you sign a membership agreement. In cyberspace, however, this is the norm. American citizens in cyberspace risk trading their citizenship for membership. The switch from citizens to members is more than semantic. Members don’t have rights; they have responsibilities and fiduciary obligations.

The benefits of membership (at bath houses or gay campgrounds, for example) are fully dependent on the manner in which customers become commodities for other customers. “Prosumer” is the term has been coined. Customers join for other customers. You are not only purchasing, you are being sold. You are being sold to (and on) the other members, but in a framework that you do not own. Gay social networking sites are very much formed along the lines of the prosumer membership metaphor. Are we more of a community because we are consuming each other through this enabling technology, or are we less of a community because of the degree to which we have been made symbolic and commoditized?

The membership metaphor tends to be associated with a “customer service” orientation towards members, while the citizenship metaphor tends to be associated with the language of community. The instrumentality inherent within a customer service relationship is not the same as the befriending attitude and approach supported by citizenship. Citizens discuss issues, while customers tend to “rate” each other in extension of the commoditization of the relationship. An orientation towards collecting friends and increasing the number of page views expresses an attitude of consumerism more than citizenship. “Hot lists” (such as those on gay.com) rarely promote community or the sense of belonging associated with citizenship. They are tools.

Another metaphorical pairing that can provide insight into social networking site design is that of the occult approach vs. openness. In computing in general, openness fosters transparency- open source software, wikis based upon collaborative approaches that encourage peer review, and public discussions about how sites are governed and what their objectives should be are examples. Openness fosters the community’s sense of ownership and participation.

In contrast, occult orders are structured hierarchically, with varying degrees of authority and access to information. Membership agreements here function as “sacred texts” which are handed down from on high, and if one does not accept them they are
simply cast out from the community. The hierarchical structure may be mirrored in the competitive quest of members who are scrambling to acquire new “virtual buddies” and to gain status.

Of course for many computers themselves are seen as occult, which is supported by the early terminology employed, such as “daemons” for services and “icons” for graphical interface elements. These machines are everything and nothing, but above all they have been transformative in manifesting of our potential and vice. Symbolic mental mobility and interaction have created, in truth, a new reality. In this new reality, access is granted by the arcane and hidden knowledge of the IT gatekeepers. The open, collaborative sharing of knowledge diminishes the power and control of the keepers of IT secrets and makes them subject to scrutiny that they may not appreciate.

The metaphor of an interface is not necessarily the same as the metaphor of a space. Interfaces grant compartmentalized access to devices and services, like windows or controls. Spaces are neutral backgrounds where users do as they wish. The exposed characteristics and instrumentality is a feature of the space. An interface itself is a kind of metaphor for what the designer thinks about the creation as well as its users. Metaphors are applied to the design of the interface to facilitate usability by mapping it to the known. Interfaces as metaphors for extension can also cause a type of amputation (Gordon, 1997, p. 56). Interfaces obscure as they reveal.

The media and customs it chooses to validate define a culture. Social networking media has been contextualized by many leaders as following the mythological pattern of stealing fire from heaven. These bold new innovators have seen their efforts as bringing gifts to humanity that they would not have otherwise had. From hackers to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, their clever code trickery steals from the gods. Like the Hindu monkey god Hanuman and the Native American trickster Coyote, these “gods” have flouted the stuffy constraints of the old order in bringing about their changes.

Those who instead see these leaders as opening Pandora’s box are largely dismissed as Luddites or stuck in the past. It may be apt to consider the ways in which the new found freedom provided by social networking media may let us soar too far above physical reality, risking groundlessness and detachment in a manner akin to Icarus.

The optimistic mythology of social networking contends that this new technological capacity heralds the onset of communal utopia. “Utopia” is an interestingly paradoxical word coined by Sir Thomas More. More intentionally omitted the first vowel from the Greek root word. Eutopos would mean “good place”, but outopos would means “no place” (Hollis III, 1998, p. 253). Someplace (as in a bathroom or a bar) is a real place. The “no place” of the Internet could be viewed either as a sheerly mythological space or as the land of ideals realized. Is it entering a good place or is it entering nowhere? In a similar vein, the space may be viewed as entirely new and manufactured or as an extension of the historical and organic. Both views are valid if incomplete, despite the fact that they appear to be unable to coexist.

The overarching mythology of New Media presented through television and newspapers, though largely contradictory, has focused upon the ways in which new media empowers us and fosters democracy. A few alarm bells have of course been sounded about sexual perversion, “viruses”, hackers, scams, and copyright protections. This mythology tells us that everything has changed, and that nothing has changed. It tells us that privacy is dead, but that now ultimate, anonymous privacy is possible. It tells
us that opportunities for socializing are expanding dramatically, even as social skills and common courtesy are fading. All the knowledge in the world is at our fingertips, as the libraries are closing down. We have unprecedented access to media, as it is hobbled by copy protection along with dire warnings from the FBI.

While metaphor and mythology are not commonly used to refer to media themselves, text certainly is. The paradigm of the Internet as a collection of texts and databases is woefully inadequate given the nature of the medium. Texts are static embodiments of encoding efforts that are, at some point, designed to be decoded. Analysis of these fragments can reveal something of the encoding process itself. Interactive digital media encodes and decodes our texts using an interactive grammar of usage, based upon clicks and keystrokes. There is a flow to this grammar that can reveal the presence of cues and mediations. That grammar’s impact upon user’s texts aside for now, no analysis of site culture could be complete without looking at the actual texts themselves.

What users actually say (by voice, by keystroke, or by some visual representation) serves as a fundamental means of interaction with other users and the culture of a site. The dynamics of their interactions have a grammatical element as well as an interpretive and a performative element. Without getting into these at this point, we can ask a number of questions about the encoding efforts and decoding efforts themselves, and what they reveal.

One could justifiably ask, when observing the stilted and chaotic text in many chat rooms, “do these communications constitute or reveal anything about an actual culture?” Perhaps these communications are marginally social at best, and lack real interchange of substance. Perhaps these texts are composed primarily of instrumental ploys, wish fulfillments, status seeking, attempts to relieve boredom, imaginative fancies, or emotional purges. Perhaps most of the chat room is filled up with “non-regulars” who stop in, spend some time, and then leave to be replaced by new strangers.

Clearly chat rooms like the above are not culture as we have known it. However, they are cultures. Chat room texts do reveal a “set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices” as well as “customary beliefs, social forms… of a social group… [and].. characteristic features shared by people in a time and place” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 2007). Culture is not all about Mozart and good manners. Culture is a commonality that can exist in a basic sense in any social setting.

If we view texts, be they chat room discussions or profiles, as attempts to encode and decode identity, goals, and culture than we have a starting point to approach their analysis. Look for the social forms, the shared practices, and the shared attitudes revealed by the text. Consider that these reflect the author’s views of the culture as well as themselves and their goals. The types of texts composed are directly affected by the texts composed by others. Each text is expected to be decoded in a particular way.

**Media Analysis – Media Ecology and Distributed Network Analysis**

Up to this point, I have tried to present ways of identifying and considering mediation in specific terms related to social networking sites as new media. Since this is not essentially a book about media criticism but a book about the impacts of a form of new media that utilizes IT knowledge in conjunction with media criticism to identify impacts upon a particular community, I have gone from the specific to the general in this
chapter. In providing a final glimpse at the general, let us briefly consider two emergent media theories: media analysis school of media ecology and mediated discourse theory as it is applied to networks.

*Media ecology* theory is an emerging field that suffers from its breadth as certainly as it benefits from it. According to the Media Ecology Association’s Lance Strate (1999), media ecology can be defined as follows:

- It is the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs.
- Media ecology is the Toronto School, and the New York School. It is technological determinism, hard and soft, and technological evolution. It is media logic, medium theory, mediology.
- It is McLuhan Studies, orality–literacy studies, American cultural studies. It is grammar and rhetoric, semiotics and systems theory, the history and the philosophy of technology.
- It is the postindustrial and the postmodern, and the preliterate and prehistoric.

(An Overview of Media Ecology)

The key words to focus on in this rather poetic definition are environments, modes, and codes. What distinguishes media ecology from other approaches is the emphasis upon the contextual environment.

Applying the context of media ecology, we see that mediation is not necessarily centered and isolated in specific agencies, but it is an embodied phenomenon. The search for mediation and meditative effects is a search for understanding of a greater array of interrelationships. A site is not mediated simply by its classifications as listed above, but by its relationships with the greater environment.

*Mediated discourse theory applied to network culture* will be discussed in future chapters and can be used to analyze components when considered as loci within actor networks. One source used from this theory is a class taught by Paul Mcilvenny (2005) at Aalborg University in Denmark, 2005. Despite his rather “wacky” profile at his private server, the foresight, synthesis, and quality of his work in this area is quite impressive.¹

The application of mediated discourse theory to networks is especially pertinent when analyzing mediations that occur between communication network media, the greater culture, and individuals. While these mediations are manufactured, they do not simply appear out of thin air or spring full from the head of Zeus. Neither are they simply the machinations of a lone developer somehow above his or her environment.

The theory embraces the Michael Foucault (1980) concept that “In fact, it is one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (p. 60). In the field of mediated discourse, the discourse itself cycles through social actions that work their

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¹ A list of his publications can be found here: [http://vbn.aau.dk/research/(3411)/publications?language=sec](http://vbn.aau.dk/research/(3411)/publications?language=sec). Specific course notes can be found here: [http://paul-server.hum.aau.dk/discourse05](http://paul-server.hum.aau.dk/discourse05).
way into practices, objects, and environments; these environments then interact with the discourse, repeating the cycle (Mcilvenny, 2005).

Actor-network analysis is productive and revealing in the context of social networking. Given the transactional nature of embodiment online, and the synthetic nature of social networking sites with culture and media, the question of agency and identity needs to be approached from an integrative paradigm that neither repudiates materiality nor engages in simple reductionism to it. While the details of this school of thought are beyond the scope of this work, it will be borrowed from and credited. While this theory is not directly diagnostic or prescriptive, an understanding of it will certainly serve to place the question of mediation within a broader yet grounded context.

**Concluding Notes About Methodology**

The question finally arises, by what practice do we determine the types and degrees of mediation influencing individuals and cultures in social networking sites? The details have already been given, at least in basic terms as they apply to a site-wide analysis. The key elements to look at are: historical changes, basic site types, mediation types, revenge effects, metaphors, myths and texts, and analysis of the media ecology and mediated discourse analysis in networks variety. All need not be applied in every case.

Scales of hybridity exist in each of these classifications and they are simply tools to be used as starting points for analysis. Other categories can be added, as needed, using a similar framework – such as open source vs. closed source. I have tried to include what I see as root distinctions of significance that apply in most cases and that will not become moot in the near future.

In essence these classifications largely touch upon questions of ownership, transparency, and design choices that reflect and/or shape cultural and individual communications. Site structure supports certain behaviors and does not others. Site structure embodies certain cultural assumptions and enables certain forms of identity embodiment.

Along with these factors (ownership, transparency, design decisions, behavior support, cultural assumptions, and identity embodiment), a few other key elements have been emphasized. Roles are not the least among these. While it has already been noted that a user may be a “Prosumer” or a “Consumed-er”, what has not been as fully considered by the general media is if a user is a citizen, a customer, or a member.

Understanding how and if change happens, and to what extent the users may initiate this, is key to understanding the hidden power structures that mediate at a higher level. How changes happened in other (old media) cultures was different. Identifying mediation is a matter of understanding the media itself, the environment in which it exists, and the drivers that intentionally and inadvertently shape the design. In the next chapter, we will consider individual components and actor-network theory, as these components are not merely landscape artifices but the structure of communication itself in social networking sites.
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Chapter 3
Common Elements of Gay Social Networking Websites
Chapter 3.
Common Elements of Gay Social Networking Websites

Thus far I have considered the question of mediation broadly in terms of new media, “sites” and paradigms. I have proposed a typology for categorizing over-all design and layout, with associated cultural assumptions about users and their goals inherent in each. While design choices are not made outside of circumstantial constraints and influences, they are necessarily an effort to embody the goals of designers. This media environment’s mediation is not limited to the creation of structural possibilities for user connections or the lack thereof.

The selection and prominence of certain features, as well as how they are integrated into the site, factor into typographic categorization. These elements themselves merit a more complete look. In this chapter we will consider the specific constituents present in particular websites. Website components are the exposed interfaces that enable activities, present content, and ultimately merge into the form of a particular locale on the Internet. Each social networking site creates a space for a type of culture, and components are the basic building block of this space as certainly as users are.

The basic concepts of performative identity presented by Goffman (1959) tell us that while artists may seek to create an art gallery, the very presence of the art gallery modifies the types of performances that occur there. Furthermore, the size of the gallery and the types of the displays ultimately impact the conversations that occur there since they affect the culture of the place. This can be extended to virtual and symbolic social spaces that are manufactured networks.

Traditional Network Analysis – Links Between People

Traditional social networking analysis, per Stanly Milgram, involves analyzing the network of associates as a whole. This type of analysis focuses on individuals as “nodes” and the ways they connect. Patterns of clustering, and strong and weak ties may be graphed so as to reveal degrees of separation and the centrality of power as well as other insights. “If we consider address books from email agents, bookmarks to home pages from web browsers, contact lists from communicators, etc. as a kind of links between people, then we obtain a complicated network” (Kazienko and Musial, 2005, p. 2). The full network view includes all members and possible connections.

The snowball method of analysis defines the nodes (actors), identifies their connections, and then does the same for each of these actor’s connections. The procedure is repeated outward from this central point iteratively, like building up a bigger and bigger snowball. An ego-only analysis may be focused upon just the first-level connections of an individual, viewed as a node, to reveal possibilities and constraints for that individual’s sub-network (Kazienko and Musial, 2005).

Taking an approach similar to “traffic analysis” and viewing the network itself as the active engagement of nodes, a structure is mapped. We may group nodes by structural attributes that they possess in common to arrive at an understanding of classes and categories of actors as groups. In this case a social role may be defined by its structural position and relationship to other nodes. Structural equivalents have the same relationship to all other nodes. Automorphic equivalents are embedded the same way in
the larger structure, but may not be tied to the same other nodes. Regular equivalence is like automorphic equivalence but may involve a different number of actors – for example, a mother may have three children or one child, but in either case the relationship to the child is that of a mother (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005).

In terms of social networking websites, ego networks and the analysis of centrality of power are employed by many analysts. The resultant set of data provides useful information about sub-networks within the larger network, and relationship patterns that group nodes together. Such analysis is largely structural, although the groupings focused upon are simply a matter of choice, as is the decision to end to the analysis beyond a certain scope or range.

**Actor-Network Theory – components are people too**

In this chapter I will consider the specific component elements that are common features of social networking websites. As sites support particular behaviors, so do components. Design decisions implement the culture of the site through the site’s components. In a programming context, components strictly refer to reusable bits of code that function like “black boxes” that exhibit particular behaviors and attributes (Kafura, 1996). In terms of object-oriented or component programming, these components possess behaviors (actions and functions they perform) and attributes (data states). These are meaningful in relation to the other components and the users. In performance support systems terminology, behaviors and attributes are also present in varying degrees (Gery, 2000). In this chapter, I am simply referring to components as interface elements.

While users are the intentional actors in website systems, components could also be viewed as actors. These actors may have a role in engendering a context of community that benefits the users. Actor network theory (abbreviated ANT), is a ‘material-semiotic’ method. By this, I mean that in ANT things and concepts form into a coherent whole (even if the whole is not intrinsically inherent). In ANT, users and the external elements of the network have a synergistic relationship that is not limited to people. ANT does acknowledge that these agencies are actors. Ant further expects that a network that does not serve its goal will fail. If people do not use this network, which is constantly reshaped through use, it will dissolve. For example, if no one goes to chat.com, then chat.com shuts down (Latour, 2005).

However, ANT does not account for the hardening influences of outside agencies in a technological environment. In reality, some networks exist because they serve other goals and are well positioned while only marginally serving the goals of the majority of the actors (perhaps as a peripheral side effect or consequence). In many cases, the creator declares a network a whole themselves, not the users. Individual components and attributes may not be in line at all with user needs, even if the whole in some way serves it. In strict ANT terms, any analysis could never be confined to what is discussed here, but the concepts may serve as an important jumping off point for re-conceptualizing the debate over where users fit in new media (Couldry, 2004).

**Component Maps**

When designing a website by recommended usability criteria, one of the first design steps is to create a rough “site map” of the layout – showing the connections
between components and the links on each page to other areas. In normal heuristic usability analysis that might follow this structural analysis, mockups might then be employed to further usability testing, focusing upon "use cases" and users. Component maps, as I am proposing them, are similar except that they focus upon components and component linkages rather than pages or page links.

The design and the components used by social networking websites facilitate certain communication behaviors and discourage others. The net results of these design decisions are changes in communication behavior that ultimately impact communication content. Certain goals are facilitated and other goals are not supported. These supported behaviors and topics encapsulate assumptions about the user and the community, as well as how they should relate and what defines the users themselves as a community. The real estate changes with clicks, but what has the most favored real estate for the fewest clicks? What is this, in turn then, associated with in terms of the site design?

The below process need not be slavishly followed. Utilize what is relevant.

1. Identify components on each webpage

To begin, conceptually divide up areas of the display on a piece of paper (or less conveniently on a computer simulated paper) into quadrants. Identify the components on each page and draw a shape representing them in the appropriate quadrant(s) of the grid. At this point a high-level analysis is all that is needed, so if there are a group of links in a section for example, simply treat them as once component and label it news links, for example. Depending upon how the site is laid out and how much content is squeezed in, something like the below would normally suffice to reveal relationships and favored locations:

| TL(1:1) | TC(1:2) | TR(1:3) |
| 2L(2:1) | 2C(2:2) | 2R(2:3) |
| 3L(3:1) | 3C(3:2) | 3R(3:3) |
| BL(4:1) | BC(4:2) | BR(4:3) |

2. Determine the prominence each individual representative component.

The prominence is indicated by the location of the component on the screen and the size of the component. Prominence as an attribute is also enhanced by attention-attracting behavior by the component or appealing design. A component that is linked to in several locations on the same page (or other pages) also has enhanced prominence. Prominence is indicated in step one, although you may wish to collect the list of locations where a component appears on the same page next to the main presentation of that component. Again, this is meant to be representative so if a group of links is used as above, each individual link to "news" for example need not be addressed separately.

3. Identify linkages between components and persistence of availability of each representative component.

Identify linkages between components (on the same or other pages). This will require steps one and two to be completed for the entire site. There is generally an implied workflow or navigation or path that the user is expected to take. Look for the cues, prompts, and associations that guide users.
Persistence is indicated by the accessibility of the component on multiple pages. To identify persistence, add together each location or corresponding component where this component may be accessed, and make a note of it next to the component. In the case of an instant messenger that “floats” in its own window, for example, the persistence may be 100%. Obviously discovering persistence can be time consuming, and if time is a factor only relevant or significant linkages need be indicated.

4. Categorize each component

Make an educated guess regarding the value (purpose) to users of each component, and briefly note it textually along side the component. If this is a particularly strong or weak value, this may optionally be noted at this point. The most used, prominent and persistent, or most marketed components might have the strongest value attached to them. Additionally, the components that are the most time-consuming to setup and use might be thought to have the particular appeal to users. It may help to identify which components would be most likely to bring users back to the site after their first visit, or which components are most “goal achieving.” If the site is a SNgS site then these will likely include profiles, chat rooms, and instant messages (described below as utilities and self-descriptors).

Categorize each component as belonging to one of the groups listed below (examples will be shown later):

**Navigation**

For our purposes, navigation is treated as a single component among other components (which may or may not persist in its consistency and presentation throughout the site). We are not attempting to analyze the navigational interface itself so much as the functional relationship of the components themselves. We’ll limit analysis of this component to a concise textual description of navigation as a whole.

**Forms**

Forms are an effort to standardize information so that it may be searched and categorized; the assumption of a form is that there is an answer to the question and that the question is framed in a relevant manner to the purpose of the members. Forms may be analyzed in terms of what information they capture, how they contextualize this information, what text they present, how it is presented, the sequence they follow, and what they do and do not permit.

**Self-presentations**

Self-presentations are an effort to project or embody a representation (or image) of one’s self for the consumption of others. Analysis may consist of what is possible to be presented or hidden, as well as what is most emphasized, useful, and attractive.

**Utilities**

Utilities are features of the website that offer services or perform some processing for the end user. These includes services offered “behind the scenes” such as matching technologies. While utilities often present forms of some sort, the function performed by them is not primarily navigation or data entry for storage. Utilities “do something” with the information for the user, like pushing it to the displays of multiple other users. Analysis of utilities may consist of what the utility is designed to accomplish, and how well it does so.

**Affiliations**
Affiliations are associations between members – common interests or characteristics that are somehow indicated structurally. Analysis may include the customizability of groupings, and the usefulness of groupings.

**Indicators**

Indicators are signals, cues, and signifiers. In many cases, indicators take the place of body language, environmental context, or extra-verbal communications in real life encounters. If there is an equivalent in other modes of communication, it may be identified and contrasted.

**Content**

Content refers to any media or “stuff” that can be consumed. While users may present content through utilities, in this section I am primarily focused upon content directly offered by the site provider. Who chooses the content and what themes pervade it may be analyzed.

**Marketing**

Marketing refers to any messages or attempts to make money, including those that present the culture and goals of the site. If any cultural assumptions exist in the marketing, they may be analyzed.

5. **Consider the categories - is the emphasis upon a particular category? How are these organized in relation to each other?**

What organization does the site create, and what segment is emphasized? At this point think in generic terms about the categories or types of components. For example, is the SNgS more self-presentation or utility oriented? Look at the associations between these components. What is considered window dressing and what is considered important? How long could the average user reasonably be expected to spend in each “loop” and where is the incentive? Is it goal oriented or entertainment oriented?

If all individual links for content components are in a tiny area or one section of the screen, make a note of it. If the links for content are interspersed with utilities and scattered throughout the page, make a note of that. Such design decisions may be intended for clean navigation and clarity, or they may be intended for segmentation based upon presumed user types and goals.

6. **Fill in the details for each component**

For utilities and self-presentations, fill in the following where relevant:

1. The component and its category (example: utility – chat)
2. The type (example: text chat)
3. The prominence (grid areas occupied and any modifiers such as “flashing”)
4. The characteristics of the component (example – password protected)
5. Links to other areas and components (and blockages if there are any)
6. Persistence of the component (number of pages and components it is accessible from)
7. Specific questions related to the component

For other categories of components, generally identifying the component and its type along with the answers to relevant questions will be sufficient. After this is completed, evaluate the following-
1. What components get the best “real estate?”
2. What components have the most linkages and blockages?
3. What components likely get the greatest usage/most users?
4. What components likely have the greatest number of user motives and the strongest motives?
5. What components likely convey site operator motives clearly to most users?
6. What components have the most linkages to advertising?
7. What components have the strongest activation of surrounding components?

Below are several example component details minus any site-specific information.

**Common Components: Navigation**

When analyzing navigation as a whole, note what the links are, how they are organized, and where they are located. Identify categorization, convenience, and prominence. Note if the navigation is consistent from each point or if it changes from page to page. Summarize in a brief textual description.

**Common Components: Forms**

Below are some examples of common forms. Note the location and size of each form, as well as how to get there and where it leads. Is the form passive and simply textual or active and attractive? What other components are associated with it or is it linked to? Forms may be analyzed in terms of what information they capture, how they contextualize this information, what text they present, how it is presented, the sequence they follow, and what they do and do not permit.

**Join/Sign Up Form**

When you sign up for or join a social networking site, there is a web form. Even if the site is not a membership site, there will be some form that allows you to enter personally identifying information so you can interact with the community. How you get to use the site is often forgotten after you sign up, but this is part of the equations. If fees are charged, these are often at the end of the signup process. Marketing efforts focus heavily upon signup forms and procedures in an effort to entice users to enter credit card numbers.

New media considerations: The convention has been established that users are expected to “sign up.”
Types
1. Requires you to fill out a complete profile or just a partial profile.
2. May be free or require you to pay.

Characteristics
The clarity and accessibility of the agreement and the visibility of all of the steps involved as well as what is agreed to.

Links/Blocks
Passing through this form is required to activate membership and normally to use the site. Normally links to agreement.

Questions
1. What does the form try to sell users on? What does it say about the site?
2. How does one find and go back to this form if they want to read it later? How does one know if it changes and what changed?
3. In the signup process, does the requirement get more complex than it is at first presented? Is the initial investment and promise somehow modified with “up selling” at the end?

Agreement, Terms of Service
Usage or membership agreements, often called terms of service, are nearly universal. In part these are an effort to avoid potential liabilities on the part of the site operator(s). These agreements are usually verbose legalese text tacked on to the signup process that inhabit “scroll boxes.” Terms of service are not normally designed to be carefully reflected upon or actually read. Statements within the terms indicating that they may be changed at any time reinforce the idea that they are to be ignored. When analyzing the components of any site, a starting point should be the terms of service statement.

Types
Legalese in scroll box, or understandable

Characteristics
Do they have a way to contact them about this agreement on the page?
Do they acknowledge any responsibility on their part?
How do you know if these change? How do you get back here?

Links/Blocks
Passing through this form is required to activate membership and normally to use the site.

Questions
1. What rights does a user have?
2. What responsibilities does a user have?
3. What rights does the site have?
4. What responsibilities does the site have?

Complaining and Feedback
Mechanisms to report abuse indicate that the site wants users to be able to feel protected to some extent. How reliable these are sends a message, and how quickly they work. If users have no appeal from anonymous unfounded complaints against them, then users know they need to avoid offending others at all costs and to never be controversial. In some cases the only option may be to go outside of the feedback systems provided by these websites (Wainewright, 2009).
Types | Form or email?
---|---
Characteristics | How easy is it to get to? How time consuming to use?
| How much do they let you use your own words?
| Do you know what to expect will happen as a result?

Links/Blocks | May link to a FAQ
| May link to customer service number
| May prevent you from complaining before filling out certain forms
| May be a way of the operator avoiding customer feedback (circular file – use the complaint form).

Questions | 1. Can users get others kicked out just because they are somehow offended?
| 2. Is your feedback accurately recorded and understood or classified as they see fit to dismiss you?
| 3. Are multiple complaints linked or do you have to “start over” every time?
| 4. Is the response an effort to explain, to get rid of you, or to help?

**Common Components: Content**

Note the location and size of each content component, as well as how to get there and where it leads. Is the content passive and simply textual or active and attractive? What other components are associated with it or is it linked to? Who chooses the content and what themes pervade it may be analyzed.

**Entertainment Features**

Real time and otherwise, entertainment features include games and celebrity gossip or movie reviews. Media lends itself well to entertainment features, particularly about other media. A site can be made more fun and entertaining through these. The presence of these means it is expected that you might want to have fun there, and if there are games that can be multiplayer this can be a social bonding activity.

Types | Stories, commentaries, videos, jokes, games, etc.
---|---
Characteristics | Interactive or non-interactive
Links/Blocks | May link to response utilities or other content
Questions | 1. Who decides what entertainment is available?
| 2. Is there a pattern to it?
| 3. Does it inform as well as entertain?
| 4. Are serious issues given serious treatment?

**News Articles & XML Feeds (Syndication)**

New stories or updates on blogs may be context that is offers and even syndicated through xml. These might or might not allow comment, which indicates something of the intention. If no comments are allowed, then the effort is to control presentation and manage impressions as well as to communicate the actual content. Users may syndicate themselves.
Types | 1. Current events and issues  
2. Entertainment related  
2. Community specific  

Characteristics | Informing and involving or preaching? Discussion or is it commentary?  

Links/Blocks | May link to response utilities or other content  
Link to related content?  
Link to sources?  
Link to further research?  
Links to activism?  

Questions | 1. Written by the site or aggregated from other sources?  
2. How credible is it and how do you know?  
3. Is the goal to inform or to incite?  

**Common Components: Marketing**

Note the location and size of each marketing component, as well as how to get there and where it leads. Is the content passive and simply textual or active and attractive? What other components are associated with it or is it linked to? If any cultural assumptions exist in the marketing, they may be analyzed.

**Marketing: Shopping**

Most sites want you to shop through them. There are various ploys but the bottom line is if you buy through them they get more money. Many sites will tell you that shopping through them supports “your community” and the site.

Types | 1. Passive content or active content  
2. Ignorable or non-ignorable  

Characteristics | How much space does it take up?  
Is it “adult oriented?”  

Links/Blocks | Do you need to “pass through” the ad?  
Where does it take you?  

Questions | 1. Is the ad related to the site? If so, how?  
2. Where else would you expect to see such an ad?  

**Marketing: Up-selling Pitches**

Up-selling pitches are how they get you to upgrade. Messages and tactics are both included here. Any effort to get you to upgrade belongs in this category. All tiered sites have these.

Types | 1. As that “arrest” you when trying to do something  
2. General ads as others  

Characteristics | Are they full page or compartmentalized? What happens if you refuse?  

Links/Blocks | Are you blocked by this? Where does it take you?  

Questions | 1. Was it clear when you signed up how you were limited?  
2. Why do you think the site placed this ad here?
Common Components: Self-Presentations

Note the location and size of each self-presentation component, as well as how to get there and where it leads. Is the content passive and simply textual or active and attractive? What other components are associated with it or is it linked to? Analysis may consist of what is possible to presented or hidden, as well as what is most emphasized, useful, and attractive.

Profiles

Profiles are “the personal information you provided during registration” (Gartner, n.d.). By personal information Gartner means information about you as an individual. In this context, beyond the information the site uses, all that should be needed is a name that people online can identify you by as an individual. However, this is not the way most sites are designed to operate. Along with the company’s profile of the user, there is a public (at least to some other users) profile as well. Emphasis upon this public profile is normally what we see in the signup process. The more detail you provide the public about yourself, the more complete your profile is considered. This personal information often gets added to and reworked after registration.

The basic reason for having a public profile is to have a name. Beyond this, why have a profile at all? If there is something you want to say about yourself, you can just say it to whomever you wish when you want. When more information than this is provided, the motives for doing so reduce down to either impression management or being able to found. Normally, if you want to be found, it is not by someone you already know since they can identify you by very basic information or you can simply provide them with your name. You don’t need a detailed profile to chat with people you know. According to Leary & Kowalski (1990), impression management is simply the attempt to control others’ perceptions. (For more on impression management, see also Becker (2005)).

New media considerations: danah boyd pointed out some ways that online communications are fundamentally different from real life communications. In her thesis Faceted Identity (2002), she referred to the ways in which users are able to communicate contextual information and personally identifying significations – such as through fashion – in real life that are not present or are not the same online. To an extent, the profile is like your clothing. The difference here is that anonymous profiles are like wearing a giant question mark without anything visible inside. The degree of anonymity chosen by users says something about the users view of the site and their motives. Perhaps they do not want to be identified, or perhaps they are afraid of other users knowing who they are.

In real life, public behaviors and signals can act as transient cues and indicators that will be recognized by certain individuals and not others. On line, one has a different relationship to public performances and private communications. Digital communications leave permanent records that can be taken out of context and therefore the nuance to them gets lost. All of our identities are faceted – consider the behavior of adults around children, such as a Mother saying “Not in front of the children, dear!” Few of us would want our employers to stumble across records of a casual conversation at a bar, particularly absent of situational, interpersonal, and space-based cues that contextualize the conversation in time and space. Online communications and online profiles, by their very digital nature, risk collapsing contextual information and making it
difficult for us to maintain properly segmented lives. Most teenagers are glad Grandma does not use Facebook. The danger of collapsed contexts is that users will resort to homogenous self-censorship that limits content to what is acceptable in all contexts (boyd, 2002). The nature of embodiment in the real world, and of space in the real world, is quite different from the nature of embodiment online.

While it can sometimes be difficult to tell if someone is male or female in real life, and his or her name might not help, this is the exception and not the norm. The absence of the information can actually produce a degree of discomfort even in non-sexualized situations. People often want you to know what gender they are, and studies have proven that the way men and women talk to each other is significantly different. Most adolescent males would be deeply offended to be mistaken for females, even in casual passing. Males often are eager to perform in ways that easily identify them as male through mimicking genderized stereotypical character that are culled from the media – for example, engaging in presentations of superiority, making assertions of maturity, and acting like knights in shining armor (Leaning, 1998). This genderized behavior can be tied up with status among peer groups of both genders, and ambiguity about gender can introduce ambiguity about status and open people up (males especially) to ridicule.

| Types          | 1. Simple form  
|                | 2. Tabbed       |
| Characters     | Personality-oriented, commonality-oriented, or hook-up oriented? |
| Links/Blocks   | What links to profiles? What can be blocked by profiles? |
| Questions      | 1. What information is required for the site to collect?  
|                | 2. What information is required for the user to display?  
|                | 3. How fine grain is the degree of control the user has over this display?  
|                | 4. Can the user group information? If so how?  
|                | 5. Is the profile designed primarily for searchability with static categories and answers, or for user-directed self-representation?  
|                | 6. where is free text and where is select?  
|                | 7. Is honesty somehow enforced? Is it expected? |

Type 1-
One approach to faceting this identity is to use “tabs”, and to make these tabs available on a selective basis. Most sites don’t do this. There may be a tab for “general” profile information, a tab for professional information, and a tab for “adult” information (sexual). Naturally having these tabs and making it clear that you are not unlocking them itself sends a signal, so they probably should simply show up as “blank” until the owner decides to unlock them without indicating that they are locked. Most sites with profile tabs don’t do this. This changes the nature of affiliation online in that the chosen private areas of one’s identity become public assertions of privacy.

Regardless of user faceting, all of the entered information can still be recorded and aggregated by the site – faceting is really just for end users. All of the information is still collected and those who have the means to aggregate it still can. This presents a compelling argument for anonymity if one is truly concerned by this aggregation or
collection. Trust takes on different forms online, and not all users are conscious of the trust they are investing such sites with.

Type 2-

Most profiles are just forms. Some allow pictures to be unlocked and locked individually (gay.com), but the fact that they exits and are locked is public. Users can request this missing information. The fields on these forms are selected because the operators believe they are relevant to the users goals there or because they want the information themselves. In short, the form reflects a cultural assumption.

Characteristic 1-

Some profiles allow you to screen what is available based upon affiliations or memberships in networks, as in Facebook. Some profiles try to force you to enter accurate information. Some systems allow users to “rate” other users. The type of profile employed says quite a bit about the type of site that is being analyzed and the culture the designers are supporting.

Link 1-

In addition, the search mechanisms for profiles indicate what expectations the designers have for users and their motives. A high degree of searchability is associated with SNSg sites more than SNS sites. User directories and search mechanisms cater more to either SNS or SNSg paradigms.

Link 2-

Personal pages, which will be covered later, are similar to profiles but are not the same thing. Personal pages are geared more towards self-expression than to direct proxies for an individual. They are more like your house or your business card or artwork than they are like “you.” The type of profile is a good next step in analysis after looking at terms of service.

**Personal Pages**

Personal pages create a custom space that may function like a type of profile. Some personal pages allow and encourage the creation of a communication center, with linkages to external information, emails, IM screen names, etc. Some ban this. Personal pages may also function like a business card or representative of a family or business. The more static nature of these lends itself to more deliberate presentation for presentation’s sake, and may become competitive. To “exist” on some sites you must have a personal page.

| Types                               | 1. Profile like  
|                                     | 2. Business card like  
|                                     | 3. Home base like  
|                                     | 4. Expressing myself like  
|                                     | 5. keeping in touch and staying in the loop like  
| Characteristics                     | How customizable are they? What do they allow and not allow?  
| Links/Blocks                        | Is access to the profile blocked in some way? Does it lead to other profiles or groups?  
| Questions                           |  

Pictures

While pictures may be considered part of the profile, they merit specific consideration. A picture may be an abstract representation of some message or personal characteristic, but this is not what they are normally used for on networking sites. Pictures are often “supposed to” be of you. A picture is not like a portrait that you hang on the wall – it’s a photo like you would put in your vacation album or year book.

New media considerations: Where there are headless bodies and obscured faces, chances are the user is viewing the site as a hook up venue. Words like discreet and empty description information are often associated. These people want to be found, but not to be identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>1. Profile picture</th>
<th>2. Albums</th>
<th>3. Selectively shared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Are they static?</td>
<td>Do they have dates and captions?</td>
<td>Are they generally real or generally not photo-realistic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Often membership is a requirement. If selective sharing is utilized, this may also present a blockage.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>1. Is there a pattern present to the type of photos presented?</td>
<td>2. Are photos prominent in a favored spot? Are ads near by?</td>
<td>3. Do the photos tend to communicate what the user wishes to attract and if so what?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type 1-

Public application of a photo to your profile pretty much removes the wiggle room and deniability. If you see someone in passing, you might not be sure who they are. If you see a photo in passing on the Internet, you can go back to the page and stare at the picture as long as you like to be certain. The photo might be fake or retouched, but there it is. Some people deliberately obscure themselves in various ways to keep deniability.

Type 2&3-

Some sites allow you to selectively hide and reveal particular photos or all photos. Gay.com allows you to unlock private photos one at a time for particular individuals. Other sites allow you to password protect photos or to grant access to network members but not non-members.

User Motives-

Pictures help to reassure people that even if you are lying it is obvious now that you are trying to misrepresent yourself and you can’t claim it was a simple misunderstanding. Posting an out of date picture might be something you are granted a little wiggle room with, but posting a male picture when you are a female means you are just faking it (virtual cross-dressing). Posting a photo of a weight lifter when you are a 98 pound weakling means you are either out to engage in fantasy and/or cybersex, or you are being dishonest. Identifying fantasists from realists can be challenging although one
may believe they are good at it. The context matters, for example if you are going to
meet or if you are getting together virtually to play a role playing game. Asking someone
“is that really you?” is a hook-up question in most cases.

Privacy Settings and Options
The settings available here are actually self-presentation features, not just settings.
The degree and how fine-grained as well as easily managed privacy is says a lot about a
site. A site with lots of privacy options may not necessarily be a “hook up” site, but a site
that wants you to feel free to provide a lot of information without sharing it with the
world. A site with no privacy settings is likely a content-driven rather than personality-
driven site. The greater the degree of privacy offered, the more likely the operator
expects you to make the site an embodiment. The absence of this does not indicate the
opposite however – they might just outsourcing to be bad programmers.

New media considerations: “A 2005 survey survey found that one out of four
employers has rejected applicants based on research via search engines” (Melber 2008).
Privacy might have been considered a fringe issue before the widespread adoption of the
Internet, but privacy can no longer be treated as such. I challenge anyone over 40 to stop
and consider what blog entry they would have made about current events when they were
sixteen and what their employer would think of discovering it today. Most users do not
yet fully appreciate the “staying power” of their communications among their peer groups
online. Most sites do not provide much education to these users, or many options for
those who are aware.

| Types                      | 1. Site defined settings (frozen in ANT theory)  
|                           | 2. Component specific settings (defined at the component)  
|                           | 3. Profile associated settings (controlled by profile affiliations & settings)  |
| Characteristics           | Prominence and accessibility, degree of control, mechanism of selection |
| Links/Blocks              | Often these settings are directly connected to individual components, but they may be linked at the profile level. Transparency and affordances do not always map well suggesting these settings are often viewed as “advanced” features. Rarely marketing settings are also here, although conceptually they fit. |
| Questions                 | 1. What is the actual mechanism and criteria used?  
|                           | 2. Do these settings implement any stated site policy?  
|                           | 3. What are these settings practically useful for? |

Common Components: Utilities
Note the location and size of each utility component, as well as how to get there and
where it leads. Is the content passive and simply textual or active and attractive?
What other components are associated with it or is it linked to? Analysis of utilities may
consist of what the utility is designed to accomplish, and how well it does so.
Chat Rooms
Chat rooms are conceptualized as locations where users “go” to chat. Chat rooms are “a virtual space where a chat session takes place. Technically, it is just the real-time communication between two computer users, such that once a chat has been initiated, either user can type in information and the entered text appears on the other user’s screen” (OECD.org, 2005).

New media considerations: Since chat rooms are new media creations, the only parallels in old media were the telephone and face to face chat for real time communications. Chat rooms tend to both segment users into interest groups and force them to compete for attention since there is no natural special division for grouping conversations. Perhaps chat rooms could keep a few key users you are interested in in their own frame apart from the rest of the chat to help keep things clear. Some users will type the name of the person(s) they are speaking to in the beginning of the message in the public room.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>1. text-centric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. enhanced text-centric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. graphical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. virtual environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Public or password protected? Is it moderated or unmoderated? What is the theme if there is one?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Links/Blocks</th>
<th>Often advertising, links to profiles, IM linkages. Membership may be required.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Questions                     | 1. What are the titles?  
|                               | 2. What modalities are involved? What type of chat room is this?  
|                               | 3. Are chat rooms primarily public or private?  
|                               | 4. How active are the chat rooms? Which rooms are the most active and when?  
|                               | 5. What activity happens there? Are there patterns?  
|                               | 6. Are there commonalities to names and profiles in a room?  
|                               | 7. Does it tend to attract a particular group (age, sex, etc)? |

Type 1-
Chat rooms come in many types, with the most common by far being the text-centric and (nearly) real-time variety. “Public”, group oriented chats and are designed for chatting with or around others people. Private chat-rooms may require a password to enter. Text only chat rooms limit communications to the modality of text. Textual conversations may be “busy” with many users, or may be “quiet” with most users either observing passively or involved in private messages. Is the conversation coherent, directed among a few users, or more of a “free-for-all?”

Type 2-
Multimodal chat (such as text and voice) is common, although text still tends to be favored. Multimode chat rooms as an enhancement of text-only chat rooms may offer
emoticon graphics, voice, and other supplemental features to the primary method of textual communications.

Type 3-

Another type of chat room uses graphical avatars (representative characters that visually personify the chatters). Avatar chat may be enhanced with graphical “environments” that are shared by chatters. These avatars may or may not be customizable. The types of avatars used – be they fantasy characters, cartoon characters, or media personas, can indicate something of the nature of the chat room. In some cases, the avatars might “purchase” with real or virtual currency objects that exist in the chat environment only.

Type 4-

Another main type of chat room is a video chat room. Video chat rooms may allow simultaneous chat and projection of video images like a “video phone.” They may also be oriented towards one broadcaster and multiple viewers.

Characteristic 1-

In implementing chat rooms, there are several relevant considerations that impact the culture there and the ways users attempt to manage impressions. The titles of the chat rooms, and what titles can be changed and user created, factor in. If user chats are segregated from official site-created chats, this indicates a legitimacy to site chats that user chats do not have. If the titles are location-based, for example, this indicates a greater interest in meeting in real life.

Characteristic 2-

Chat rooms that are heavily moderated are quite different from chat rooms that are virtually unmoderated. Heavily moderated chat rooms tend to keep users focused or to drive out troublemakers. An informal atmosphere tends to take over in less moderated chat rooms.

Characteristic 3-

The environment presented in a graphical chatroom may direct the conversation in a simulation of actual physical presence in that space. The conversation style may be impacted by the topic and the type of people perceived to be there. The modalities (text, voice, etc.) may also influence the conversation.

Instant Messages

Instant messaging is “a type of communications service that enables users to create a private chat room with another user. Typically, the instant messaging system alerts users whenever somebody on their chat room list is online, then the user can initiate a chat session with that person” (OECD.org, 2005).

Instant messages are not mere notifications, indicators, cues or status messages although they can be used this way. Instant messages must possess the capability of instantiating nearly real-time two-way communications with some significant content. An instant message utility might be used to say “Hi – I’m at home”, but it could also
easily be used to say “let me explain what I meant by that point I made at the meeting, and interrupt me if you need any clarification.” Instant messages may be geared towards smaller chunks of exchange, but they are designed so as to allow conversations to be carried out (even if they are not like conversations through epistles).

| Types                  | 1. textual and enhanced textual  
|                       | 2. graphical  
| Characteristics       | Size of message allowed, modalities, enhancements if they exist  
| Links/Blocks          | Who can use the system, if they can indicate outside connection methods, profile  
| Questions             | 1. How are status messages used? Can they be custom?  
|                       | 2. Do instant messages screen somehow?  

Type 1 & 2-

There are several types of instant messages. Instant messages are like private chat rooms, which can be mostly textual or multimodal and graphical. A bubble coming from an avatar’s mouth that contains text which can only be seen by select individual(s) is an instant message. A voice message emailed to someone or post on the web is not an instant message because it is recorded rather than real-time.

Pokes and prompts and cues and not instant messages, although they have a very similar mechanism. In this case, the message conveyed is “canned” and has more in common with body language or winks and nods than with chat. These make up for some of the missing contextual cues provided by spatial environments. Sending someone a smiley face through IM is an instant message because it is a ritualized use of the utility which is geared in a more flexible context.

Among the implementation considerations to be engaged in design are usage patterns associated with instant messages. First and foremost is screening. While it is possible for people to see that you are talking to someone and otherwise occupied in physical space, this is not always obvious online. Status messages developed for this. While you might convey your availability or interest by positioning and body language in physical space, there is only one space online – the IM server. You are there or not.

Screening behavior is needed, and must be supported by site implementation if they expect users to continue employing their IM utilities. Screening behavior follows certain patterns that tend to recur. For example, it is common on many SNSg sites for the first step in evaluating an instant message to be viewing the profile of the user sending it before responding. This is like checking the person out. However, online it is not considered rude to ignore someone. For all they know you are out in the kitchen making coffee and simply leaving the machine on, or checking your email. This might seem terrible, but it’s necessary. Instant messages can be viewed like answering machines, which you choose to answer or not – if you are even there.

Conversational style is impacted by the medium of instant messages as well. For one, it becomes more obvious if someone is dominating the conversation or being long-winded. Exchanges tend to be chunked into approximately the width of the im text box or less. Exceeding this box tends to be a subtle indicator that you are getting too wordy. IM is not the preferred venue to make complex arguments with a lot of background or to convey large amounts of information. Sensitive topics can easily be misconstrued,
similar to the phenomenon of email but compounded by special limitations and the chance that the other parties will “break in” at any given moment, or put you on the spot. While it is a casual medium where emoticons and cute expressions are considered generally, it is not a good way to break the news of a death in the family, for example.

**Searching Users**

Whether it be from an Instant Messenger or from a web form, the utilities offered to search for other users are central to many SNS sites. Some sites emphasize groups more than searching for individual users.

| Types | 1. highly customizable criteria  
|       | 2. localization emphasis  
|       | 3. interest emphasis  
|       | 4. affiliation emphasis  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5. minimal functionality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>The degree of functionality, the degree of customizability, what is exposed and what is hidden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>What is available to search on, profiles, IM is usually available or some type of mail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions | 1. What ads are near the search utility?  
|           | 2. How friendly and useful is the utility?  
|           | 3. What types of searches are possible? |

**Web Cams**

Web cams are “a camera used in transmitting live images over the World Wide Web” (webcam, 2010).

Webcams can be used for constant monitoring of Yellowstone’s “Old Faithful” geyser, or of “Susan’s Sorority dorm room.” In this study the focus is upon using webcams to engage in real-time interaction or broadcast of an actual person (or people). Even if what is portrayed is altered (for example headless), real people interacting in real time are the focus.

**New Media Considerations**

Natural images may be augmented by media filters and virtual reality environments and effects. Here perhaps more than in any other medium it becomes apparent that we are all stars now, in a manner of speaking. Human beings have become bound up with the media that purports to represent them and taken on its characteristics. Simulated perfectly safe beings present themselves in as real a way as we can thus far produce.
Impact of Social Networking Websites on the Gay Community  Chapter 3: p. 89

| Types | 1. photorealistic  
2. enhanced |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Titles of links to webcams, two-way or one-way emphasis, bandwidth options, prevalence of audio and chat with webcam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Is any content banned or censored?, profiles, IMs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions | 1. Are webcams segmented from other chat?  
2. Do webcam titles indicate get togethers or hook ups? |

**Message & Discussion Boards**
Discussion boards or newsgroup posts are asynchronous and generally available “permanently” to a group of users. These are suited to public debate of issues such as current events. Message boards are also used by educational institutions to encourage student participation. Message boards are about the subject, not about you. Blogs are about you, but others might be able to comment.

| Types | 1. Threaded or unthreaded  
2. Read only for non-members, no access, or all access? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Active? Content-related?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>May be linked to content or current events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions | 1. How are they grouped? Member created groupings?  
2. Can users remain anonymous? |

**Blogs & Micro-blogs**
A blog is “a website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. Blogs often provide commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of most early blogs” (SussexLearningNetwork, 2006).

Microblogging – brief blog entries such as those about what you are doing right now – is popular currently. Services like Twitter enable you to tell the world you are watching Wheel of Fortune and drinking a Bud Light as you are doing it. In contrast, others use these services for professional purposes or critical disaster updates. Naturally, usage will vary considerably across users. The question below is for later analysis as texts and should be contextualized as a sample. Microblogs are not as commonly used on social networking (SNgS) sites.
### Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>On user page or public page? Monitored or unmoderated?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>May link to profiles and other content. May have access controlled or be tiered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions       | 1. Do most of the posts seem to be about user’s life?  
                  2. Do most of the posts seem to be opinion pieces?  
                  3. Do the posts address the larger community or specific people? |

### Offline Messaging

Be it email or stored IMs, the ability to send messages privately to individuals when they are not online.

| Types                      | Offline instant messages  
                            | Site-specific email  
                            | Forwarded messages |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Characteristics            | Do these messages contain ads?  
                            | Do these messages get SPAM and bots? |
| Links/Blocks               | Link to site? Link to ad? Membership required? |
| Questions                  | 1. Is offline messaging forwarded somehow? |

### Screening Utilities

The ways screening is possible and happens are here. Grouping and going invisible selectively are examples. Using multiple profiles can constitute screening behavior. The behavior of checking profiles before responding is a type of screening.

| Types                          | bot screens  
                                   | customized status by user or group  
                                   | ignore  
                                   | Allowance by group affiliation |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| Characteristics                | Does this information get communicated? Does this impact user ratings? Is it associated with reporting users? |
| Links/Blocks                   | Users may be blocked or allowed, often links to profile |
| Questions                      | 1. Are users entirely blocked or partially?  
                                   2. Is it easy to adjust these settings? |

### Ranking utilities

These are the ways users are content are ranked.

| Types                       | user (knowledge?) ranking  
                              | hot list  
                              | popularity |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Characteristics             | Does this ranking affect anything? |
| Links/Blocks                | Who can rank whom and whom does it affect? |
Questions | 1. What seems to be the purpose of the rating?

---

**Common Components: Affiliations**

Note the location and size of each affiliation component, as well as how to get there and where it leads. Is the content passive and simply textual or active and attractive? What other components are associated with it or is it linked to? Analysis may include the customizability of groupings, and the usefulness of groupings.

**Buddy Lists**

Buddy lists are groups of individuals that you want to be able to chat with, or did at one time. If buddyling communicates acceptance of some sort, it would be logical to conclude that un-buddyling could be perceived as a type of rejection in some cases. Some buddy lists allow the user to instead “hide” from specific users without visibly revoking their buddy status. This hiding option often doesn’t exit with in person encounters but may have a parallel with screening phone calls. Another equivalent could be to always be busy when someone wants to chat or get together.

Buddy lists tend to be the same in basic functionality and intent. The most common is simply a collection of individual handles with associated profiles that are gathered together in your IM utility window like a menu. These might be grouped somehow, such as work/family/school/friends.

| Types | 1. public  
2. private |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>How unbuddying happens, what buddyling is required for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>How added and managed, status, identity, grouping, searching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions | 1. What is the list called?  
2. What purpose does the list serve?  
3. How does the list shape connectivity?  
4. How easily are the list and individual member characteristics modified? |

Type 1 & 2–

Buddy lists may be public or private. Public buddy lists tend to discourage adding people you don’t want your other friends to know about. Thus, if a site only has public buddy lists you are likely not to use it in certain ways unless you can simply remember the names of your secret buddies and contact them without publicly buddyling.

Link 1–

Instant messages are generally initiated and managed through a buddy list switchboard of some sort. Status, identity, might be seen as part of the buddy list but they really are not.

Type 3 –

Sub-lists like “hot lists” might. Adding a name to a buddy list represents the intention to be able to find that person again and thus functions like a mnemonic device.

Questions-
Groups and Networks

Groups and networks are like buddy lists, but focus upon structured and shared groupings of association. For example, on Facebook users must actually verify that you attend a particular college to join that network by using an email address from that college. The grouping here is not merely ad-hoc.

| Types          | 1. Group  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2. Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Shared public or personal use groupings? Who created them?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions      | 1. What are these groupings based upon?  
|                | 2. Can users create new groupings?  
|                | 3. Is there some sort of verification? |

Selective Sharing

Sites that allow selective sharing are acknowledging the realities of online communications. Again, as a user is “online” or “not” in a way that they are not “at the bar” or “not” – there is no space, no body language, no contextual cues, no obvious way of knowing what they are doing unless it is in a public chat – you need it. A good feature is the ability to unlock photos and other info selectively. Having this info there means that it is ready to be consumed – info that does not need to be in this form then you have to ask yourself why upload or store it at all, honestly.

One note – selective sharing and privacy settings may be associated with individual components, the profile, or site-wide design. In this section they are considered as a whole and in more detail as site characteristics. These are considered as components so that patterns may be recognized beyond the individual component’s characteristics themselves.

| Types          | 1. unlock to individual  
|                | 2. unlock to group  
|                | 3. unlock to buddies  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>4. unlock to site members only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Degree of selectivity, ease of modification, revocation, transparency of something existing which is locked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Who is blocked, often profile, upselling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions      | 1. how is the sharing implemented?  
|                | 2. What is this useful for? |

Localization

Where and to what degree localization settings are available says something about the type of community the site supports. Where localization is applied to is telling as well. Local weather is a nice feature, but segregating out local people is a design decision geared towards either meeting people or community issues for an area. A site that is localized expects to spill over into real life in some way.
Impact of Social Networking Websites on the Gay Community  Chapter 3: p. 93

| Types                          | 1. State wide localization  
|                               | 2. smaller-area localization |
| Characteristics               | Customizable view and content or just search? |
| Links/Blocks                  | Is anything filtered out by localization or enabled by it? |
| Questions                     | 1. Is localization useful?  
|                               | 2. Does localization impact content or just search?  |

**Common Components: Indicators**

Note the location and size of each indicator component, as well as how to get there and where it leads. Is the content passive and simply textual or active and attractive? What other components are associated with it or is it linked to? If there is an equivalent in other modes of communication, it may be identified and contrasted.

**Indicators: Interest (Active) and Receptivity (Passive)**

Indicators such as ‘visits’ may be added to personal pages and profile views to indicate interest by others. Adding people to your hot list, which may be public popularity contests, can indicate you are interested in them. Indicators of interest and receptivity can be added to simulate body language and other contextual information.

| Types                          | 1. Nudge  
|                               | 2. ‘Like’ points for some portion of user’s content  
|                               | 3. “visit” or view by indicator  
|                               | 4. adding to ‘hot list’  
|                               | 5. buddy request  
|                               | 6. request to view private content/selective shared content |
| Characteristics               | Indicators of interest, indicators of receptivity, public or private |
| Links/Blocks                  | May be linked to content |
| Questions                     | 1. How are interest / receptivity indicators implemented?  
|                               | 2. Would these serve a place beyond initial relationship formation? |

**Indicators: Status and Mode/Motive**

IM “status” messages may function as a type of microblog, but they were designed originally to let other users know something of you current mode – busy, free to chat, or otherwise. These can also indicate something of motive, since they are set by the user. Someone with a motive to chat will be free to chat in their status.

| Types                          | 1. IM status message  
|                               | 2. Doing now messages |
| Characteristics               | Customizable or canned |
| Links/Blocks                  | Status may influence who can contact you |
| Questions                     | 1. How does you status look to people you have indicated you are offline to? |
References


boyd, d. (2002). FACETED ID/ENTITY: Managing representation in a digital world Media Arts and Sciences. Cambridge, MIT. Masters of Science Media Arts and Sciences: 118.


Chapter 4
User Goals and Site Goals
Chapter 4.
User Goals and Site Goals

In considering user goals and site goals, two parties must be identified - the users of gay social networking sites, and the owners/operators of those sites (for example, gay.com, gaywatch, mandate, manhunt). The users of any particular site are obviously unique individuals although generalizations might be drawn about them just as they might be drawn about any group studied by sociologists or marketers. The site-operators are in reality organizations comprised of individuals but presented as a cohesive whole through their site and site name. No one example of the gay community is representative, just as no one example of the straight community is representative. Affirming this complexity of community and sub-community, their identities and goals (as well as their views of each other), we can still draw some broad-brush strokes.

One generalization about the gay community (as previously discussed) is that it has been an early leader in the use of online services. The term use is emphasized here since it specifically does not imply ownership. “Apart from avidly reading blogs, gay and lesbian adults also are choosing to connect online through social networking sites more often than their heterosexual counterparts. Slightly more than half (55%) of gay and lesbian adults state they are members of Facebook, compared with 46% of heterosexual adults. Also, 43% of gay and lesbian respondents report being members of MySpace, compared to just less than a third (30%) of heterosexual respondents. When it comes to the business-oriented social networking site, LinkedIn, 23% of gay and lesbian respondents reported being members, while 13% of heterosexual adults stated they are members” (Harris Interactive, July 13, 2010).

Another generalization about members of the gay community is that they have benefited from the increased visibility and ability to connect with each other through social networking sites. The new medium has enabled this. The question of gay visibility is considered by Susanna Danuta Walters in her book All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America (2003), although she focuses upon television. Like Meeker, Walters considers the visibility of the gay community as a media issue that can be analyzed in terms of media periods. While this visibility is generally seen as a good thing for a community like the gay community, it can also provoke reactions. At least in its early phases, there might be a connection between increased visibility and anti-gay reactions (Walters, 2003).

Ironically perhaps, the Internet can also obscure niche communities by rendering them invisible through homogenization. A simple Internet filter application can “de-gay” the entire Internet to the person surfing, if not the person surfing. The question of visibility is a complex question, as the question of community itself is complex, has multiple associations, and involves change.

User representation (including motive indications) and visibility on particular sites can be misleading in new ways. The niche nature of gay social networking sites might cater to particular interests while neglecting others, portray particular representations, and ultimately discourage interaction between members of that community and the outside world. Particular representations are made visible and supported by the site design. Interactions on these sites have the potential to reshape
impressions from within the community of the attitudes outside of it (maybe everyone isn’t a homophobe after all), and vice-versa (maybe gays are not all pansies).

While users in chat are basically free to say whatever they wish, within the terms of service, they must do so through the components and designs that convey or indicate motives. As of the time of this writing, on gay.com, for example, users can indicate on their chat status that they are: chatting, reading articles, looking for dates, looking for hook-up, looking for relationship, up for anything, not looking, (offline – invisible). Only one of these can be selected. There is no free text option, which helps others searching for strangers by status.

On the users profile (multiples of these can be selected), a user can check “I’m interested in”: Friendship, Love/Relationship, Action/Sex, Conversation, Ask Me. Again, no free text. Relationship status on the profile can be (multiple can be selected): Single, Dating, Seeing someone, Monogamous relationship, Open relationship, Ask Me. No free text is available here either, indicating search ability by strangers is valued.

All of these messages do not have to agree with each other or the behavior and communication. There are other areas in the profile where free text can be utilized. Surprisingly few users bother to indicate much there beyond their past negative experiences and trying to avoid them as they understand them. Chat rooms obviously have titles as well. These elements are presented to the user as motive indication mechanisms. Social Networking websites have played a significant role in the increased visibility of the gay community. However, design has mediated and supported particular representations and goals, as indicated above.

Design is not the only mediation. The nature of these very same websites has been largely commercial. Given their very natures, it is logical to conclude that these sites have predominantly supported only some forms of gay identity - the kinds of identity and community that are marketable. Many sites have suffered from the commercialism of their creators and operational models over alternative community-based goals and designs. This is a natural outgrowth of the fact that these sites are designed, constructed, and run in the template of Internet commerce - for marketability goals over community. Commercialism may have contributed to the greater exposure and scale of “hook up” sites oriented towards the gay community than information-oriented sites.

This form of commercialism is somewhat unique to the medium, or at the very least takes on unique forms in new media. An analysis of these sites for their mediating influences and the culture they create can be undertaken in a structured fashion. When considering user goals and site goals, the prominence of certain components over others may be considered. Each component is designed to be used, and given a certain prominence and “place” in the manufactured space of the social networking site.

“Capitalism has no loyalty to anything but its own process of capital accumulation, no loyalty to anything but itself. Nor could it be otherwise if one wished to survive as a capitalist; for the first law of the market is to make a profit off other people’s labor or go out of business. Private profitability rather than social need is the determining condition of capital investment” (Parenti, 1986, p. 2).
Complexity of Motivations

Motives are not necessarily simple, necessarily conscious, or monolithic; if they were, the field of psychiatry would not be nearly as contested or interesting. Marketing would also be far less interesting, as would art and human relationships themselves. Assigning or validating motivations to anyone or any group is a tricky business. In this chapter, I will not be claiming to know the private or emotional motives of site designers or users. I will however be questioning various motives and assessing how well they are supported by particular site designs and components.

A motive as used here is not necessarily a wish of the heart so much as a discrete goal or objective. The owner(s) of that motive is or are theoretical, but must necessarily be associated with some element of the site itself. Treated generically and demonstrated through symbolic examples of interactions with actual components, user motives are seen as arising from their persona to be conveyed as allowed through the site’s components and indicators. Site motives are treated as coming from the controlling interests, their organizations, and conveyed through the components offered. In both of these cases, a theoretical category of goal(s) is referenced by the term “motivation” in order to determine what is supported or not.

Community Spaces and Tendencies

There is no empowerment without motivation. There is no community without a shared sense of space and interest. Historically, some bars and pubs have served to provide such a space for gay men, due more to the softly-lit atmosphere of privacy than to the alcohol. Already in the 19th century England, certain pubs provided the sense of seclusion and privacy that was requisite for gay men whose “sodomy” could be punished by imprisonment (Weeks, 1989, p. 209). Prior to Stonewall in America, police raids were specifically designed to unsettle this sense of privacy and to destroy the “gay space.” In San Francisco, however, a full decade before Stonewall, court orders protected the rights of gay men to gather in bars and other public establishments (D’Emilio, 1989, p. 459).

The bar owners have motives and so do the patrons – but they share a culture, on some level. Community is discovered, made, and remade by diverse individuals out of the stuff that is available to them, and of this generally the stuff that offers the least amount of resistance. Putting a dance floor in the bar might lead to more gays dancing, perhaps at their own request or perhaps to whip up more business.

The previous chapter presented categories for the forms that components take. These categories could be paired with the most likely user and site “motive” (or goal) in an analysis. While this involves speculation, it is an exercise that can be justified through supporting evidence and analysis. It is also an exercise that is worth undertaking because it is likely to reveal more of the character of the site in the specific cultural atmosphere frozen into the design of the site. The motive represents the usefulness of the component.

While I am not trying to establish a dynamic dialectic between user and site goals here as if they were discrete and oppositional, I do think there is a common understanding of where these generally diverge and what the emphasis would be in commercial settings. A division between user motive and site motive is structurally represented in the messages coming from the site and the messages coming from the user. Furthermore, what is provided to the users reflects something of the motives of the site.
Sites motives are easier to identify – commercial sites have a basic goal of making money, which can be assumed. Perhaps there are other goals, such as serving the community, but these cannot be assumed without evidence. The commercial model itself does serve as evidence that a site seeks to generate income, and most often profit. Making money means getting members (“conversion” is the marketing term), retaining them, and increasing memberships. Sites may also sell some kind of content (Crucial_Marketing, 2009). Advertisements also are a revenue source, and the more members the more money. The more intelligence on the community and the better sorted they are for targeting, the more the money can be made by selling this information.

**Walkthroughs: Symbolic Intentions and Classes of Users**

Users are a bit more complex. Users can have several goals. Certain sites pander to particular types of users and user goals. For example, social networking sites will often be more attractive to users seeking companionship more than information. A user might be interested in information and news, or legal issues such as gay marriage and what to do without it. Statistics show that gays lead non-gays for Internet use for access to political news, so it would seem logical that gay oriented sites would have a lot of news resources (PR_Newswire, 2004). Users might be looking for discrimination resources, travel resources, directories of gay friendly businesses, or activism links. Users might be looking for health information related to safer sex, gay friendly doctors, or gay friendly employers and religious or spiritual groups. These are informational resource seekers, and they are normally not going to get very lucky at most of these sites. This statement is supported by the components chosen and developed on the site, and the lack of other components. Normally when informational components exist they are limited to the selections of the operators and often take on a magazine quality of “infotainment” (Postman, 1985).

Other users are looking for friendships and socialization. They might want to know what food and fashion or entertainment they are expected to be “up on.” They might want to know what the protocol and expectations are if they are new to the gay community so they are ready to hang out with other gays. They might just want to meet a friend. These are social users, and they will be less disappointed but likely not really satisfied. This is supported by an analysis of the components as well as an analysis of the culture of the site. Analyzing marketing is one way to understand the cultural expectations supported. If marketing is to be believed, it is worth noting that few of these sites market themselves as a way to “meet friends for board games.”

Another class of users is out for a date. These users might want to meet that someone special, or pretend to. These users are likely to be slightly happier. This goal is usually better supported by the design of the site and in line with the culture presented in the advertisements of and on the site.

Another class of users is looking for cyber-sex. These users might be “in it” for the fantasy while keeping “it” safe. These users are likely to be happy at some sites and not at others, or until they “use everyone up.” Sites that make provisions for explicit chat without verifying information, making it public, or requiring location information support this. Sites with fantasy title chat rooms or areas also can support this.

Another class of users is looking for “hook-ups” in real life – generally anonymous quick sex. Depending upon their area and willingness to travel, these users
might be very happy. Their success will depend upon a number of factors, but the opportunity is present in the design, culture, and membership. Most users will presumably represent themselves in the best possible light and might be in for a shock when the real meeting happens.

**Are Usage Patterns Based Around the Individuals?**

Analyzing the usage patterns of urban and rural users, out and closeted, and just curiosity-driven users might reveal some interesting divergences in motives. All of these users are going to gravitate towards particular sites if they have the knowledge and opportunity. In spite of this, many of these users may end up on the same site with differences in profiles and motives. *Part of the attraction of any site is membership*, and the site that panders to the lowest common denominator will often get the most members. The satisfaction of each of these users in meeting their expectations and planned outcomes will vary. Users of one motive or goal might find they can best meet their needs indirectly by assimilation into the culture of the site, regardless of how well it suits them.

The above could be said about traditional venues, given the practical constraints of economics and real space. The economics of “space” in cyberspace are different, however. While a bar might be limited by rent and physical location to an upper limit for people present at a given time, a virtual location can more easily accommodate 10 times the users for a substantially lower cost in equipment and service upgrades. As of the time of this writing, stablehost.com offers an upgrade from 100 GB transfer allowance per month to 300 GB/month for $2.00 extra. While this example shouldn’t be taken to scale literally, it conveys something of the new economics at play. A web host like Rackspace (which is designed to support massive sites) would want to discuss your setup and needs extensively before providing a quote. This further promotes the economic incentive towards producing a site with the largest membership base possible.

These theoretical motives or goals could be personified as symbolic users, often called personas. An HCI technique commonly practiced is to create theoretical user ethnographies. These ethnographies can then be “walked through” the site based upon their profiles (Jacko and Sears, 2007, p. 1007). Just such an approach can be applied post facto to tease out information about what goals are supported by the design and components, and what users would receive the most benefits based upon their goals.

In the table below I am proposing some suggested motives for the above personas (or types of users), presented as symbolic categories that can be used in a similar fashion to “walkthrough” a site. Heuristic analysis and such a walkthrough can help to reveal what goals are supported and what goals are not. Each component in fact can be subjected to a “mini walkthrough” and analysis. As with the previous chapter, this process is not to be slavishly adhered to but applied as useful and appropriate.
Some suggested motives are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Motives (UMs)</th>
<th>Site Motives (SMs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Finding other users</td>
<td>Encouraging users to contribute and become resources for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Presenting and advertising yourself</td>
<td>Collecting marketing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Evaluating other users</td>
<td>Continuously hooking user’s interest in the site/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Signaling receptivity</td>
<td>Collecting marketing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Signalining interest</td>
<td>Facilitating habituation of usage and integration into life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Screening users (and segmenting)</td>
<td>Categorizing and targeting marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Building relationships</td>
<td>Building trust and targeting the site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Recreation</td>
<td>Providing novelty, distraction, or drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Keeping in touch</td>
<td>Keeping the user coming back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Meeting</td>
<td>Getting users to refer/attract other users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Other</td>
<td>Getting members to buy from ads or upgrade memberships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Safety and privacy</td>
<td>Avoiding liability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The site motive of a component is not necessarily going to correspond with the user motive across from it (although it might). You will notice that chat itself is not a motive. That is because chat may be recreational or have other motives associated with it. Chatting in itself is an activity through a utility-type of component and not a motive. The emphasis of a site upon a particular utility or service should also be noted, along with its marketing.

If, for example, we look at the component map for the join/signup from the previous chapter, we can add entries for user motive and site motive to it. The general procedure indicated below is to utilize these maps to perform a “mini walkthrough” and assess the user motives and site motives. All of these can then be evaluated as a whole to assess what motives the site best supports.
Join/Sign Up Form

| Types | 1. Requires you to fill out a complete profile or just a partial profile.  
2. May be free or require you to pay. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>The clarity and accessibility of the agreement and the visibility of all of the steps involved as well as what is agreed to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMs</td>
<td>Unknown (8,1,7,9,10?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMs</td>
<td>1 (2-12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Passing through this form is required to activate membership and normally to use the site. Normally links to agreement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions | 1. What does the form try to sell users on? What does it say about the site?  
2. How does one find and go back to this form if one wants to read it later? How does one know if it changes and what changed?  
3. In the signup process, does the requirement get more complex than it is at first presented? Is the initial investment and promise somehow modified with “up selling” at the end? |

**Reasoning:** Generically, it would be safe to say the user wants to join the site. Regardless of the objective of the user, this component supports ‘signing up.’ The form is designed for this purpose and the text will indicate the process is one of signing you up as a member.

**Motive consideration:** The reason the user wants to join the site would be encapsulated in their persona. Note that some potential primary and secondary motives are indicated in parenthesis. Recreation, finding other users, building relationships, keeping in touch, and actually meeting people in real life are reasonable potential motives that some users might have for signing up. It is not clear that this component better supports any one of these than the other at this point.

The site is supporting their goal of getting members. All of the other goals of the site are secondarily supported by getting non-members to join (these are in parenthesis). The motive of getting users to join is clear because the form is designed for that purpose, and often the site will try to entice non-members by listing the benefits and making the process as painless as possible. The marketing will convey this as a desirable goal for the user.

**Mini-walkthrough:** This is best done with an actual example, but generally the user is presented with an advertisement that they have been referred to or found online. The user assesses what is offered and what is required, and decides to fill out the form or not. The process of filling out this form can be looked at in specific terms of that user and their experience, screen by screen if merited.

Continuing this process for the other components, one can use a similar template for the approach. Using the data gathered from the previous chapter, we can propose user and site goal attributions. The reasoning for these attributions can be explained. Motive considerations and “mini-walkthroughs” can be discussed in terms of these components. Any actual analysis would need to be specific to a given site, but below are some theoretical generic examples.
**Agreement, Terms of Service**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UMs</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMs</td>
<td>12(1-11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reasoning:* The user agrees to these terms for the reason that they join the site. The site tries to lure the user in with the marketing, so the site assumes their reason is encapsulated somewhere within this. This could be seen as a root reason for site use – a root goal.

*Motive consideration:* The user behavior is limited in this regard – they are presented with a single option that is either agree to and passed through (like an obstacle) or not. The site’s motive is primarily to avoid liability, as evidenced by the legalese language emphasizing disclaimers and the rights of the site owners.

*Mini-walkthrough:* The user is normally presented this formality as a boring requirement to get inside the club. No effort has been made to assure that users know what they are agreeing to or that they really read it. Click through the nuisance as a formality to continue. Feedback is not encouraged or facilitated and it is not clear how questions can be answered. The interface basically says “just click it already.”

**Complaining and Feedback**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UMs</th>
<th>Unknown (11)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMs</td>
<td>12(9, 7, 5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reasoning:* The user’s goal is to change or “fix” something about the site or their experience with the operators. Beyond this, the goal could be anything and should be expressed in the text of their complaint. They may be trying to participate with the site itself and not the users in the proscribed way.

*Motive consideration:* The way the complaint is received communicates something about how receptive the site will be to it. If a promise of a quick response is given, this encourages usage. If categories are present, these may be presented to filter users in an impersonal and bureaucratic way or they may exist to assist with routing to experts who can help. The site may be seeking to handle the complaint in a way that will assist them in avoiding potential liability (there is an option other than going right to your lawyer). The text may be supportive in an effort to keep the user coming back instead of just giving up. The efforts to assist the member may be useful in building users trust if they are treated in a manner that is respectful and that leaves them feeling important.

*Mini-walkthrough:* This is one example of where a walkthrough can reveal a lot about the way a site views members and their role on the site. A well-designed feedback and support system will minimize frustration and emphasize facilitation of positive user experiences.

**Entertainment Features**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UMs</th>
<th>8(unknown)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMs</td>
<td>8(4,9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reasoning:* Entertainment features are intended to provide novelty, distraction and entertainment whatever the medium.

*Motive consideration:* If new content is added this might keep the user coming back. New content can be a point of interest or a shared experience for members of the...
site. Content that is presented as a pass-time with no required action or immediate social relevance is a diversion.

*Mini-walkthrough:* If a persona that is not interested in entertainment features (say an information seeker) must pass through multiple entertainment features that have been given default prominence, this can “taint” serious content. This in part depends upon how/if the content is segregated.

For the remaining components I will only suggest possible user and site motives. The above examples should give a general idea about the procedure that can be used on specific sites and components. The same procedure may be applied to each component.

*News Articles & XML Feeds (Syndication)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8(unknown)</td>
<td>8(4,9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Marketing: Shopping*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not the result of their actions (unknown)</td>
<td>11 (3,6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Marketing: Up-selling pitches*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not the result of their actions (unknown)</td>
<td>11(3,6,2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2(1)</td>
<td>3 (6, 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Personal Pages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2(9,1,4,5,7)</td>
<td>2(10,3,5,9,7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pictures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 (unknown)</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Privacy Settings and Options*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 (2,3)</td>
<td>2 (7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chat Rooms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UM</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 (2,8,7,9,3,4,5,6,10,11)</td>
<td>2 (5,8,10, unknown)</td>
</tr>
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## Impact of Social Networking Websites on the Gay Community

### Chapter 4: p. 105

#### Instant Messages

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#### Blogs & Micro-blogs

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#### Buddy Lists

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#### Groups and Networks

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#### Selective Sharing

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Localization

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Indicators: Interest (active) and Receptivity (passive)

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Indicators: Status and Mode/Motive

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**Less Common Components**

One might ask why some of these components tend to be less common. The addition of these components might be said to be less traditional, and business, being risk-averse, might not see the competitive advantage of including non-traditional components. Since each of these components also has a corresponding goal, that goal might not be seen as in alignment with the culture of the site. There is a cost associated with each of these components in terms of bandwidth, space, development and upkeep. In some cases the cost is extremely low yet they are not commonly included. The site operators might believe there is no call for them, and be responding to their vision of the market.

If we reverse the questions “why include this?” and ask “why not include this?”, some interesting speculations are forthcoming. Here we will also ask: “what potential motive for not including this?” Neglected component’s associated motives and their implications may have been de-emphasized and to some extent de-valued by exclusion.

**Self-Presentations: Family/Couple Membership vs. Individual Membership**

How does a family or couple go online here as a family, and do they get a chance to do so? Do they each get their own account as well as a family account? How do they link and how can you tell who is who when they are talking? The shared computer and the family account at chat sites is an under-explored phenomenon that is becoming more prevalent. It is an unusual teenager who would want to share a screen name with their mother. Most mothers would also not want to share a screen name with their teenagers. However, suspicious spouses might encourage shared accounts. How do you know who is who, and why do sites gear themselves away from shared accounts? The net result is that everyone wants a private account even if they occasionally use a shared account – the account name itself conveys some context and it can get confusing when couples or families “group chat” as one screen name.

**Utilities: Events and Forums**

Events and Forums (as opposed to chat rooms) were venues that were more prevalent in the “old” Compuserve and Delphi services than they are in many modern SNGs sites. Events present usability challenges that are related to the Internet as media when they attempt to involve massive amounts of individuals in more than a broadcast over the Internet. Real-world town halls for political events traditionally have needed to
structure participants involvement in order to keep the affair orderly and productive, but this takes new forms online. One common strategy is to try to get a participant from each major area of the spectator’s seating. There is no seating online. Raised hands are as simple as “on bits” or flags, and nothing is communicated by their presence other than what has been accounted for in the interface. No one knows really with whom you are sitting – be it your family or club. Nonverbal cues are different (no one can interpret your T-shirt).

Forums are an effort to have sensible discussions online by limiting the conversation to a topic. This sounds like a great idea when compared with the chaos of the average chat room or the inordinate prevalence of immature users ruining the chat for everyone else. This experience can be likened to idealists being “mowed down by barbarian hordes” as Stone quoted one of the early Communitree veterans as saying (Stone 1991). A forum may make use of a chat room, but it is not merely a moderated room. A forum is an effort to make the conversation and content hold a certain coherence and to serve a purpose, and often to elevate it as well. A forum properly conveys the sense of a group of experts seriously debating and discussing issues in a sincere effort to further the subject, and might eject “newbies.” Forums are mentioned here primarily to note their absence from many SNGS sites in their current incarnation.

Utilities: Conferencing

The distinction of this term from forum or chat is largely semantic and interpretive. The term is often applied to give an air of “business” to the proceedings or when online communications are regarded as a conference telephone call. Conferencing is an effort to engage multiple users and get them coordinated in a common effort or to keep them on the same page. Conferencing generally is applied to media other than text-only chat. A conference is a meeting, generally with a purpose. This is generally goal-oriented like a forum but utilized most often for specific tactical purposes by a task team, rather than for purposes of debate or discussion. A conference generally is limited to less than eight or so participants, otherwise it takes on more of the characteristics of a broadcast or event. Conferencing is not commonly used so much as group chat in social networking sites. Conferencing is more suited to businesses.

In conferencing, grouping individuals needs to be artificially simulated. An exception to this might be “group web surfing” where chat utilities are used to group people individually. Actual conferencing implies some two-way communication, usually between divergent groups that need to coordinate in a common effort.

Utilities: e-Cards

E-greetings can be sent for everything from “Get better soon” to “come to my party!” These are used to communicate sentiments in ways that feel less transient and cheap than instant messages but are less trouble than email. An e-card is like a free hallmark card that you customize. Most sites don’t have these if they are SNGS sites (except for flirting cards perhaps), some SNSs do.

Content: Classifieds

Selling things and seeking things (as in not personals) is a community activity. Whether it is kittens to give away or massages offered, classifieds indicate a link of
commerce that is geared towards the community of the site. Seeking roommates, for example, would be a classified in this sense. The community wheels and deals with itself here. Most SNgSs do not have these.

**Utilities: Activism**

Doing things in the real world takes you away from the site and decreases the likelihood that you will buy something. A bowflex is quickly forgotten and leaves you free to chat but going out into the world to feed the homeless might give you interactions that replace online ones. Activism is mentioned but fundamentally ignored and unsupported online – unless you can blog about it online or otherwise not leave your chair and the site. Users who feel powerless would consider these things silly idealism anyway.

**Content: Advice Columns (“Dear Abby”)**

Columns like “Dear Abby” may exist. On gay SNgS sites, there have been at times columns to ask about STDs and relationship problems, tax issues related to gay couples, legal issues related to discrimination, and even to cry for help when one feels alone. These columns are tricky, as they can have some liability associated with them, thus they are rare or very selective. Less often, advice columns may exist where community members respond to other community members, rather than some expert (who may or may not moderate). In place of Elders, Priests, counselors, or wise men some may resort to these precisely because they are strangers. There do exist crowd-sourced Q&A sites such as Yahoo! Answers, however.

**Content: Resource Directories**

Resource directories and guides provide useful information targeted to a particular community. A gay resource guide might include everything from gay friendly establishments to cruising spots to gay friendly doctors and counselors. Resource guides can help point people to the organizations and places to check for assistance and further information. Most SNgSs do not have these.

**Content: Research**

Searching for information beyond what is provided by a resource guide is research. For example, if a gay man wanted to learn more about their local representative in some detail this would be research. If a gay man wanted to compare various research on the AIDS epidemic, this would be research. Few sites provide this and therefore no users are doing this on those sites. The simple alternative would be to forget about it, chat some more and upgrade to premium.

**Content: Community ratings for services and products**

Recommendations by the community from the community mean more than advertising, except to the site that wants the advertising. Community ratings of services and products offer unvarnished feedback about experiences. Consumers need advocates, and your community as a whole may be viewed as a consumer. Few SNgS sites currently utilize this component, unless it is really just a disguise for marketing.
Utilities: Mash ups and Aggregators

Google Apps is a service-oriented architecture example. The next generation of the Internet is what newspapers are screaming about – people aggregating your work in their own forms without paying you for it (largely). After the dust has settled, this is what businesses will need to do for the future of their applications and their system integrations although the scaling is tricky and I have doubts if the “content” and “service” providers will willingly go along with it until forced. It’s just too foreign from the model they have been born and raised on.

Utilities: Calendars

Personal and community calendars are useful to send invitations and to see what your friends are doing or what is happening in your community. Few people seem to use these. They are often a source of cognitive dissonance that fails to interface well with existing calendars that users may already employ, and can present challenges with segmenting and integrating work with private life. Using the software may be seen as an inefficient exertion as opposed to an effective time management strategy. If you want to announce your party or invite people to it, it is often simpler to use email and IM. Many discarded PDAs ultimately failed to live up to the promise of calendaring, and this may be instructive here.

In each of these components, the site and the users are both presumably being served somehow. Marketing and HCI have shown how media can play a role in shaping its own usage and consumption. Previous discussions have asked the question “are motives restrained by the medium?”

We see, for example, marked changes in attitudes and behaviors related to privacy issues in users of new media. This issue does not exist as a philosophical query alone – it exists as a design issue and a media issue. In later chapters I will look more closely at what this medium does to privacy in a manner similar to previous discussions about identity and behavior. Simple motive analysis can be conducted by asking users if their behavior and results match their original ideas, and then identifying why or why not.

Looking into components and component maps specifically, user types (personas), ethnographic walkthroughs, and design pattern identification can help to identify mediation and motivation that is supported or structurally conveyed along with cultural assumptions. HCI literature, media literature, and marketing literature may all be utilized for this analysis.

Users may clearly convey their desired motivations through the affordances provided by the site designer. These may be supported to a lesser or greater extent by the site design. Users may also contradict themselves – for example having a profile status of “Not looking for sex”, but an adult profile or naked pictures. A site with naked photos is more likely to encourage posting of more and to attract and retain users who post such photos and pursue them. Users may adapt to such an environment if they do not initially suit it, or they may leave for other alternatives.

Culture is subtle and progressively elaborated so that the messages conveyed may be controlled by the site designer and some cultural messages might not be immediately obvious at some sites, yet they exert a presence. For example, one might not have a sense of the scope and count of the naked pictures per site if this is not otherwise made
prominent until a certain amount of usage and perhaps “conversion” to membership has already taken place. Individual user assumptions can be as treacherous as site cultural assumptions, but in truth the site holds all of the cards. For example, a user can’t assume each profile is a unique individual – it might be used by a couple. The profile for the same person might be different on a different site. A new kind of “street smarts” is required, which is in itself an affirmation of the power of this new medium to reshape culture. Looking at statistics and analysis of differing sites, one might be able to identify patterns of segmentation, community supportiveness and dishonesty that do differ from site to site.

What I am proposing is that theoretical user ethnography be undertaken to understand the “map” created by these components through walkthroughs based upon each of these user goals. Supporting and minimizing factors are identified, along with cultural assumptions. These are correlated with design decisions. These supporting factors and minimizing factors are not necessarily overt statements or gestures, but rather they are subtle limitations, cues, and workflow associations in what is commonly understood to be a forum for freedom of expression and self-expression.

Given the layers of complexity and interconnection inherent in modern networking technology, it is likely that average users have no idea what their rights, responsibilities, or freedoms are. An analogous impact upon behavior could be found in a scenario where the average citizen has no idea where the commons were, the sidewalk is, where the mall starts, and where private property begins. This blurring is in fact made worse by many social networking websites which bury policies that no one ever reads in legalese and marketing.

Social networking sites can have definite cultural impacts, both positive and negative. They may connect members of marginal groups and empower them to express their identity, share knowledge, and forge true community. Commercial sites risk turning cultural identity into a marketable commodity guided by the interests of the proprietors, and the limitations of what sells (as opposed to the uncomfortable and sometimes complex challenges all real communities face). It is my contention that networking websites insert cultural assumptions and emphasize particular aspects of culture or behavior not because these reflect or benefit the community they address themselves to, but because identity itself is flattened by the technology and the commercialization of the medium.
References


PR_Newswire (2004) "Gays Lead Non-Gays in Internet Use for Access to Political News; National survey findings also show gays may more often feel influenced by online advertising than heterosexuals, and they are more likely to use gay-specific websites for travel reservations."


Chapter 5
Virtual Personas and Real Communities:
Do Virtual Communities Impact Real Communities?
Chapter 5.
Virtual Personas and Real Communities: Do Virtual Communities Impact Real Communities?

The benefits of virtual communications come in tandem with a change in the way we view people. The medium through which interaction (and representation) happens fosters and supports certain behaviors, attitudes, and even paradigms of relation. This is especially true when considering online communities.

Seeking community online can become tied up with the pursuit of virtual personas sought out almost like utilitarian (and perhaps fleeting) acquisitions plucked casually from a great mass of cyber-humanity. There are risks to viewing real communities, relationships, and people in terms of “cheap digital words” and virtual personas, alongside the benefits. Community is real only if it makes room to address real struggles and concerns. Such concerns often fare better or seem to fit in more naturally with mediums other than social networking websites. However, this may be impacted by design decisions made by the operators (perhaps inadvertently).

Attitudes and Norms

Communities tend to foster certain attitudes and norms. Do Internet social networking sites (or does the existence of Internet social networking) change attitudes towards social norms of interaction? Nancy Willard, director of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, has expressed concerns about the types of norms established by social networking for teenagers. She sees a heightened risk for unsafe disclosure of personal information, addiction, risky sexual behavior, cyber-bullying, exposure to dangerous communities, and cyber-threats (threats posted in cyberspace).

Teens simply do not have the brain development necessary to consistently make safe and responsible choices, especially in an environment where actions are disassociated from consequences and the social norms support inappropriate choices. Many teens are using these sites to explore their personal identities and to establish ‘social status.’ Unfortunately, under today's societal standards, these activities tend to encourage the presentation of provocative, intimate information that can cross the lines of safety and appropriateness

(Willard, 2006, p. 18).

Perhaps all online social networking has inherent properties or tendencies of concern, but this has hardly been established. While no clear discrimination is mentioned between types of sites here, logic suggests that the type of site itself might well have an impact upon the prevalence and reinforcement of the behaviors of concern mentioned. Perhaps the very existence and accessibility of particular types of networks is the change of concern, not just the utilization of them. Being fearful about the decline of our youth in modern times seems to be a bit of a lazy generalization, albeit one that gets perennial expression as a satisfying theme for the presses perceived target audiences.
Some believe they have proven these concerns are myths. A recent study titled The Digital Youth Project\(^2\), based on research conducted at the University of Southern California and the University of California at Berkeley, is earned mention in the Washington Times for its recognition of the benefits of social networking. The lead author of the study, Mizuko Ito, identified what she called myths in statements like ‘social networking is dangerous and making youth lazy’ as the basis for her forthcoming book (Goff, 2009).

Gay communities have always had their own niches, norms, and values, but existed within the cereal influence of the greater community. Gay culture has been more tolerant of rebellious forms of self-expression and “offline” social networking. Gay communities of various varieties have existed as isolated subcultures with unique characteristics from long before the popular adoption of the Internet. Relationships have commonly been more far-flung, freely formed, and easily dissolved as a means of self-expression and in the pursuit of personal fulfillment. Existing standards of the mainstream culture did not apply as rigidly in all areas.

These very same characteristics seem to be well supported by many modern social networking systems online. The symbolic, flexible, experimental sense of identity as a virtual “fashion” to be celebrated among your peers is a type of drag that is available to everyone online. Old ideas about identity as a static and rigid duty have been supplanted with perhaps more temporal play. One could suggest that people play even more to the roles as a social act online, even as they can create new ones. Reputation capital is however becoming a moderating force as youth begin to face their previous incarnations online when job hunting or seeking a serious mate.

This shift began before Internet social networking, even outside of the gay community and is to some extent fostered by commercialism and democracy. Finding oneself among one’s peers has taken on tones of liberation and self-actualization encouraged by the counter-cultural movements of the 60’s and 70’s. This is also a group of people with an attitude and sensibility ripe for commercial exploitation.

The nature of online communications is well suited to those seeking fantasy. It is also well suited to short, affirmative statements of gushing affection. This can become incorporated into users habits as a form of maintenance that is non-threatening and further serves to ‘brand’ an identity of affiliation. In this, both gender and sexual orientation can become becomes pronounced identifiers. “…[Y]oungsters are helping each other being valued and getting the acknowledgement they seek. They are using the website to get a feeling of self-confidence….and constantly being reminded that they are all right and someone likes them. Here, the website with its different features plays a crucial role. The youngsters do not talk like that when they meet face to face…” (Larson, 2007, p. 12).\(^3\)

So here an obvious impact is a new form of maintenance for the relationship. This fantasy-like maintenance, however, can have various impacts and reshape the type of relationship offline. An example of one such impact is the ease with which

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\(^2\) The full text of The Digital Youth Project report is available here: http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/report
\(^3\) This is also available here: http://vbn.aau.dk/files/17515750/Understanding_social__networking._Bidrag_til_bog.pdf
commitments can be altered or avoided—such as sending an email at the last minute indicating that you won’t be able to keep plans with a friend.

Virtual violations and bullying can produce genuine harm. “This event in cyberspace, first discussed by Julian Dibbell (1993), involved a real life controller who, through his online character (Bungle) and some subprograms of the Lambda MOO, managed to assault two other characters (legba and Starsinger) in the MOO. Dibbell’s account and subsequent analyses suggest strongly that the controller of Bungle harmed the two people who had created and controlled legba and Starsinger. Moreover, the cyber-rape seems to have shocked the other members of LambdaMOO, and they responded by means that are common in close-knit communities: they condemned and ostracized Bungle, they called on an authority to issue a punishment, and they established stricter rules for behavior in the future” (Powers, 2003, p. 191).

**Behavior**

A fundamental question when considering online communities as they fit in with traditional communities is “How do members’ behaviors and expectations change when they go online?” Additionally, one could ask, “Does the supposed anonymity of online social networking promote dishonesty?” One form of behavior is removed, or rather transformed—body language. Body language is the fundamental “tell” used to identify liars in real life by psychologists and, with less precision, common people. In the absence of this fundamental tell, lying often works online. A study by one team at the University of British Columbia, Canada found some interesting results that have been collaborated by forensic psychologists.

“When people are interacting face to face, there is something called the 'motivational impairment effect’, where your body will give off some cues as you become more nervous and there's more at stake with your lie,” says forensic psychologist Michael Woodworth. In a computer-mediated environment, the exact opposite occurs. “Lying online avoids the physical cues which could give the game away… Deception is one of the most significant and pervasive social phenomena of our age,” said Woodworth who pointed out that a growing number of people are falling prey to Internet deception. Deception linked to communication technology is affecting personal and professional lives and “an important set of concerns have emerged about how technology affects digital deception.” (Dublin Evening Herald, 2009).

There are fewer unavoidable feedback cues for verification and fewer mechanisms available to build trust. Different mechanisms have evolved, but these are quite different from the natural and traditional body language. This has led to concerns over academic dishonesty in online classes. Sileo and Sileo (2007) cite multiple sources regarding these concerns. “Many instructors acknowledge that academic dishonesty in online classes is easier to achieve because of World Wide Web and Internet materials (Renard, 2000). Online education therefore comes under considerable scrutiny over the issue of academic integrity (Heberling, 2002; Jocoy & DiBiase, 2006)” (p. 55).

In the context of online social networking, profile dishonesty is simpler than in person dishonesty. “While dating and deception have always gone hand-in-hand, online
dating has taken the potential for dishonesty to new heights. The Web allows people to represent themselves in any way they choose, without having to validate their claims unless they meet their correspondents face-to-face.” (Presswire, 2008) In such a scenario, it would be easier for “normal” honesty to change. This is one example of where normality can change because of the medium.

There are structural mediations that exert obvious effects upon the communication process. For example, the programmer Ellen Ullman (1996) discusses the dissonant experience of online communication meeting face to face communication in *Come In, CQ: The Body on the Wire*. Ellen met and grew intimate (in a way) with a fellow programmer via email. One would send a message, the other would reply, and so the process continued. Eventually they agreed to meet for dinner. When they did, she noticed their conversation fell into a familiar rhythm. “One talks, stops; then the other replies, stops. An hour later we were still in this rhythm. With a shock I realized that we have finally gone out to dinner only to *exchange email*” (p. 17).

These changes are not merely accommodations of the norm to structural constraints. These are changes that impact the way relationships are formed and identified, as well as the frequency, nature, content and ultimately the way people relate. Social networking sites not only can act like sub-culture viruses, but they can also produce new normative patterns of communication behavior, friending behavior, and terminology. Users learn about their place in the community in new ways, and what their expectations should be. Ultimately, any social networking site is just another avenue of expression open for a normal user, but that avenue is more than just a phone or a piece of paper. Ultimately that avenue can exert more of shaping influence upon how relationships are formed and progress than any coffee shop.

Whether that influence is serving, shaping, or both, it is creating new problems with new solutions. For example, instant messaging is a seemingly neutral and innocuous text exchange between people online. Users must learn to balance the benefit of wide and constant availability with the drawback of being constantly available to everyone. The technology can help with this, just as doors and doorbells and answering machines have. Customs can be developed to simulate the experience of going to someone’s front door and observing expected protocol in contacting them – however the protocol is a recent tradition with no real social pressure attached to it. This new protocol is bluntly primitive and can be graceless as well as dishonest.

In screening instant messages – quite a different behavior from avoiding eye contact in a bar – one is making the decision who to ignore and who not to ignore or who to hide from and when. There is an ever present list of “pop up excuses” available. Ignoring anyone in any circumstances can take on a programmatic aspect, and becomes a simple computational gesture. “One of the key attributes of online interaction is the ability to ignore email, instant message or flirt,” says Markus Frind. He's the founder of the free dating website Plenty of Fish. “There is no face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact that requires you to feel the same level of guilt were you to ignore someone you had met” (Mintz, 2009, Life Section). Freedom from traditional mores and conventions has negative aspects along with the positive.

A quick search for rudeness online reveals plenty of consensuses, albeit hearsay, that people who spend a lot of time online are ruder. Even experts are prone to use phrases like “studies suggest” when surveying the relevance of rudeness online, without
citing the precise studies that they are referencing. This rudeness is held to be a characteristic of a youthful technology-oriented generation.

The blog site for the Association of Colleges and Research Libraries has an insightful post by Steven B, where he is commenting on the book Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before by Jean M Twenge. “Living in a technology dominated world, with social lives that are revealed online, the new generation has a different concept of privacy and personal boundaries. Making a good impression means far less to them. Exhibiting rude behavior, such as listening to an mp3 player or playing a video game while others are present, is thought to be part of living in a technology bubble… Generation Me has access to ubiquitous technology, and can always be in touch with peers even though they are isolated in their own technology bubble. Think of students who maintain contact with friends primarily through IM or social networks while alone in their room.” (B., S., 2006)

A similar observation from a public school teacher is quoted by USA Today: “Teacher Conrad faults society more than she does young people. ‘I don't think we're requiring civic responsibility anymore — the social graces, ceremony and ritual, dress codes, social mores and manners,’ she says. ‘My students seem to be saying, 'I can separate myself from whatever experience I'm in and create my own bubble'” (Jayson, 2006).

**Communication Content**

Ultimately it must be conceded that each media supports certain types of content. In the case of social media, the focus of the content is often contextually expected to be thematic to the site or service. A site with prominent and persistent components that focus upon searching for and finding other users based upon particular criteria is creating a cultural style for its users through structural elements. This style may be associated with “the gay community” or any other community for that matter. Specifically when a site is claiming to be catering to the gay community, the cultural assumptions about normative behavior are ever-present like a powerful undercurrent. The site’s vision of its users and its community is conveyed through its design, features, and emphasis.

Posting activist content on a ‘hook-up’ site is likely to be met with a perception of dissonance, just as posting gay hook-up propositions on an activist site would be. Users may feel the identity of the site it threatened. It is a common social response for people to feel compelled to point out what is abnormal publicly so as to avoid being branded abnormal themselves, or too stupid to know what is considered abnormal. This is a very primitive tribal instinct. Groups may often unify against aberrations more easily than they unify for anything. This is an easy point of consensus and a way to affirm that the spotter is “in.”

Chat rooms are supposedly designed for the kind of chats that a group of people might have while sitting in a football stadium. This might not be the ideal spot for certain types of discussions. However, there are private messages and in some cases private group messages that can be exchanged. Each chat room can be different. One chat room might foster the kinds of conversations that go on in a bar, while another more like in a church. Still, there are common elements.

One truth of content on social networking websites is that “[t]he more present you are, the more opportunity you have to influence the norms.” (boyd, 2007). Alongside the
ephemeral nature of online chit-chat there is the realization that there is a loss of ownership and to some extent a loss of control over what is expressed and what can be done with it. While there are ways to grab attention off-line or indirectly to put a tone on that conversation or add more subtle innuendo that can later be explained, these largely don’t work online. As someone enters a chat room wild-eyed with rage or devastated with grief, other users largely don’t know until that user types something to spell it out.

The presence that a user has is not the same and the natural influences and constraints of physical presence are not there to inform, shape, direct, or create a sense of consequential gravity. Friendship by its very nature online tends to be performance-oriented, with the performance as the presence. Computers themselves are task oriented, as is the Internet. It is my contention that most current online social networking sites serve as poor channels for meeting new people if the intention of that meeting is to develop a relationship beyond the task-oriented.

Privacy and performance don’t work well together. Unless one is keeping in touch with a known friend or group of friends, privacy is largely equivalent to non-existence. For someone seeking their peer group (who has not already met them), and acceptance from them, certain things need to be made known. Finding and being found is a different phenomenon online than it is when physically meeting up with those you already know.

Performative identity among peers and as an instrument in finding one’s peer group impacts self-awareness and other-awareness in different ways that are experienced when identity is defined more concretely as real presence. Online there is a new stage, with props provided, scripts a-plenty, and the authority figures intangibly ever-present but able to eject you from the theatre without any recourse available.

As users post profiles and photographs (sometimes naked), are they in essence cognizant of violating their own privacy? Is this privacy-diminishing behavior engineered by the design of the site or the technology itself? Do advertisements, marketing, and a site’s cultural assumption truly serve as new scripts? Is the “status” game being manipulated to encourage greater and greater disclosure? Are users more able to find and express themselves on this stage, or are they simply being commoditized and their relationships turned into services?

Students are grappling with gender and identity issues in new ways because of this new medium (Torrens, 2007). Lest we forget this is not merely a struggle that happens in a vacuum for an individual, students are also learning what society thinks, and their peers think on this stage. The way a community defines itself is not only to itself but also to the greater world and culture. In general, Identity according to others has greater credibility (Hardt, 2005). This includes one’s own and one’s community’s external identity to mainstream culture.

The notion of privacy is not just changing for the gay community, but the change is quite pronounced for the gay community specifically. Openness is generally seen as a sign of progress towards acceptance, and this is predominately a very well supported position by the facts. The change for the gay community is not merely symptomatic of progress towards acceptance, nor is it entirely the result of new social media. It is without question the result of both. The openness (and dare I say overt-ness) expressed on semi-private online community sites today never existed on a similar scale with old
media. The sense that the gay community is not merely isolated or marginalized but rather tied together across the globe is one possible take on new media’s impact.

Yet the identity that is shared is as brittle and vapid as ever, if not more so. Most social networking websites for the gay community are not, by their very design, trying to strengthen or forge community or foster friendship. Using the site becomes as much the focus as relating to one’s peers. Use of the site often emphasizes selling oneself or searching for what one wants like shopping. The question remains unresolved – who “is” the community? Is the community what I see online at this site or that? Can my community be trusted to act like a community, and if so how? Is the site fooling the users or are the users fooling each other? If someone is to blame, who? If someone is going to help, who?

Does this Bleed Over Into Off-line Behavior?

A “social gadgets” oriented approach to community online may be the result of the medium. Social gadgets are interface that offer, convey, facilitate, and support the functionality of social interaction but are not themselves the content of the interaction. The representations they convey and the interactions they offer are re-embodiments of deliberate communication acts originating in real people. The approach to and relationship with these gadgets is supposed to be secondary to the users approach towards and relationships with each other. When users engage each other as if they were screening the personals for attractive commodities for acquisitions online, this can be understood to be the rather crass or blunt instrumentation failing to obscure their lack of sophistication.

The value of a neighbor, however, might be modified by exposure to such instruments. There remain salient questions that merit careful research. How do friend lists of hundreds change the relationships to the friends on those lists and towards friending in general? Could the importance of a neighbor be diminished? Could online competition to real relationships from the potential sea of online personas dissuade users from spending as much time with real people? Might expectations for social convention established through such media transfer in some ways to offline behavior? Does the dismissive and utilitarian approach supported by online social gadgets translate into a more instrumental approach towards others in real life (one that reduces others to more of a symbolic representation in relation to oneself)?

Some research has indicated that those who interact online frequently are actually more likely to interact with their neighbors in real life. Keith Hampton’s e-Neighbors: Neighborhoods in the Network Society (2010), currently under review, presents experimental examples that demonstrate positive interventions. Such studies, and critical enquiries into them, address important emerging issues.

Communities are not formed of gadgets – they are formed of neighbors. Some neighbors might live closer than others. While proximity is a circumstance that creates a type of relationship with the physical community of an area, no such constraint operates online. One may say the online communities are the most intentional of communities. Yet, they are subject to other circumstantial constraints. Furthermore, much of what is called community online does not possess the characteristics of what has traditionally been known as community, perhaps because of this very lack of constraints. Communication trans-actions occur and ties may develop of various natures and
persistence. The needs of others cannot assert themselves in the same ways. There are no homeless. There may be advocates, but the Internet homeless simply do not exist online without advocates being allowed to insert themselves and represent them. Victimization is largely compartmentalized, out of sight, and left conveniently avoidable to “whyne” in their designated corners – not out on the streets where the reality of one’s neighbor may be viscerally and inescapably felt as a natural part of the community. The communities that exist are communities of users seeking other users. Being a part of the community is an activity that has its place designed for specific tasks. Geographic ties of lineage and economic historical circumstances are not among them, unless one seeks to meet in real life.

Theoretically anyone can say anything anywhere online. Theoretically what happens online is merely a projection of our real lives (or some aspect of them), personalities, and wishes. The value of our communications, and certain types of communication, are changed as well as the position of that communication when it occurs online however. That change in position and value can influence content selection. Getting attention online is entirely different from getting attention in real life. Exchanging glances across the library is quite different from exchanging emoticons. One may socialize as a natural result of other people being around in real life as they engage in normal activities in the community. Going to a research engine leaves only the option of leaving a comment (if that). Much of what is done online, as opposed to physically in the community, is either isolated or overtly social for its own sake. There is a place to bank and a place to chit-chat with “your” bankers, but these are not one and the same. This attitude towards community makes community more of an effort than a consequence of living. Socializing may involve self-expression but is treated more as a need that gets satisfied than as a part of being in a community.

If users are sitting at their keyboards forming relationships and seeking life-partners, ultimately this approach is going to modify the way sex happens. Love at first sight and dating until going steady can be transformed into something closer to interviewing candidates based upon their resumes (profiles) until a list of finalists is obtained. These individuals are not seen in the greater community interacting as part of their business of living but evaluated by their very specific advertisements and “statistics” presented. While this may make logical sense, it doesn’t make intuitive sense. Imagine picking out the family pet online. Even if that pet could talk, this probably would not be the way most people would go looking for a pet. Being told the pet is spunky or affectionate by an eager shelter worker would not be the same as finding out for oneself. This is not how people have found each other and discovered their interest in each other traditionally. The experience of “chemistry” online is even more of a hallucination than it is in traditional mating. Matching a list of the qualifications you think are right for long-term happiness isn’t going to work any more than other cerebral approaches. Deep unconscious forces drive attraction and ultimately play a significant part in determining what makes magic and what doesn’t. Sex will be discussed further in a later chapter.

Online relationships can transfer over into off-line relationships. “…[T]he development of multiplexity can involve the conversion of relationships that operate only online to ones that include in-person and telephonic encounters. Just as community ties that began in-person can be sustained through email, online ties can be reinforced and broadened through in-person meetings.”(Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Taking the
relationship “off-line” is often seen as going to the next level. That would mean that online only relationships were viewed to be at a lower level. Not all users feel this way, however.

“For me, gay Bombay is a family that I chose, and it’s a family and space that I wouldn’t trade for any in the world” (Roy, 2003). Choice and affiliation are seen by some as the highest forms of (and perhaps values of) community. Social clubs are about choice and affiliation. Communities are not just about choice and affiliation. Communities are about people. Private clubs can keep the riff-raff out. Communities don’t include only individuals you feel great about. Communities include people you don’t like. Friendships might be about choice but community is about more than fun-time friendships. Communities don’t center themselves around any one individual unless they are a cult or dictatorships. Families of choice are as valid as families of circumstance, but there is no objective reason ultimately for members of such families to commit to each other when the going gets rough. After all, its just choice that holds them together. Traditional families have largely fallen apart as the social pressures that keep them together have given way along with enforced roles and pressures to conform. What is left is either true friendship unencumbered, fun, or mutual dependence. Without community, friendships and families become much more subject to fashion, moods and whims.

There are four different (and at times contradicting) models for analyzing how online (or other) relationships are valued and contextualized. Social presence theory suggests that different media create contrasting degrees of immediacy or remoteness in relationships. The medium that the user selects for meeting an individual is therefore dependent upon the users desire for an appropriate degree of perceived presence and intimacy. The hyper-personal perspective suggests that individuals gravitate towards the medium that enables them to present their own qualities in the most favorable light. Social context cues theory suggests that the reduction of contextual cues will lead to more impersonal and nonconforming behaviors. Despite this prediction, some feel they have found satisfying relationships online with people they have not physically met. The SIDE model suggests that people online tend to rely even more upon norms and expected social roles to find acceptance precisely because of the lack of cues that exist in real life interactions. This fosters greater emphasis upon an instrumental effort to gain acceptance and become attractive. Anonymity strengthens the appeal of categorizations and stereotyping. (Wood and Smith, 2006)

Each of these models predicts differences in perception, expectation, or behavior when the media for relationships change. These models are not simply ways of understanding individuals efforts to express themselves, but recognitions of the impact that external factors can play in supporting or shaping the communication process itself. Relationships formed in particular contexts or practiced in those contexts may break free of the constraints of their originating culture and assumptions, but in that process the relationships themselves could well change. Perceptions of “the other” may change with the media, as well as perceptions of the relationship. When half-imagined personas are inferred from deliberate profiles, these may come into conflict with real personas in actual meetings. Seeing someone think on his or her feet in real life might be far less flattering than what appeared to be spontaneous grace online. The sense of what is rude may change with the media, and with it the perception of the rudeness of an individual.
Online personas can be composed as much of self-affirming feedback loops on the part of the perceiver as they are realities. When following up through other channels, meeting, doing, and extending or maintaining relationships off-line we may discover that what was learned about relationships in general or a given specific relationship is suddenly wrong.

As individuals start to form and maintain relationships online, this approach to relating becomes enculturated. It is not only subsumed by the greater culture, but becomes interwoven with it. Culture adapts to the technology and finally merges to some extent with it.

The spread of cultural change has been studied commercially in terms of fads for a long time by many researchers. In his book Tipping Point, Gladwell (2000) describes three types of key players that build momentum for “cultural” change. These are connectors (those with huge social networks), mavens (information brokers and experts), and salesmen (powerful communicators who are motivated to persuade). In addition, “the Stickiness Factor” is defined as the quality that compels people to pay close, sustained attention to a product, concept, or idea. Site operators may harness the power of these three players along with stickiness factor of “sex appeal” as part of their business models.

While the theory itself is subject to debate, what is not debatable is that these networks take on new scales and forms of communication online. The roles themselves change online. For example, the search engine may take on the role of Maven even as the site can become the context of all roles. The site itself becomes a type of authority. “Visitors primarily arrive at social networking sites through direct navigation/bookmarking, Google search, Yahoo! search, and links in emails (in that order)” (iProspect, 2007). Habituation to a site becomes a social choice with cultural consequences.

Ultimately online social networks are as much about who is not on them as who is. Given the very nature of these sites and the anonymity that they can provide, the next wave in social networking might be centered around the careful granting of access to trusted individuals, smaller in scale, and far less public. When teenagers learn that these commercial sites are sinks for everyone – from parents to teachers to “the uncool” to future employers – and that what transpires there can come back to haunt them - the resourceful will turn to technologies and tools they more fully control. Private, exclusive social networks may well be the next wave in community for the coming generation.

Social groups are not task groups, and peer status is not really about absurdly large friend lists that no one takes seriously. All that proves is that you are not ostracized. Peer status ultimately belongs to those who make the culture, not those who consume it. Social groups are about whom you choose to associate with and what that says about you. If you can’t control that then you can never have a truly independent identity.

The Impact of These Websites on the Gay Community

In some ways, social networking websites cater to the behaviors and attitudes that have characterized certain segments of the gay population already (including “non-gay” sites). Traditionally, gay community has not formed around the concept of mutual aid or cooperative economic enterprise. Gay community has formed around mutual enjoyment and affiliation, as a form of extended friendship. Gay community has largely been a
A fundamental impact of the existence of these websites is that they provide visibility and accessibility to the gay community. While gay people tend to be a minority (if a significant minority) in any given area and cultural forces have largely acted as pressures towards secrecy or an interpretation of homosexuality as a moral failing or diseases, this visibility and accessibility can serve as a validation of personal identity and the beginnings of a validation for a community identity.

Community requires membership and participation. Intentional communities—even if they are formed primarily for commercial reasons—must serve emotional and even “spiritual” needs of individuals (not just intellectual or political needs) if they are to survive. Communities must foster belonging. “The building of an ‘affectionate community’ must be as much a part of our political movement as are campaigns for civil rights. In this way we may pre-figure the shape of personal relationships in a society grounded in equality and justice rather than exploitation and oppression, a society where autonomy and security do not preclude each other but coexist” (D’Emilio, 1998, p. 139).

Sex may or may not be associated with community or with affection. While online communities may not have overt radical political activism at their core, wherever real community is formed—even if for the pleasure of it—political power starts to accumulate.

The fear of activism online might not be due to the media itself, although the influences and players controlling that media tend to craft the space in such a way as to fail to successfully support activism. They gay community’s activism has largely only been successful or prominent in terms of increased visibility and insertion into media. This is naturally a generalization and it should be acknowledged that there have been and are some notable exceptions.

While I accept these views as a valid choice, the pervasive antipathy to politics among gay men and lesbians baffles me, since every aspect of our lives is contested. To acknowledge oneself as queer is to occupy a politically loaded status. The very spaces we depend on to give us a sense of community and family--be they gay community centers, bars, health clinics, newspapers, or social groups--exist in a hostile social context. Still, only a fraction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people engage in overt political activity. Most of us are unaware of gay politics and history, have never written a letter or sent a fax or made a phone call to a politician, and if we are indeed like the majority of Americans, probably don’t even vote.


Beyond this, the overt validation of casual semi-anonymous sex with multiple partners has been a prominent characteristic of these websites as associated with both the gay community and the greater community. Pornography has served this purpose and to some extent “the personals” historically, but modern dating sites—especially those that proclaim their affiliations with the gay community—have surpassed and remediated these artifacts. Specifically, the marketing of gay social networking websites has not been focused upon making friends or throwing charity auctions. Few sites beyond...
“compatible partners” (which was brought into existence from a straight-only site by threat of lawsuit) have invested much infrastructure in truly assisting individuals to find their soul mates. Few sites make sexual education or health, serious relationship advice, or community building prominent or consistent features.

Clearly gay men and women do more than endlessly search for a date or more to the point have sex, and their sexual orientations impact more of their lives than simply the sex act. Not all members of the gay community are looking for long-term monogamous relationships, but some are – and those that are not may also be looking for safer sex information and other connections with their community. More will be said on this in a later chapter.

In a more pro-active vein, the question of how these sites may play a role in intervention has been explored by some researchers with a community-focus. According to an online article by Evans (2008) in POZ magazine, the Internet is strongly suspect as a factor in the spike in HIV diagnoses in New York City between 2001 and 2005. “…as the number of Internet-based dating and sex websites has increased, so has the number of new HIV infections… 47% of gay and bisexual men participating in a recent online POZ/AIDSmeds survey say they meet the majority of their dating and sex partners online.” In addition, “49% say that the number of romantic and sexual partners they meet online has increased or greatly increased, compared with the number of ‘connections’ made five years ago at venues like bars and clubs” (above Disturbing Trends).

This same article mentions an intervention effort with a virtual gay cruise-ship, where men get to choose from one of four attractive animated pursuers, “guiding them through the cruise ship and helping them think through a number of sexual decision-making scenarios arising from encounters with other animated ship passengers.” The majority of men who participated reported it was enjoyable and helpful. (Evans, 2008, under Brave New World). This is the type of intervention that can be integrated into gay community sites.

Generically, the suitability of these communities to exert an influence upon current events and community standards is an emerging question. For example, the controversial Iraq war provoked a lot of online activity but the impact of this activity is itself questionable. Blogging was a common response. Heim (2008) concludes that some evidence exists that A-list blogs influenced news coverage (and may have even exerted an agenda-setting influence by keeping attention on an issue). While this is not conclusive evidence that blogging ultimately influences the political landscape, this suggests that online activity can impact the wider and more broadly disseminated media in some cases.

A more direct approach is also possible, and perhaps more effective. A recent visit to the weblog of Dr. Elizabeth Lane Lawley (Professor and Director of the Lab for Social Computing at RIT), mamamusings.net, provides another example. Prominently featured was a reference to a new project born from a collaboration between RIT and the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle called picturing the impossible. “Out of that meeting, and a few that followed, came the idea of a city-wide ARG that took advantage of RIT’s strengths in interactive games & media, and the newspaper's strengths in community outreach. Since then, I've been working with the newspaper and with my colleagues at RIT to design, develop, and (soon) deploy that game…but what I love most about the
game is that we've tied it directly to three local charities, each of which will be affiliated with a specific faction in the game. When you register, you'll choose a faction. Each week, the faction with the largest number of accumulated points will have a donation made to their affiliated charity” (Lawley, 2009). This charitable form of activism is fun and is also a direct way to involve community members in their real life local communities.

Figure 7.4 on page 219 of Gay Identity, New Storytelling and the Media by Christopher Pullen (2009) shows a smiling Arsham Parsi, “creator of the Iranian Queer Organization, a significant web portal supporting gay men and lesbians in Iran, gaining in excess of 5000 members.” This is also a very specific community with real challenges and goals. Visibility and the opportunity to connect socially creates a media presence but also, without directly needing to push a given activist agenda, supports individuals and a community in a way that an offline presence might never be able to. This website is about the users, their community and experiences, and to some extent the impact of their community environment upon individuals. While such a focus might be derided as “keyboard activism” here in the United States, it is clear that the users of this site feel a definite benefit exists simply from the site’s presence if not use.

Much has been claimed about the democratic potential of the Internet, which arguably devolves down ultimately to an argument about individuals being free to shape their own subcultures. One advocate for this up-beat viewpoint is Lawrence Lessing. In Against the Machine: How the Web is Reshaping Culture and Commerce – and Why it Matters, Siegel (2000) criticizes this view. His criticisms of the positive expected outcomes of Internet communication upon the democratic vitality of a community or country make lucid the difference between the potential exercise and the actual mechanisms of democracy. “More telling is Lessig’s idea of ‘democracy,’ a word that in the American context means government by the people through freely elected representatives. Lessig seems to think it means ‘creativity,’ or, as they like to say on the Internet, ‘self-expression.’ But even a tyrant allows their subjects to write love poems or exchange favorite recordings…. Lessig has confused what makes democracy possible – certain political, not cultural, mechanisms – with what democracy makes possible: free ‘expression’” (p. 27).

In essence, the Internet’s impact upon any community is always more powerful as a potential for the members of that community to take action through the agency of than it is as a reality in and of itself. Real communities are not made or remade through social networking websites. The democratic potential of the Internet is simply that not only a few can control a media seen by many. Yet if those users are unable or unwilling to use it wisely for change, the result is nothing worth much to democracy. The Internet simply serves as a powerful opportunity to those who would take it – an opportunity that can change the landscape or languish in a shallow media with its users.

Conclusions

Virtual personas and communities can help to negotiate identity in new ways, and to find likeminded individuals. Therefore, virtual communities can strengthen identity, but tend to favor certain types of identity and certain activities for communities. To those seeking to free themselves from cultural constraints and to explore identity in a greater community, online social networking can provide opportunities that would not exist on
the same scale otherwise. However, communities online are not generally much like communities in real life. While they may be used for activism, they are generally not – most sites are commercial and therefore seek to avoid controversy and ultimately support the status quo ala Chomsky.

How communities meet, keep in touch, and share space have changed due to online social networking. All of these activities work together to shape their identification as a group. In the process the concept of community and individual identity are to some extent remediated, and the online version competes with the traditional version.
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Chapter 6
An Analysis of Gay.com
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An Analysis of Gay.com

The Internet is a living and vital media and not an archival library. Among the new challenges this introduces to any analysis of its media or sites is a requirement to contextualize such a study within time. During the writing of this thesis, the design (not just content) of gay.com has changed three times. Each change has been communicated to the users as an improvement for their user experience brought about by the intention to serve the users better. *In these changes, the communications to the users have cast these users as consumers and not participants.* The analysis in these pages refers to the site design in October of 2009. What has occurred on the site is no doubt part of a competitive effort to remain palatable to the users and to recruit new users (see motives – chapter four).

What has been discussed in the previous chapters will be applied here in an analysis of gay.com. The analysis will be undertaken to determine what mediating impacts the design of the site may have upon user behavior, specifically here for members of the gay community that use this site. Supported behaviors might not be expressly generated through the site itself, but evaluating these influences can help to determine the cultural assumptions and “motives” (as defined in chapter four) of the site designers. The sites components are furthermore examined for what they communicate about the identity of the community they are professing to serve.

Gay.com as Social New Media

All social networking websites are new media and social media. Like most major social networking websites, gay.com uses advertising and subscriptions to make money (like old media). Thus a first question must be about transparency. How transparent is gay.com? A fundamental part of transparency is the accurate representation of your motivations and clarity about whom the stakeholders are that orchestrate and produce content. Transparency in this sense can be understood to be the opposite of an attempt to obscure motivations, operational decision processes, and stakeholders.

The latest design of gay.com has a company info link at the bottom of the main page, along with an advertising info link, and a non-clickable statement “© 2009 Here Media, Inc. All Rights Reserved.” There is also a legal notice link.

Clicking the company info link takes the user to [http://www.heremedia.com](http://www.heremedia.com), which displays the logo, a clickable list of properties as icons, and an address and phone numbers. Here media, inc. is presented as the owner. The properties listed are: Out, The Advocate, Here!, Alyson Books, HIV + Mag, Out Traveler.com, Here Films, She Wired.com, and Gay.com. This page is copyright Here Media LLC (not HereMedia inc). Clicking on any of the icons for these properties takes you to an end user site (like gay.com) not an “about” page.

The only real information is the address and the phone number. One could infer that these sites are all somehow associated and probably owned by here media. No statement of purpose, history, or stock symbol is presented. To find out about this company, I needed to research elsewhere. The information that follows was not on this heremedia.com, or any publicly presented webpage owned by heremedia that I was able
to locate. From this I conclude that the owners of heremedia are not interested in making their financial operations transparent to the general public.

Before gay.com was owned by heremedia it was owned by a corporation called PlanetOut, with the stock ticker symbol lgbt. Gay.com was founded in 1994 by Mark Elderkin, who later founded the Gay Ad Network (Alamurto, 2008). “Founded in 1995, PlanetOut is no stranger to acquisitions. PlanetOut Partners Inc. was created in late 2000 by combining Online Partners, the parent company of Gay.com, and PlanetOut Corp. into a single online entity.” (CBJ, 2005). “PlanetOut went public in October 2004 raising $41.6 million” (Brooks 2005). Yahoo has not de-listed this index as of the date of this writing, and it is currently showing as 38 cents/share (even though it is not publicly traded and doesn’t exist anymore). The chart for this stock looks like this:

![Chart of PlanetOut stock performance](http://finance.yahoo.com)

This chart shows a long fall for a stock that was traded at about $15/share in January 2005. From these auspicious beginnings, Planet Out acquired RSVP cruises in January 2005 (Wu, 2007) followed by LPI media (“Liberation Publications Inc.”, which published the Advocate and Out magazines, HIV Plus, and Alyson Books) in November 2005 for $24 million (Selvin, 2005). The shopping spree ended shortly thereafter when it was discovered that these acquisitions did not ultimately turn out to be profitable, perhaps due to how they were managed.

“After LPI Media was sold for $31.1 million in 2005 to PlanetOut--who threw its wrecking ball at The Advocate, devaluing its content by putting it on Gay.com, spending no money on it's website, and ruining the importance of its subs to advertisers by offering them cheap with Gay.com memberships--it took them less than two years to diminish the worth of the company to the 4.7 million Here! Media (Regent) paid for it. Only Out pulled through in decent financial shape. That credit belongs to its EIC” (Wieder, 2009).

In less than two years, it was evident that there was a problem. The slide went from evident to serious around the second quarter of 2007. Around July of 2007, a majority stake in Planet Out was sold off as part of a rescue buy-out from Cascade
investments, Allen & Co, and other investors. Planet Out also sold their RSVP cruise division to Atlantis in October 2007 (Writer, 2007).

The downward trend became inescapably pronounced in that last quarter of 2008, after Planet Out announced the intention to sell their LPI properties in April 2007 to Regent Releasing (Here! Networks, owner of gaywired.com) (Sass, 2008). In January of 2009, Planet Out announced they would be merging with (acquired by) Here! Networks LLC and Regent Entertainment Media Inc which they had sold the magazines to previously (Fell 2009). “‘Following a very thorough review of all of the strategic alternatives available to us, and the proposed transaction, our Board concluded that the opportunity to combine with Here Networks and Regent Entertainment Media was in the best interests of PlanetOut's stockholders,’ said Karen Magee, PlanetOut's CEO” (PlanetOut_Inc., 2009). The merger was complete with websites in June 2009.

From late 2004 with an IPO of $9/share as LGBT to the acquisition in early 2009, LGBT was a publicly traded corporation with publicly available records. While their interests were presumably those of the stockholders who sought to develop financial value, one could research their operational choices without great difficulty. As a potentially interested investor, I was unable to find the ticker symbol for Here! Media.

Using the phone number from http://www.heremedia.com/ brought me to a recording the first few times I called. I called several times at different times of the day, and ultimately left a message with contact information at their investor relations line which was never returned. After this, I called their main phone and was placed on hold almost immediately. After about 5 minutes the same operator answered as if I was on a new call. I was then transferred to a pleasant female but there appeared to be a language barrier at play in the conversation. She fumbled quite a bit and did not seem to understand my request for a stock ticker symbol, but eventually I was able to find out from her that Here media is not publicly traded and there was no stock ticker symbol. She said there was not yet sufficient interest. I was forwarded an email that was sent out to previous PlanetOut shareholders.

“As a former PNO Stockholder, your client should have received a statement from Well Fargo, the transfer agent and registrar, stating that for each PNO share in your possession, you receive one share of Here Media Common Stock and one shares of Here Media Special Stock. The par value per share is $0.001.” (E-mail from Here! media, Oct. 21, 2009). While I am not an expert in finance, this seems to contradict the press releases from Planet Out. Regardless, this privately held company is under the control of the majority owners primarily, and not accountable to share holders as it once was. The ownership and financials are less available since it is now a private company.

The question naturally arises of who owns gay.com now, and what are their plans? Here networks is described as “the premier global company for providing news and entertainment to the LGBT community. The company is also uniquely positioned to provide advertisers opportunities to reach its niche audience across platforms including television, online, print publishing, and filmed entertainment. Here Media’s unmatched reach positions the company as a leader in creating an interactive relationship with consumers across all its iconic brands…” (echelon_magazine, 2009). Apparently Paul Colichman is Chief Executive Officer of Here Media and Stephen P. Jarchow is Chairman (echelon_magazine, 2009). “The board of directors of the new company will initially consist of Mr. Jarchow, Mr. Colichman, and Phil Kleweno, PlanetOut's
Chairman” (PlanetOut_Inc., 2009). For information, there is the option to write to the following address:
Here Media
Attn: Legal Department
10990 Wilshire Blvd, Penthouse
Los Angeles, CA 90024

The issue of remediation is one way to approach this question of a changing dynamic in the communications networks of the gay community, with new strengths and weaknesses. The story of gay.com’s presence, interaction with other communication networks, and changes can be viewed as a story of new media remediation related to social networks. Remediation is generally considered a positive recasting, but might be a popular means of glossing over negative impacts. Not all critiques are so formulaic.

“Fears that The Advocate, America's most widely recognized national gay and lesbian publication, is being downsized into little more than a glossy propaganda machine for Here Media's other properties, which include gay cable channel here! television and a gay-themed film distribution company, continue to haunt the gay media community and those watching it” (Santoscoy, 2009).

Queerty describes the secretive failures and recent consolidations in gay media as a game of musical chairs, quoting John Waters appellation of Colichman as ‘the Gay Citizen Hearst.’ “Yet when it comes to gay media, Colichman has signaled he has little to no interest in gay media as anything other than a marketing tool. Speaking about Here! Magazine, his first print venture, Colichman said: ‘We did the magazine purely as a publicity piece for the network. We're not in the magazine business. It's a really saturated and very difficult market. I really have zero desire to be in the magazine business in any serious way. We simply use it as a marketing piece as we would a flier or a handout’…” (Queerty, 2009).

Within the re-launches of the site gay.com, and its community, there is also a tale of remediation within new media itself. Behind the re-launch in October 2008, was economics. This remediation reflects greater emphasis upon the profit-driven consumer based model and less emphasis upon active, positive citizenship and community. Community online isn’t a condition, right, responsibility, or born of necessity so much as a branded utility of choice, and by its very nature virtual rather than an instinctually pressing necessity.

A call to customer service during this re-launch to request clarification about the time-line expected before service was reliably restored led to the discovery that entire years subscriptions were being refunded routinely without much argument. Many users publicly and privately asked the service to revert to its former system. After over a week of severe outages, the operator enthusiastically recommended cancelling the subscription and provided no useful information. Gay.com published an open letter on their website. In this open letter, gay.com claimed to have tested extensively before the launch but found it was just too large and complex to test properly. Gay.com claimed to be identifying and fixing the bugs that led to unplanned system outages. Gay.com declared that it was committed to customer service and getting everyone on the site. Finally, they promised to be as open as possible in their communications to ‘you’ (gay.com, 2008).

From chapter one, the first premise is that the user has a goal that can be served by the media. The choice of this media may have less to do with how well it fulfills users
goals than other enculturating factors (such as the website url or the number of users). In the case of gay.com, a self-evident factor is the url — gay.com is “the” premiere domain name. Given the name of the domain, one could speculate that the goal served by the website is to cater to the gay. If one viewed being gay as an identity within a community, or as simply about sex then one would likely project this impression onto their expectations for such a domain name. Just as a domain name “asian.com” would be expected not to simply sell stereotypes about Asian people or risk being offensive, so gay.com would be expected not to simply sell stereotypes lest they risk offense. While a website “woman.com” might in effect be a tacky pornographic site, the misogynistic overtones of choosing such a name would be self-evident… unless one really did view women simply as sexual objects. The goal here, whatever it may be for the user, is distinctly tied in with their orientation towards homosexuality (excuse the pun).

We have already touched upon Colichman’s view of the place gay.com occupies in the media ecology and his goals. Online gays are sometimes idealized as collectively having more than their share of the avant-garde - those whose influence can be used to create “tipping points” among the affluent or in media culture at large. According to the advertising splashed across the front page of gay.com, a major goal served by the website is to attract interest in the videos offered by here media. These are consistently present, moving, attention grabbing, and take a prominent 1/3 or more of the “front door” screen space on the website without exception. This design and content change occurred in parallel with the relaunch and restructuring decisions.

The second premise is that the user is granted access to and some measure of control over a neutral (if shared) media space through the interface. On gay.com the control exists in chat messages and profiles as well as through member search utilities using predefined criteria. There is no “personal space” beyond the profile, which isn’t very flexible or interesting beyond the text you are allowed. I do not believe this is an arbitrary consequence of design limitations. The user is indoctrinated with advertising, through which they must proceed before accomplishing their goals. The gateway to their community is more like a mall than a cozy café. The prominent features are passive — watching media someone else made that is supposed to be about you, or at least that you can relate to. This very passivity places the user immediately into a consumer-orientation towards the community. In the case of gay.com, this neutral shared media space includes profiles, chat rooms, etc. The interface affords this access through tiny links on the borders of what is being advertised.

News stories and interactive blogs once occupied the prominent spaces now filled up with “videos.” There is an easy to miss “news ticker” under the top advertisements and it does move. The stories presented include “The new thirst quencher”, “Kellan Lutz the new krotch of Kalvin Klein”, “Alanis Morisette loves her weed”, and finally “48% of NJ Catholics Support Marriage.” Clicking this last story takes the user to advocate.com where they are presented with a big photo of a church and five paragraphs of analysis-free feel-good info. Note this takes the user off of the site. The design is unfriendly to those seeking specific information but supports having whatever the designers select pushed onto your eyeballs. These changes were in sync with the relaunch.

The impression created from the site is that the designers expect the user to tune in to watch videos on gay.com and then perhaps to chat about them, to do a little
shopping (perhaps for HIV medication which is a prominent ad), and then to find their perfect match who also happens to be cute. I suspect the quest for a life partner can indeed take some time, but the fact that many of the featured members are shirtless could save some time. I jest here, but serial monogamy seems to be endemic within the wider culture and the pretext here is largely a wink of approval towards this assumption as I am sure this would mean all that was left to do would be to watch so many brilliantly written and performed videos… No mention is made of making friends or keeping in touch, so this is all I can conclude.

In looking at the influence of advertising on this specific site, the order on most visits is:
1. videos (ads for here!)
2. members (ads for the site)
3. travel
4. HIV medication
5. Appeals to join or upgrade (ads for the site)
6. Written media (ads for other media properties owned by the parent company)

The majority of the advertisements are for properties of the company that owns gay.com. From this we can glean that the market they have chosen has free time to watch videos and is interested in the subject matter, and has broadband in order to view them. We can also glean that the site designer wants the user to watch them, meaning that the designer is interested in conversion of users to other media properties. We can also glean that the target market is interested in meeting other gay people, at least in part based upon their photos (since this is all we see of them on the main page). We can also conclude that the advertisers expect to find individuals who travel (which is an indication of free time and/or disposable income generally), and more HIV+ individuals at this venue. While a composite of these lures is not necessarily meant to represent the mythical target individual, these characteristics are nonetheless expected to be present in varying degrees to a greater extent.

Clearly given the screen real estate and layout, commercial advertisements control design. “The opposite of advertising” (community service and responsibility) exists sandwiched between the fluff, in forms that are neither satisfying nor extremely useful, almost as if they were present only to satisfy oneself that they have been included (if marginally). This is in evidence in the fact that 1/6th or less of the screen is given over to active utilization by an original goal-directed individual (as opposed to someone with a passive consumption goal that they have been presented with through someone else’s choice). Unless the goal is to browse videos, the user has a few peripheral buttons and the option to log in.

The speculative question “to what extent is the culture changing in relation to this media?” could be turned around posed another way. Does this design take advantage of the supposed benefits of new media which aim to turn media into an egalitarian enterprise responsive to the active will of its participants? The answer to this is no, or at the very least that these benefits are significantly de-emphasized. The change from small-distribution to large distribution increases visibility and accessibility, and helps to forge a community’s sense of identity, but streaming videos produced by inscrutable (and perhaps unscrupulous) conglomerates does not a revolution make. Gathering online and communicating online presents a community with new choices but these do in many
cases come at the expense of others, since there is only so much time and money. Whatever is supported by such powerhouse websites will likely become a more prominent feature among users behaviors.

Gay.com does not hide from the rest of the world, but also does not seek to reach outside of the bubble it has created, instead offering that bubble as an alternative community or at least activity. Even as the bubble expands, it doesn’t touch any other bubbles. It is not clear to what extent the gay community turns to this media and what their expectations are when doing so. This in itself is a sign that the medium is not being responsive or representative. The site itself tells users what they should want. It is therefore unlikely that this medium is presenting realistic or useful images. Advertisements dominate these images, as do profiles which are themselves a form of advertisement.

There is somewhat of a convention in place even in new media regarding design for social networking websites. To some extent this is due to the technical realities of the media and to some extent this is due to attempts at manipulation for commercial reasons. In some cases this is simply due to lack of inspiration on the part of the designer, or limited resources. What makes a site unique is what is due to the human element (IT for humans). This is supplied by the users in profiles and chat rooms, and in an occasional topical article on gay.com, but there are very limited ways this can find expression. There is no evidence of any special effort being made to support an active community that is aware and involved in changing their world or even their lives for the better.

In terms of gay.com as media, gay presence inside and outside of the community is created as a collection of consumerist chatters with cruise-ready profiles, watching videos and spending time in a virtual pocket community that essentially has no real purpose or meaning other than hooking up or feeling good about yourself as gay. Shared myth and shared reality does not protect any central lesson or foster any valuable themes amidst the chaos of the online masses. In essence, original content is drown out and significant collegial collaboration or debate is stifled by white noise and consumerism.

**Gay.com As a Cultural Medium and Mediator**

In chapter two, three tests of transparency were presented. Firstly, have user reactions been validated by the site? Secondly, have users been given policy ownership? Thirdly, has the administration of the site expressed the language and philosophy of transparency? The answers to these questions will convey some measure of the transparency gay.com offers to users.

Obviously there is no reasonably way to acquire complete information about every user “reaction” to every piece of the system, policy, or change. The relevant information that is obtainable is related to daily operational mechanisms that are exposed to validate these reactions as well as the response to any significant events or changes in the system and/or policy. Again, one salient example would be the upgrade of gay.com.

In general, if a user wishes to express unhappiness or happiness regarding policy, operational details, or design, there is no overt affordance for this. Feedback is not solicited. It is not clear who to email or what number to call. If you click on the tiny help link at the button right of the main screen, it will take you to a FAQ page with a pretty large email and chat button prominently on the top left of the page. Chat is only available to premium members. There is also a contact tab which takes the user to a page which invites them to join (become premium). The text next to the email button says
“got questions? We can help.” This is not directly soliciting feedback, but obviously it could be used for this. None of the FAQ entries say anything about feedback. From this, it is clear that user feedback is not considered relevant to daily operations.

During the last upgrade of gay.com, user feedback was also not solicited. However, once a sufficient amount of this feedback had been received, it was publicly acknowledged in the form of an open letter on the website, and with emails to members. Promises were made that the website would be improving (which it did not for several weeks), and several free months of gay.com membership were offered over a period of a few weeks.

In addition, a (malfuctioning) blog was created for users to comment on the public letter that was posted. Blog entries were screened, without informing users of this, and often simply not posted. No response was generated to any of these postings or posting attempts. In effect, users were allowed to vent if their posts were approved, but only to themselves. The blog did not have a mechanism to track your postings or responses to them. No email was generated to confirm postings.

To summarize, users feedback was acknowledged after it had reached a certain level, albeit in a sanitized and generic form, compensation was offered in the form of free months membership, and a blog was created but this blog was either malfunctioning or not the egalitarian free-speech forum it appeared to be and nothing from it was ever acknowledged or directly addressed. Frustration was validated, but the specifics were not, and misleading promises were offered that continued to project the problem as a carefully controlled customer placation tactic rather than a response to the community that validated them or what they were saying in any specific way. For the above reasons, gay.com earned at best a C for “validating customer feedback.”

In the second test, users being given policy ownership, gay.com failed miserably during the upgrade. The policies in question were site design and operational decisions about how to approach the upgrade. Users clearly expressed a desire to roll-back the system or to make the old system available while the bugs were worked out of the new system. Users were told that they would benefit more from the new design and they just needed to give it time. Clearly the decision had been made and the users had to live with it – they were told to trust the site operators choices and not their own impressions or wishes. The message was clearly “yes we know you want this, but too bad.” On giving users policy ownership gay.com scored an F for the upgrade.

For the third test, administration expressing the language and philosophy of transparency, gay.com did fairly well on first glance, but ultimately fell short. The administration admitted they made a mistake and promised to be open. However, user comments were censored and the reason for the upgrade was simply expressed as “improvements.” No mention was made of any operational or financial details. For the third test, gay.com earned a C during the upgrade. Averaging two low C’s and an F together yields an F. Therefore, gay.com failed to pass the tests of transparency during its upgrade. Gay.com did not function as a transparent cultural medium.

This being said, the question arises about what forms of mediation are present within the space created. The tag line from the main page “Experience. Encounter. Enjoy.” indicates that the site’s portrayal or purpose related to the gay community is one of fun encounters. The large section full of selected attractive profile photos has smiling, often shirtless persons of interest, presumably the kind the user would like to encounter.
The large video section to the left of the profiles largely portrays either sexy individuals or cute couples having a great time and living “the good life.” From these we can deduce that the site is positioning itself as or at the very least invested in the story line of living the good life and meeting attractive guys as a gay man. If we take this as an image of the gay community and the individual user, it seems to communicate that there is some connection between being gay and the fun lifestyle that involves meeting hunks.

Very few old friendships seem to be portrayed. The people shown are largely either alone and being interviewed or meeting someone new (or occasionally rediscovering them). When groups are portrayed, they are generally out “living it up” somehow and spending money. Novelty seems to be accentuated, even in place of kitschy drama like one would see in continuing “soap opera” romances. Community issues, serious subjects, and long-term relationships are rare appearances. Sex, status, fun and flamboyance appear frequently. Little is communicated about community or long-term relationships – the site does not significantly positioned in relation to these except through neglect. If the site is portraying their impression of the gay community and its users, then the site does not believe these aspects are important parts of the gay identity. In all fairness, media in general makes assumptions about what sells. At times these assumptions tend to cheapen human experience and to accentuate the sensationalistic or shallow in the quest to make good copy. The relevant point here is that the supposed benefits of new media are starkly absent. While there is a choice what to click, the choice is very much one which leaves the user in a consumer role. Egalitarian community involvement has been devalued and ignored while the nature of the media chosen has been shallow market-driven image-based entertainment selected by a financially motivated elite in control of the production. This sounds a lot like old media.

In essence, what this site has to say about family, community, and meeting friends is that the gay men they represent view the entire question as one of fun and novelty. The space created is one of entertainment where no one questions the commercial or community values they are surrounded by. Advertising and content merge in increasingly ambiguous ways and no one is interested in questioning that or reconsidering the place of gay men within this environment. Individuals and relationships are presented as pathways to a lifestyle or interesting bits of the gay experience. While this appears to be surprisingly progressive and non-judgmental, the commercial context appears to promote just the opposite. What is communicated might be construed as an oppressive sense of what is expected – an overly idealized party-boy lifestyle full of beautiful happy people spending it up. Long-term relationships appear to be considered far less interesting than new encounters and titillating media-friendly “superstar” personalities.

**Broad Site Categories**

The below represents initial categorizations based upon the criteria in chapter two. This was determined from an overview of the site, with reasons given to the right. Additional details related to these categorizations may be added as the site design is progressively elaborated in later analysis and documentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. SNgS (Social Networking Site)</td>
<td>As a broad category that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact of Social Networking Websites on the Gay Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>has tight integration of</td>
<td>“personals” style functionality into the rest of the site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Membership</td>
<td>Anyone can join, but access to all of the features and content requires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open (effectively semi-open)</td>
<td>“premium” membership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Charge/Free</td>
<td>Same as above. Membership has levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Customized Content &amp;</td>
<td>The profile is customizable, but there are no provisions made to see what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>you want (and not what you don’t), or to organize content and utilities as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not encouraged</td>
<td>you wish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Customized Networks</td>
<td>Sorting options and utilities exist, but no real grouping or network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not encouraged</td>
<td>categories available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Operational Participation</td>
<td>Affordances for operational participation do not exist. The assumption is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not encouraged</td>
<td>that the user would not want to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Community Ownership</td>
<td>There is no community ownership. Not encouraged/supported.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market owned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Moderation</td>
<td>Moderation rarely exists, except when blog posts are censored about site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Mash Ups”</td>
<td>This feature is unavailable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From this high-level view, some information is available related to how “reputation capital” is managed on the site. In general, the site displays both friends and a list of users who added an individual to their ‘hot list.’ One form of reputation capital designed is a popularity contest, which is public.

**Mediations**

The below represents initial identifications based upon the criteria in chapter two. This was determined from an overview of the site, with reasons given to the right. Additional details related to these identifications may be added as the site design is progressively elaborated in later analysis and documentation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediation Instance(s)</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Legal mediations</td>
<td>Terms of Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Modal mediations</td>
<td>Visual favored, esp. text and photos. Several pre-recorded videos from the company are available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Economic mediations</td>
<td>Premium/non-premium distinctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Behavior supporting mediations</td>
<td>Watching videos site made, searching for members, chatting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Identity embodiment mediations</td>
<td>Textual profile using pre-determined criteria, with photo options, screen name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Role Supporting Mediations</td>
<td>Customer more than community member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sorting mediations</td>
<td>Profile criteria, chat room names, membership status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Cultural Assumptions and Clichés</td>
<td>Instrumentality, sexual interest*, boy meets boy, fun times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Limitations of power</td>
<td>Ability to ignore and be ignored, ability to sort and be sorted; no ability to create new chat rooms for ‘your niche’ (verify this)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From a high-level overview, some revenge effects may be speculated but not positively identified. One possible revenge effect is reinforcing the stereotype that gay men are always cruising. Another possible revenge effect is contributing to loneliness by taking members away from real world interactions to focus upon virtual ones. Another possible revenge effect is driving gay men away from online “gay chat” due to the climate that exists.
To some extent, the nature of the chat rooms enforces the roles that are supported. Only certain types of public exchanges will be rewarded. This is not unique to gay.com or to new media for that matter, but gay.com makes few provisions to counteract it.

Also to some extent, new stages of relationship formation exist on par with other similar “adult themed” sites online. Determining trust in such an environment has to do with interactivity (expressiveness) and reputation (Karen S. Cook, 2009). Sizing up individuals through the environment and tools provided becomes a different process. Psychologically and sociologically, the incentive structures that are built into or expressed through the interaction space (which is also a media) may facilitate or hinder certain types of interaction with their associated goals.

The impacts of new media do not simply enable or amputate our social impulses but could play a key role with users in ultimately shape a new normative sense of them. As Susan Sontag (1973) said, “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notion of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe” (p. 3). The fact that every individual is able to post naked photos of themselves along with online blog journals, etc. has made it suddenly worthwhile to do so, and not abnormal to want to view other people thusly. In addition, we see the prominence of photos on profiles confirming her second point of visual ethics/the new visual code, that photos “provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present” (p. 4).

**Metaphors**

The below represents initial identifications based upon the criteria in chapter two. This was determined from an overview of the site, with reasons given to the right. Additional details related to these identifications may be added as the site design is progressively elaborated in later analysis and documentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. club/citizen</td>
<td>Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Occult/openness</td>
<td>Occult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Interface/Space</td>
<td>Interface</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Myths

The below represents initial identifications based upon the criteria in chapter two. This was determined from an overview of the site, with reasons given to the right. Additional details related to these identifications may be added as the site design is progressively elaborated in later analysis and documentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Reasoning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pandora’s Box</td>
<td>Where is pandora’s box on this site? Membership is opening Pandora’s box.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stolen Fire</td>
<td>What fire is being stolen? Other members are the fire that is being stolen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Utopia</td>
<td>What does this site say about utopia? It seems to imply utopia is found with other people – the “right” people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. New Media Mythology</td>
<td>How does it leverage the overarching mythology of new media? It doesn’t, except that it does meld advertising into everything and have videos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Texts

If we view texts, be they chat room discussions or profiles, as attempts to encode and decode identity, goals, and culture than we have a starting point to approach their analysis. Look for the social forms, the shared practices, and the shared attitudes revealed by the text. Consider that these reflect the author’s views of the culture as well as themselves and their goals. The types of texts composed are directly affected by the texts composed by others. Each text is expected to be decoded in a particular way.

To answer this analytic requirement, a profile analysis can be performed.

For my analysis, I chose to focus upon a small geographical segment of male users, with photos, as this is likely what many users would do. Because this is a smaller sample, I included ages from 18 – 65. The results for other areas would likely be different, so the conclusions drawn here are meant to be directly related to the data set chosen. I did not chose “online now” even though this would highlight active users because then I would need to account for the time of day and date.

In the interest of privacy and respecting the terms of service, all data will be anonymized and presented as statistical based upon categories and criteria. The top 25 results will be used (which appeared on the first page of search results). I was not able to immediately determine what sort order criteria were used for the returned results – it was
not screen name or online status. Last activity date for all was “this week.” I suspect the last profile update factors into the “top” result placement, but was not able to confirm this yet.

Screen Names (embedded within the name itself):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th># (out of 25)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Include location</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Does not include one college that reveals location, but does include three locations that are in or near Ithaca, states, cities. No zip codes obvious. 3 potential area codes excluded since it was not obvious this was what they were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include person name</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Does not include 1 mythical name, 1 name that may or may not be a nickname in real life, or 4 results that may or may not be initials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes year</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Five 2-digit years, and one apparent 4-digit year that does not match their actual age elsewhere in the profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include “guy”:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include some form of sexual self-identification</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Includes bear/btm, gay, bi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempting to say something non-sexual and not location-based about the owner</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Presumably all, but only two overtly used adjectives about personality traits – one used an abbreviation for the adjective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes some form of boast</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hung. Subtler status clues and implications disregarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include group of some sort</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>A college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include “gay”:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include “boy” or some form of the term</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“boi”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include some interest</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Although there may be messages about interests that are not obvious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempting to say something about what the owner wants</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>It may be the screen name is not the place to say this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include phone #:</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>some may have area code, but isn’t clear this is what it is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact of Social Networking Websites on the Gay Community  
Chapter 6: p. 145

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo:</th>
<th># (out of 25)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With private primary photo</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Photos are available but you must request them from the user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headless/faceless photo</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 photos without head/face, 1 photo with face 90% obscured due to angle, not including the 3 private only photos. 24% of the top results do not let you see their face.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interested in results:</th>
<th># (out of 25)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendship:</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>By far the strongest category. This site must attract a lot of people looking for friends. 80% of the returned results claimed this, and if we remove the 3 blanks results, this would be 20/22 or 90.9%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/Relationship</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action/Sex</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask Me</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Included in above, but with the specific mix of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Included in above, but with the specific mix of:</th>
<th># (out of 25)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendship with love/relationship</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship with conversation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/relationship with conversation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship with action/sex</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>does not include ”ask me’s”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love/relationship with action/sex</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>does not include ”ask me’s”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship with love/relationship and action/sex</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>does not include “ask me’s”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just friendship and/or conversation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just action/sex</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these texts, we can interpret the following about the target search result users (which may or may not apply beyond that specific group):

1) About 25% of the users of the site do not wish to be identified (split evenly between those who keep photos private and those who obscure their faces)
2) Location information seems important, since it is included in so many screen names (at least 32%).

3) Friendship is the #1 self-reported motive if the users, with love/relationship and conversation tying for second place. The third most important self-reported motive is sex.

4) Some users are inconsistent in their profile information, out of date, dishonest, or not clear about what it is they want. It is natural that a user would not wish to reveal or promise a great deal until they got to know the other party, but – for example - a number of people listed being in a monogamous relationship were also listed elsewhere in their profile as looking for a relationship or “ask me.”

Opening up the chat panel, there are some promising options:

1. Interests & sports – 3 categories, 63 rooms total. Gay.com made a real effort here to support other motives by creating these rooms, but it is not clear that members know they exist. Out of all 63 rooms, one room had anyone in it – the wrestling room. This room had one user. This may be an underutilized feature due to visibility and poor design, or due to user preference. If users could create their own rooms, more incentive might exist as well.

2. Topics – 47 rooms, mostly fetishes. These rooms did have users in them. There are some other rooms of interest, including couples (1 member), disabled (3 members), intellectuals (with 44 users – impressive), love & relationships (169 users), married (108), mature (41), POS (HIV +) (104 members), Parents, friends, family (1), Recovery (0), Safe Sex (0). Gay.com deserves credit for creating these rooms and leaving them up. This is a community conscious decision on their part. The love & relationships room clearly reveals that significant minorities of online users want to chat about love & relationships.

3. Finally, rooms that have broken down by location (country – state – county generally).

The following was observed from spending 15 minutes in the intellectuals chat room:

I entered room with my real profile but remained non-interactive. The conversations were steady, slightly coherent, and left enough room for someone to jump in if they wanted to. Within the 15 minute window, 17 members posted to the public chat, largely interactively with each other (66% not participating in the public discussion within that period). There were a total of 169 textual statements (and 4 direct uses of the ‘gesture statement text’, which does not include gestures indicated through regular textual statements). 144 of these statements (85%) were one line or less in size.

-1 user contributed over 21% (36 statements)
-3 users contributed 10% -14% (17 -23 statements)
-6 users contributed 4-8% (7- 14 statements)
-1 user contributed 3 % (5 statements)
-6 users contributed less than 2 % (3 statements or less).

Some responses were directly related to what preceded them, although few statements were direct solicitations for a specific response. 37 in text name references (excluding one “she” indirect reference) to people in the room occurred.

Threads included the following:
- Greek – a productive somewhat collaborative discussion (if not in depth) about grammar
- Astronomy, including current events and a link offered to a recent photo (mostly statements from one user, but some real discussion)
- General greetings among the apparently already acquainted and catching up
- Cattiness, belittling, name calling, snotty belittling, and accusing other people of being “whores” (apparently in good humor)
- Cute statements, clever creativity, general humor, trivia and weirdness
- *Wish for a site feature – temporary ignore that lasts for one session
- *Statement of disappointment with gay.com’s categories
- Self-deprecating humor related to the “room” and a reference to how busy the room was
- Statement that gay.com is careless towards it members
- Someone trying to harp on their perceived penchant among members for “victimhood”
- One racist statement which was questioned by other members and got an apology

Clearly this small experiment cannot be inferred to extend beyond the immediate confines of the control set parameters – it applies to the specific area examined under those specific conditions. It may apply elsewhere, or it may not. Acknowledging this, some conclusions can be drawn:

1) Most of the users are not participating in the public chat, even though they are “there.” Therefore, either the users are not there to contribute (at least at that time) in this way, or they did not feel it was worth the effort at that time for some reason.
2) Most of those who do participate, do so with a recreational attitude
3) Some of the users know each other and appear to be “regulars.”
4) Discussions with some content and some back-and-forth are possible, at least some times, in this chat room
5) Overly sensitive people might wish to avoid this chat room, at least at this time studied
6) Statements about gay.com are made as wishes and complaints of no real consequence, with no expectation that anything can or will be done
7) As catty as many users are, there is some “self-policing” taking place by the users, as demonstrated by the racist remark and how it was handled.

Results were more positive than originally expected. This has not matched results for the regionally oriented rooms (texts there tend to indicate se as a pick-up spot). It is feasible that there is not one culture present, and that a site such as gay.com may in fact support a greater variety of cultures than most brick & mortar sites can. This is an unexpected result.

**Media Ecology**

The above conclusion adds complexity to the question of the location of gay.com within the media ecology. Gay.com is not one chat room, and is not exclusively user
controlled or exclusively corporate controlled. It may be that there is more room for diversity within a new social media site than I had at first concluded. While a site may be “a pick up” site or a “relationship” site, it may not be mere pretext to claim that it is in fact both. Some users are apparently going to gay.com to discuss love & relationships, or chat with intellectuals. The site, to some extent, supports this.

Actor-network theory for mediated discourse applied to this environment would allow for faster transformation cycles to occur, although they would be constrained as has been previously discussed. However the lesson of this chat room might be that within the umbrella of a larger site, actor-network theory might be able to support somewhat independent cycles for pieces of a site (assuming it survives).

In terms of the prior classifications, ownership still remains corporate and transparency has not improved. The design choices that enabled this chat room to exist are a positive reflection upon the operators, but the overall site design remains oriented towards meeting new people. These 17 intellectual chat users are utilizing the site in a way that is not extensively promoted by the design or marketing, at least during the period observed. Yet the site does enable this.

The site structure supports identity embodiments that are in alignment with the cultural assumptions of the operators. The role that the users have chosen for themselves is active participants, which is not the role that the majority of users had chosen for the public portion of chat in that room at that time. It may be those users who were not participating had other goals or passive goals, or it may be that those users did not feel they were given what they needed in order to become active participants in a rewarding manner. This cannot be determined from the observation undertaken. I suspect the more active users feel more a part of a community than the passive users, but again this is speculation. The relationship of the users to the site who did express wishes or concerns related to the site or the room was not that of a citizen. It was that of a consumer or a member.

The users who expressed these concerns or wishes did not articulate or touch upon any understanding of how change happens on the site, and to what extent the users may initiate this. In many cases, this understanding is key to understanding the hidden power structures that mediate at a higher level. Since identifying mediation is a matter of understanding the media itself, the environment in which it exists, and the drivers that intentionally and inadvertently shape the design, this disconnect is indicative of a rather insidious mediation that many corporate-owned sites structurally enculturate.

Component Maps

Due to multiple privacy concerns, all screen images and content will be anonymized. As per the steps outlined in chapter three for component analysis, we’ll begin by placing the main page on a “grid” for analysis. All of the images shown in this chapter are from gay.com and are © 2009 Here Media, Inc. with all rights reserved.
The main page has already been discussed. There is a scrolling text new ticker on the very bottom of the “A” row that is clickable. The features in B1 change, and are usually clickable videos. The number of members supposedly online are displayed in A2 like an advertisement right next to a utility to search for members and the sign-in location. An advertisement to “sign up!” or “join” is also nearby. As indicated on Page 7 of this chapter under the order of advertising list, most of the screen real estate is given over to videos. The persistent elements are the navigational components. At the top, the bar menu offers chat, my account, interact, find members, view.

Upon signing in, there is a new utility bar that appears across top, and an instant messenger appears as a pop-over. The login box displays instead a welcome to the member, and there is an ad to view latest videos. The chat/my account/interact/find members/view bar remains in the same location.
Below is a close-up of the instant messenger:
Clicking on a profile in the messenger displays a mini-profile right in the top of the messenger:

A close up of the persistent bars for navigation:

The top bar- shows after sign in and greets member. It provides access to email, shows status, allows sign-out and provides help. It displays profile views, Hotlist buddies that are online now, buddy requests pending, and access to chat as small icons.

The navigation bar- shows before or after sign in. If you are not signed in, all features take you to an inducement to sign up or become premium.
Using the search members feature as member from the main page:

Clicking on the chat tab at the top pops up a new client window. There are three categories, each with sub-categories. Under the sub-categories are actual rooms. (Once the list loads, names appear to the right). The number of users in each room appears in parenthesis next to the room name. Selecting this name shows a mini-profile the same as the messenger.
Mini-profile from user listed in chat room list:

The rooms available are:

I. Interests and Sports
   a. Activities
      i. Books, Camping/Outdoors, Cars, Computers, Drag, Fashion, Investing, Motorcycles, Politics, Shopping, Travel
   b. Entertainment
      i. Comics, Dancing, Movies, Music, Symphony/Opera, Television, Theater, Video Games, Wine Tasting
   c. Home/Family
      i. Cooking, Decorating, Entertaining, Gardening, Home Improvement, Marriage, Parenting, Pets, Retirement
   d. Sports
      i. Gay Games, Badminton, Baseball & Softball, Basketball, Beach Volleyball, Billiards/Pool, Bowling, Cycling, Diving, Figure Skating, Football, Golf, Ice Hockey, Martial Arts, Physique, Power Lifting, Raquetball & Squash, Rodeo, Rowing, Rugby, Running, Sailing, Skiing & Snowboarding, Soccer, Surfing, Swimming, Tennis, Track and Field, Triathlon, Volleyball, Water Polo, Weight Training, Wrestling, Yoga

II. Topics
   a. Asian, Bareback, Bears, Big Dicks, Bisexuals, Blackmen4Whitemen, Cam2Cam, Chubby Chasers, College, Couples, Cowboys, Curious, Cyber, Dad/Son, Deaf, Disabled, Discipline, Farmers, Feet, Group Sex, Hispanic/Latino/Mexican, Humiliation & Roleplay, Intellectuals, Leather, Love & Relationships, Married, Mature, Men of Color, Military, Muscle, Nudist, POS (HIV+), Parents, Friends, Family, Phone, Physical Exam, Recovery, Rough Roleplay, Safe Sex, Small Penis, Smoking Room,
Transgender, FTM, Trangender, MTF, Truckers, Uncut, Underwear/Briefs/Jockstraps, Wet & Messy, Younger for Older

III.  United States
   a.  Each state
      i.  Statewide under the state
      ii. Larger cities, Areas and regions
         1. Some of these are broken down into more specific sub-regions

IV.  Africa
V.  Asia & Middle East
VI.  Australia & Oceania
VII. Canada
VIII. Caribbean
IX.  Central America
X.  Europe
XI.  Mexico
XII. South America
XIII. United Kingdom

In the actual chat room:
Getting to the favorite’d chat room via messenger (note- users can also get to chat from the chat icon that stays at top):
My account shown when not a member:
As Member, the user will see the profile:
The premium sub-tab of the profile:
Main interact tab:
Mail subtab:
My lists subtab:
Hot list submenu of interact lists:
Find members tab - full search:
Full search with expanded options:
Member name search takes the user to the unexpanded view.

My searches subtab:
Who’s online:
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Search results:

-An ad for here tv at the bottom of above graphic-
The view tab (note- there is a news subcategory, even if it isn’t mostly hard news, and that the videos are searchable):
Watching a movie:
Common Components: Navigation

Persistent navigation consists primarily of two bar across the entire top of the browser window. The top bar presents a “tabbed” text menu consisting of chat, my account, interact, find members, and view. The top bar, which I will refer to as the navigation bar, remains at the top of the screen, but is places just slightly below a new bar once a user signs in. The navigation bar shows before or after sign in. If you are not signed in, most features on the navigation bar take the user to an inducement to sign up or become premium.

Upon signing in, there is a new utility bar that appears across the very top, above the tabbed navigation bar (and a gay.com messenger window appears as a pop-over). The login box displays a welcome to the member name instead of login options, and there is an ad to view latest videos. This top bar functions like a dashboard and is largely iconic (it displays small graphics to represent each option). It provides feedback and quick access to key features. These features are email, access to chat, sign-out and help. It displays shows status, profile views, Hotlist buddies that are online now, buddy requests pending.

Common Components: Forms

Join/Sign Up Form

Membership and premium membership are not the same thing. Membership is required to use the site and to have a profile, but premium membership allows the user to: search adult and private photos, watch exclusive video content, view full size photos, get unlimited email privileges (this is not explained), turn off ads in group and im chat, get enhanced group chat access (this is not explained), see who thinks you’re hot, see who’s viewed your profile, block a member, get live help, one year subscription to out magazine.

Therefore the first branch is “join for free” or “join as premium.” Clicking Join for free from the main page presents the following form (below):
Member name, email address, password, gender, birthday, country, Capcha (to verify you are not a bot), and consent to terms of service are required. Zip code is optional. There is no way not to select an option for the exclusive offers and newsletters, but users may opt out afterwards.

The three links here are privacy policy, user agreement, and community guidelines. Users could easily ignore them. The privacy policy is legalistic and indicates “…From time to time we may share Usage Data with third parties. We do so, however, only in the aggregate and not in a manner that will enable the recipient to personally identify you, unless you have given us permission to do so. …” (gay.com, October 2009).
Under other authorized disclosures you are giving them permission to do so… “…(4) to a parent company, subsidiaries, joint ventures, or other companies under common control with Here Media (in which case we will require such entities to honor this Privacy Policy)” (October 2009, gay.com). The policy they are required to honor – this one, that just allowed them to give the information over.

The user agreement is largely about indemnification for gay.com and how accuracy and privacy are the users responsibility. It states that the user must agree to the terms of service. This is not unusual.

The community guidelines cover objectionable and banned content, and the restrictions are relatively common-sense. One interesting piece of this is here: “…Republishing Your Words and Images
As we are dedicated to sharing the best of the Here Media community with a broader audience, we may republish your words and/or image(s) across other segments of our properties and you grant us full rights to do so without restriction.” (gay.com, October 2009). There is also an invitation to ask questions but no direct method is offered.

There follows a declaration of their discretion: “…Customer & Member Care Team. The CMC team reserves the right but is not obligated to hide inappropriate comments, messages and/or image(s), suspend members and block select privileges, based on the standards set here and in our governing User Agreement. Above all, the CMC team has complete and sole discretion in determining if a member is complying with these guidelines or the User Agreement” (gay.com, October 2009).

Following this is the “next step” button. Pushing this, an email is sent with a link to confirm the address. From here, the new member may sign in. If premium is chosen, payment options are presented but the procedure is fundamentally the same.

| Types          | 1. Minimal profile is acceptable for sign-up.  
|               | 2. Premium or free membership. |
| Characteristics| A user must “dig” to clearly understand what is agreed to, but it is available. The steps are not misleading or confusing, unlike some simple forms that rope a user into more after the initial investment of effort. |
| Links/Blocks   | Passing through this form is required to activate membership and to use the site in any depth. Links to privacy policy, user agreement, and community guidelines. |
| Questions      | 1. Chatting, hot lists, photos, and videos are highlighted  
|               | 2. One would need to bookmark the locations or find a way to contact the site to go back to these forms. Changes are said to be posted or emailed to appropriate areas.  
|               | 3. In the signup process, does the requirement get more complex than it is at first presented? No. Is the initial investment and promise somehow modified with “up selling” at the end? No. |
Agreement, Terms of Service

These agreements mentioned above are largely legal self-protection. While they are not strictly legal-ease and seem to communicate more casually than a legal document, many users might not be able to disassemble them correctly in order to comprehend them. The terms of service communicate in a similar way to a salesman, seeking to reassure the user through a friendly, empathetic tone that says “relax, it’s okay” (without making sure the details are truly clear).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Smoothed, friendly legalese via link; whole page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>An address is given but not offset or highlighted. No email address is given or phone number. Gay.com only agrees to abide by their privacy policy, which is to only do what the user agrees to, which is elsewhere indicated to be whatever the site deems appropriate. Changes should be posted to appropriate areas or emailed. Getting back to these terms is not intuitive or straightforward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Passing through this form is not required to activate membership or to use the site, but checking a box agreeing to them is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>1. What rights does a user have? To complain if they feel offended or scammed by other users. 2. What responsibilities does a user have? To keep their information accurate and up-to-date, to avoid breaking any laws. 3. What rights does the site have? Final decision on what to allow/not allow, and who to allow/not allow. 4. What responsibilities does the site have? To abide by their terms of service, which are essentially meaningless in this regard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complaining and Feedback

Feedback is not encouraged. The address of what was obviously a legal department for here media (not gay.com) was given. Live chat with customer service is advertised, but this is only for premium members that need basic tech support or have account issues. In my experience, complaining or feedback was met with an offer to cancel the service without much discussion. This correlates with the experiences of other users from the time of the switchover.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Email (free for members - you must join first. Under help on navigation menu, email us icon)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chat (same location, premium only, M-F 9-6 Pacific)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FAQ (for members, under help on navigation menu. FAQ has report problems link – but this is only to report user agreement or community guideline violations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Email form is small box requesting your email address, category (one is product feedback), with a describe problem text box.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chat with us launches an instant message with staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How much do they let you use your own words? Entirely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you know what to expect will happen as a result?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>The help page also has a FAQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is no generic customer service contact or number. You must go through the site and be a member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No explicit guidelines or expectation of timeline or result, assured acknowledgement or feedback. However, live chat if it is an option provides a type of accountability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>1. Can users get others kicked out just because they are somehow offended? Yes, in theory, if the site agrees. There is no way to know if this ever happens or how frequently, or why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Is your feedback accurately recorded and understood or classified as they see fit to dismiss you? There is no way to know this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Are multiple complaints linked or do you have to “start over” every time? There is no visible tracking system or follow-up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Is the response an effort to explain, to get rid of you, or to help? There is no assurance that someone is there to help you or committed to your satisfaction.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Common Components: Content**

The content presented is primarily videos. All of the videos are gay themed and many of them sexually oriented or charged. None of them constitute pornography in explicit terms. These videos are all properties of here networks that they have selected. These are searchable and organized, however. Many are free. Some are exclusive to premium members.
### Entertainment Features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Videos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Pre-recorded, on-demand streaming (no download)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>No comment section seen, but links to move videos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Who decides what entertainment is available? The site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Is there a pattern to it? Gay themed, sexually charged, owned by here media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Does it inform as well as entertain? Entertainment seems to be the focus, but parts of the stories are plausible so perhaps education through reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Are serious issues given serious treatment? Generally not; there are “news” videos but these are generally not hard news</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### News Articles & XML Feeds (Syndication)

A news ticker towards the top of the window (at the very bottom of the “A” row) is clickable. Clicking these items take the user to other Here media properties (off-site) with brief stories. The stories seen were not content-heavy or hard-hitting reporting. Since this chapter was originally written, the ticker has been removed entirely.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Pop-culture, entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Community specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Current events and issues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involving more then informing; commentary more than news</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Links/Blocks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No direct links to response utilities or other content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources, evidence, methodology not clear in most cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No link to further research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No links to activism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aggregated from other Here media sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Credibility hard to establish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is the goal to inform or to incite?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Common Components: Marketing

In considering the location and size of each marketing component, as well as how to get there and where it leads, we see advertising monopolizing prime real estate on most pages that need to be passed through by a user with any goal. What is somewhat subtler here is the synergistic nature of the advertisements in this media – it becomes less obvious what is in fact an advertisement when the company is selling itself as media in other venues. Much of the content passive, the graphical is generally favored over the simply textual, and media are presented as active and attractive in most cases. If here! Media is selling movies in other mediums, then even offering them for free and linking to media-player components presents a hybrid type of cross-venue advertisement. As discussed earlier, several cultural assumptions exist in the marketing, and may be analyzed.
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Marketing: Shopping
One goal of gay.com appears to be encouraging members and visitors to shop through them. Surprisingly, few appeals are made directly based upon the concept of supporting “your community” by shopping at the site. I here note the lack of community-conscious shopping being a featured aspect of the site, since in this age such a concept is not novel or unusual. It appears this concept is not one that gay.com has decided to actively affirm or associate their site with.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Most hard goods and featured media show active ads, with members and non-featured media using passive content. Clothing ads tend more to be passive; services tend to be slightly active but may be passive. Most ads are ignorable, but unavoidable (you will get them presented in prominent ways).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>On the main page, shopping –specific ads take up less than 1/6 of the page but cut across the entire page (horizontally) and are placed in areas that must be scanned through to perform other tasks on that page. Off of the main page the bottom ½ of the right most column and the banner area across the bottom of the page contain ads. Most hard-good and service ads are ambiguously adult, whereas media and other ads tend to be more explicit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Ads do not need to be clicked through explicitly, but can not be avoided since many of them are presented in areas where they will always be visible on a page that links to your destination’s location. The main page takes you anywhere in the site (and is required to get there). Ads open in new windows through a click-gateway, keeping you at gay.com. The most heavily advertised areas are profile-related areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions     | 1. Ads tend to be gay-themed or lifestyle-themed (cell phones, cruises, parties, clothing). All ads appear to be somewhat targeted. I saw no ads for continuing your education (a prominent theme elsewhere on the Internet).  
2. One might expect to see a similar mix of advertisements in other gay media or perhaps in an entertainment section of an upscale periodical catering to the young and trendy. |

Marketing: Up-selling Pitches
Up-selling pitches are the messages and tactics used by sites to convince users to upgrade. Any effort to get you to upgrade belongs in this category. All tiered sites have these.
Types

Trying to send an instant message or watching a video requires joining as free. Adult photos, full size photos and profiles, exclusive videos, hot lists, and blocking members requires full membership. Clicking these takes you to the ‘join free/join premium’ page. See My Account tab image (p. 33).

General ads are embedded on the main page and scattered throughout the site.

Characteristics

Full page ads when clicking restricted content, compartmentalized ads scattered throughout site. If the user refuses, they cannot perform the action.

Links/Blocks

User blocked from specific action, taken to up-sell page.

Questions

Limitations are reasonably clearly identified if you read when you sign up.
Up-sell ads are generally located next to the areas that offer services that require you to upgrade. The areas that require upgrade were likely selected because they are seen as having the most value to the user. If this is correct, then adult-themed interactions centered around profiles (even more than chat) are seen as key to the service’s appeal to the site’s envisioned users.

Common Components: Self-Presentations

Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Tabbed, with adult-tab and photos being tiered. Profile (physical specifications and location, lifestyle habits, about me, media interests, general interests, looking for, G-rated photo(s)), Premium profile (adult)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Personality-oriented, commonality-oriented, and hook-up oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Chat links to profiles and can be blocked by them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>The site must legally verify age and collect payment information if premium. Users are required to display selection or non-selection for all profile information. Photos may be hidden. Tabs may not be selectively hidden from premium users. Therefore there is not fine grain control. There is no grouping mechanism but lists are available. The profile is designed for searchability with filled in additional customized descriptions. Free text is generic and biographical. Honesty is not enforced – anonymity is achieved by keeping you photo hidden or using a false/partial photo.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Profile Tab Elements:

*Headline:* Free text (about a line of characters)

*Looking for:* Free text

*Orientation:* Radio buttons for
   - Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Ask Me

*Gender:* Radio buttons for
   - male, femal, ftm, mtf

*Age:* combo boxes for
birthrate

*Height:* combo box
  height
*Weight:* free text

*relationship status:* check box for
  single, dating, seeing someone, monogamous relationship, open relationship, ask me
*g-rated photo (and g-rated gallery)*

*country:* combo box
  Country
*zip code:* free text

*how out are you?:* radio button for
  totally, to some people, to all but family, not at work, not out at all, ask me

*Hiv status:* check box for
  hiv+, hiv-, not sure, and ask me

*Ethnicity:* check boxes for
  various ethnicities, a category called mix, and ask me

*Build:* check boxes for
  athletic, average, chubby, large and solid, muscular, overweight, slim, ask me

*Tattoos:* radio button for
  none, one, a few, a lot

*Piercings:* radio button for
  yes, no

*Languages:* check boxes for
  various major languages and other

*Interests:* check boxes for
  activism/politics, camping/outdoors, fashion/design, travel, clubbing, theater/arts,
  fitness/exercise, yoga, team sports, entertaining, dining out, cooking, gardening, pets

*Alcohol:* radio button for
  don’t drink, social drinker, drinks lots, in recovery, ask me

*Smoking:* radio button for
  no, occasionally, yes, quitting, ask me

*Drugs:* radio button for
  don’t use drugs, recreational user, definite partier, in recovery, ask me

*Scene:* check boxes for
  bear, circuit boy, jock, leather, boy next door, drag, ask me

*About me:* Free text

*Ask me about:* free text

*Hobbies:* free text

*Music:* free text

*Books:* free text

*TV and Films:* free text

*Hair color:* radio button
  Colors including ask me

*Eye color:* radio button
  Colors including ask me
Facial hair: check boxes for
none, moustache, beard, goatee, soul patch, sideburns/chops
Looking for: free text
Interested in: check boxes for
friendship. Love/relationship, action/sex, conversation, ask me
Friends (automatically generated from your list)
Hot List (automatically generated from your list, visible only to premium)
Views (x # of ) times

**Premium Profile Tab Elements:**
Adult Headline: free text
I like to have sex: radio button for
All the time, 3-5 times a week, at least once a week, a few times a month, not a big part, ask me
I prefer to be: radio button for
giver/top, receiver/bottom, switch/versatile, ask me
Interested in: check boxes for
anal sex, body odor/smalle, bdsm, exhibitionist/public sex, feet, fisting, groups, kissing, leather, j/o only, muscles/muscle worship, one-on-one, oral sex, porn, role playing, toys, underwear/jock, uniforms/military, voyeurism, watersports
Endowment/dimensions: radio button for
small, average, above average, large, extra large, ask me
Cut/uncut: radio buttons for
cut, uncut
Body hair: radio buttons for
naturally smooth, some, shave, everywhere, hairy, ask me
Ask me about: free text
What I’m into: free text
About me: free text
( premium photos)

Note that radio buttons and combo boxes must have something selected and only one thing, but the check boxes and free text may be left blank. Free text may be more personally descriptive and other types of input are meant to be searched more reliably.

The selection of the labels was a design decision. The segregation of premium and general was also a design decision that was presumably influenced by the desire to get members to join (pay for the service). If this is the case then the premium elements are seen as key value elements to the perceived target market of the site. These design decisions reflect something of the site designer’s impressions of their users and the goals of the site designers themselves.

**Free text fields** - (more descriptive, not usable as search criteria)- Headline, Looking for, weight, zip code, about me, ask me about, hobbies, music, books, tv and films, looking for.
**Combo box fields** - age (birthday), height, country might be used on search and tend to be ‘factual.’
Radio button fields- orientation, gender, how out are you?, tattoos, piercings, alcohol, smoking, drugs, hair color, eye color; these tend to be personally descriptive, only allow one answer, and are searchable through utilities.

Check box fields- relationship status, HIV status, ethnicity, build, languages, interests, scene, facial hair, interested in; searchable and tend to be personally descriptive, but there is a certain provision made for ‘wiggle room’ in the flexibility of multiple answers and combinations.

In the premium profile, free text fields are mostly biographical descriptions (examples: adult headline, ask me about, what I’m into, about me). There are no combo box fields since the ‘facts’ have already been dealt with on the general profile. The radio button fields (examples: I like to have sex, I prefer to be, cut/uncut, and body hair) are searchable; it is presumed from this some users would like to search based upon these criteria. The only check box field is “interested in.” From this, it appears that searching based upon the radio button fields added is considered a value-adding proposition to the members, and for the site (to be used for promoting premium membership sales).

HIV status is on the general tab, and has a check box including not sure and ask me. This implies that the general tab might be related to sex (or a more casual stage of relationship that eventually leads to sex) for some users, since HIV status should not impact decisions to befriend someone. Further stuffy may be merited to quantify the number of users who have answered negative to this question, but have not been tested (perhaps while engaging in high risk activities). Also merited may be a survey of the number of users who would acknowledge uncertainty about their status but fear indicating this on their profile. A link to safer sex information and testing services would be simple to include and might benefit users, right next to this question.

Recovery related questions have been provided for the benefit of users. These questions include smoking, alcohol, and drug-related questions. This was a conscious choice on the part of the site designers to accommodate the recovery process of certain users. This is one example of a positive, community-affirming design decision that may or may not be motivated by market-share retention considerations but nonetheless offers value to users in a community-conscious manner.

The fields on these forms are selected because the operators believe they are relevant to the users goals there or because they want the information themselves. The forms, features, and components can reinforce or disallow usage patterns and may reflect the cultural assumptions of the designers.

We see here a high degree of searchability associated with SNSg sites, focused upon location, appearance, and to a lesser extent interests. The user directories and search mechanisms cater more to either SNS or SNSg paradigms. Personal pages are not used but profiles are.
**Pictures**

Gay.com allows pictures to be unlocked and locked individually, but the fact that they exist and are locked is public. Users can request this missing information. Where there are headless bodies and obscured faces, the user may be trying to remain anonymous while showing the rest of their bodies. The user may be viewing the site as a hook up venue. Words like discreet and empty description information are often associated. These users probably want to be seen (and perhaps found) by someone, but perhaps not to be identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Profile picture and albums, which may be selectively shared (locked and unlocked). Adult photos require premium status.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>These are static photos. They may have dates and captions but generally do not. Photos are presumably generally real. Some are identifiable to friends and family, some are not. Any photo may be made private. Searches may be conducted for profiles with photos only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Membership is a requirement for adult photos or full screen view of photos. Photos may be blocked entirely until unlocked selectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>The presence of headless photos indicates some users would not want to be identified but would want to be found, and that they think appearance factors into the decision of those they want to find them. Photos are prominent on the profile and ads are usually near by, including up-selling. Photos do not indicate generally what the user wishes to attract unless those photos are risqué in which case they communicate sexual interests. Generally photos are not of people together doing things. Photos may highlight certain aspects of the user’s body.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most profiles in this experiment seem to have some type of photo. Selective obscuration is possible, even with the primary photo. However, most profiles with a primary photo do not choose to obscure the photo itself. It is not uncommon for the primary photo to appear as an obvious fake (a porn model) or with the face somehow obscured. Photos do not normally have any dates attached to them and many photos present characteristics associated with attempts to make the user attractive in a sexual context.

**Privacy Settings and Options**

There are not a lot of privacy options on gay.com. The primary mechanism used is obscuring photos. There is no method for obscuring pieces of profile information. Therefore the user must balance wanting to be found, if they do, with wanting not to be identified in all case (if they do not). The profile remains static, and chat obviously is under user control. All premium users may access all profile information (except locked private photos) for all other users.
### Types

**Component specific settings (for photos only)**

### Characteristics

Photo control is prominent and accessible. The control is assigned at the individual user level. Privacy policy of site is no guarantee. Users are not supposed to share site content outside of site. The site retains ownership and discretion/control of all user content.

### Links/Blocks

Blocking a user requires full membership. Making photos private does not. Posting adult information and accessing it does require membership.

### Questions

1. What is the actual mechanism and criteria used? By user, per photo.
2. Do these settings implement any stated site policy? They reinforce the concept of premium membership and adult content.
3. What are these settings practically useful for? Keeping embarrassing or highly explicit content from unknown or untrusted users.

---

### Common Components: Utilities

#### Chat Rooms

Refer to earlier in this chapter for a discussion of the names chosen and the chat layout.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>text-centric (the site includes webcams here but they are more appropriately treated separately later in this document)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Public, un-moderated, themes may be suggested but generally are not expected to be followed. Users may complain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Advertisements around the room, links to profiles, IM linkages. Free membership required.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Questions   | 1. What are the titles? See page 27  
2. What modalities are involved? Text.  
3. Are chat rooms primarily public or private? Public.  
See previous discussion page 27 for all other questions. |

---

### Instant Messages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>textual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Small messages, text, basic functionality. Status messages presented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Any user can use the system, links to profile, internal to the site only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Status messages can not be custom (current list: offline, chatting, watching videos, looking for dates, looking for hook-ups, looking for relationship, up for anything, not looking). Status messages can be used for screening, along with profile links. No indication of what you are doing otherwise, or offline messages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Searching Users

Search is fairly advanced and customizable, only lacking free-text capabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Highly customizable criteria with optional localization emphasis or interest emphasis. Prominently featured and available as basic or advanced.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>The basic search emphasizes age, zip code, and gender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>All but free-text fields may be searched on. In results, profiles and IM are available next to photo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Various advertisements are near the utility. The utility itself is fairly friendly and useful. Most types of searches are possible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly searching is a key feature for this site. A lot of resources were put into this functionality and it is prominently featured. The rest of the site integrates with this functionality, indicating that this feature is expected to be used in association with many other features. The searches can be used in different ways and to support different motives. If a user desired to search only for local users who like team sports or who are single and looking for love/relationship, this is possible. However users cannot screen out other selections. These advanced features are not as prominently featured as a basic search (which has a location emphasis assumed). It takes more steps to look for a relationship, and there will be more manual screening. The default configuration supports ‘hook-ups’ better.

This may in part be due to the fact that creating search capability using ‘hook-up’ criteria is simply easier technologically. If the site wished to make a special provision for those only looking for long-term monogamous relationships, the site could be segmented and the profiles clearly identified in unambiguous and searchable ways. It is one possible explanation that some degree of ambiguity is in fact desired by users. This may not in fact be devious however, since long-term relationships may legitimately develop over time from less ‘serious’ ones after testing the waters.

In general, the default search does seem to indicate that the expected user behavior is one of identifying individuals who are local, perhaps have photos, and may be online currently. From these results profiles can be compared. Searches can be saved for later use, although the functionality to do this is not entirely obvious. The user can continue to use the site as a type of controlled space in which to maintain contact until such time as the user elects to share outside contact information. This can ensure anonymity, but also requires the user to continue to log onto the site to check email (no indication is forwarded to the user’s normal email address), and remain in communication.

Web Cams

Web cams in this context are inherently real-time and are difficult to use with fake images. Users can still obscure their faces, for example, but they can not easily obscure their basic physical appearance. The purpose of a webcam is to project the physical image of an individual or individuals onto the screen of someone else. This being the case, there is less of the protective anonymity and acceptable time-delay than is present in text based conversations. Greater bandwidth is required, which is not available to all. The number of users in webcam chat is far less than the number in text chat. Webcam
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Chat is not segregated into “G rated” and “adult.” The webcam chat can be one-way (multiple or single viewers) or two-way. Gay.com does not at this time have a mechanism for multiple bi-directional streams at the same time in the same room (conferencing). Cam-chat offers audio but it may be turned off. Some users may have audio both ways and video one-way, or take turns sharing video. This can be a means to move a step closer to actually meeting without yet meeting, and to verify that a user looks like they claim they do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>photorealistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>The title is cam-2-cam, indicating the point of the room is the camera. Therefore the subject is likely what the cam is suited towards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>No censorship, links to profiles and IMs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Webcams are segmented from other chat. Webcams do not work for two-way conferencing with multiple users on gay.com, making them less suitable for general discussions with groups. Users may “break off” into private cam-to-cam chats.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Message & Discussion Boards**

These have been removed from gay.com. They are not seen as adding more value than the cost/ issues associated with them by the site operators. Therefore it appears the site operators do not see their site as catering to discussions that lend themselves to this medium.

**Blogs & Micro-blogs**

There are no blogs or microblogs on gay.com currently. Blogs related to the site and articles were used in the past sparingly, but are not currently available. Articles have largely been removed from the site, and where they exist are links to other sites now. See the above.

**Offline Messaging**

This is only available through email on gay.com, and no message is sent to your regular email address. Therefore you must sign onto their site to see if you have any messages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Site-specific email, not forwarded or alerted off the site.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Ads are not in the mail itself but around it Some SPAM occasionally slips through but not much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Membership required. Mail cannot be sent off site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>No off-site use, notification, or forwarding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Screening utilities**

Multiple profiles are an option, but full functionality requires both to be paid profiles. Users can sign in as invisible but in fact they show up as online no chat, and chat messages can still come through.
Some users ask questions to verify a message does not come from a “bot.” Automated third party applications to do this have been disabled by the site. What user’s don’t realize is that this is to prevent bots as well. Ignore is not an option but block is, if you are a full member. No group based segregation is available, except for the users own reference. There is no grouping other than hot lists.

A user is notified when they have been blocked. This does not impact any type of user ratings. Reporting users is a separate activity (report abuse link at bottom of instant message utility).

Users may be blocked or allowed. This links to profile.

It is easy to block if you are a premium user, but not obvious how to unblock.

The ways users are content are ranked.

This only effects impression management according to some users

Anyone can add anyone to a hot list, if they are not blocked

The purpose of this rating seems to be to communicate interest to the other user added to the list.

On gay.com affiliations are not very customizable. For example, a user may not add groups based upon their own associations or reasons for interest. The system is designed to support hot lists, friends, and the blocked – this is all. All users of the site are largely grouped together, with the subgroup of the interesting and interested presenting the only refinement. This is in keeping with the privacy approaches presented by the site and discussed previously. On gay.com, one might have good friends, acquaintances, friends who chat about a hobby, and one might have potential love interests. The user would need to remember which was which on their own. Since this chapter was started the ability to add notes to a member profile has been added, which is a step in this direction.

Buddy lists on gay.com are a collection of individual handles with associated profiles that are gathered together in your IM utility window like a menu. One can select hotlist, who thinks I’m hot, who’s viewed me, or bookmarks for profiles as subgroups, but all are visible otherwise. Only online members are shown unless ‘view all’ is clicked.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>This list is public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Buddying is not required to send instant messages or email or chat in chat rooms. It is required to get notification of their online status without explicit search. Unbuddying happens by clicking remove friend in their profile.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>How added and managed, status, identity, grouping, searching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Public buddy lists could tend to discourage adding people you don’t want your other friends to know about. Thus, if a site only has public buddy lists users may be likely not to use it in certain ways unless they can simply remember the names of your secret buddies and contact them without publicly buddying. Users who are concerned about this might use a separate profile.

**Groups and Networks**

Gay.com does not support groups.

**Selective Sharing**

This is associated with photos only, although premium status enforces blocking adult content from non-premium members. Premium status is needed to block a member.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>unlock to individual, no group option</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>User level of selectivity, somewhat easy modification, somewhat easy revocation, there is transparency of what exists but is locked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>User is linked or blocked, connects to profile, upselling if premium content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. how is the sharing implemented? Through the profile of the other user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What is this useful for? Revealing photos, or not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Localization**

In profile searches, for segregating out local people is as a design decision geared towards either meeting people or community issues for an area. Elsewhere support is not evident explicitly for community issues but it is for meeting people. There appears to be some expectation that some users will want to meet in real life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Down to the level of zip code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>This is just used for user search, not for content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>On search for users, links to profiles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Is localization useful? In finding local individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Does localization impact content or just search? Just search</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Common Components: Indicators

*Indicators: Interest (Active) and Receptivity (Passive)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Add to Hot List, buddy request, request to view private content/selective shared content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Indicators of interest or receptivity (hot list, buddy request), public or private (request to view content)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Links to profile or shared content (images)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Implemented on profile where request originates, Would serve as reinforcement and mnemonic beyond initial relationship formation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicators: Status and Mode/Motive*

IM “status” messages. Someone with a motive to chat will be free to chat in his or her status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>IM status message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Canned only on gay.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links/Blocks</td>
<td>Status may influence who can contact you but only when respected by the user – not site enforced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>1. How does your status look to people you have indicated you are offline to? As online no-chat or as offline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Component Summarization

To summarize, profiles, searching, and chat are the main components. Selectivity is limited to friend or not, and hot list or not. Sharing is limited to block or not block, except photos, which may be individually shared or not by user. Profiles link to most other major components. Expected user activities are watching videos, searching profiles, or chatting primarily. Indications are primarily provided by the profile itself, and the components highlighted are self-presentations, utilities, and content. A user may focus upon content (watch videos) or utilities (searching and chatting) as they wish. Current marketing emphasizes users more than content for the sign up process. After sign up, the content is more emphasized.

Users are presented as part of the advertisement to up-sell. Searching for users and viewing videos get the best “real estate.” Blockages occur for non-premium members when trying to view adult content. Advertising exists throughout the site and in many cases is not obvious, since the advertisements might be cross-selling for the same company or up-selling for premium membership. While videos do add value, here media may anticipate that users who are interested in watching movies primarily will ultimately subscribe to the television channel due to practical operational and bandwidth considerations (and the ability to view movies on ‘a big screen’). Those who want news and articles can subscribe to the magazines.

This positions gay.com as a meeting place with cross-selling opportunities and new advertising opportunities. The advertisements indicate that the target market is sex-positive if not sex-oriented in their identification with the gay community. Motive
indications and utilities related to reaching those motives are the most rich related to user searches and personal representations. The strongest activation of components is linked to meeting others and communicating with them, followed by watching videos. This might be most appealing to rural gays or those who wish to remain anonymous or those who are just coming out. While anonymity could be viewed as a safety mechanism to avoid embarrassment for socially unacceptable behaviors (or being revealed as gay), it also serves legitimate purposes that can be community-affirming and properly addressing the nature of relationship formation in an online environment.

Motive Analysis

As indicated in chapter four, motive as used here is not intended as a claim to know the private or emotional motives of site designers or users. A motive as used here is not necessarily a wish of the heart so much as a discrete goal or objective. The owner(s) of that motive is or are theoretical, but must necessarily be associated with some element of the site itself. Treated generically and demonstrated through symbolic examples of interactions with actual components, user motives are seen as arising from their persona to be conveyed as allowed through the site’s components and indicators. Site motives are treated as coming from the controlling interests, their organizations, and conveyed through the components offered. In both of these cases, a theoretical category of goal(s) is referenced by the term “motivation” in order to determine what is supported or not.

The site’s motive, as indicated by the design of the site, is an attempt to get users to join (as a draw for others and to be markets to), to become premium members, and to make money. There may be other motives at work, but they have not been made transparent to this analysis by the design. Additional possible motives appear in the chart to below, in the right column. These may be compared with the site design to see if they are supported and where/how.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Motives (UMs)</th>
<th>Site Motives (SMs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Finding other users</td>
<td>Getting members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Presenting and advertising yourself</td>
<td>Encouraging users to contribute and become resources for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Evaluating other users</td>
<td>Collecting marketing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Signaling receptivity</td>
<td>Continuously hooking user’s interest in the site/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Signaling interest</td>
<td>Facilitating habituation of usage and integration into life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Screening users (and segmenting)</td>
<td>Categorizing and targeting marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Building relationships</td>
<td>Building trust and branding the site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Recreation</td>
<td>Providing novelty, distraction, or drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Keeping in touch</td>
<td>Keeping the user coming back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Meeting</td>
<td>Getting users to refer/attract other users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Other</td>
<td>Getting members to buy from ads or upgrade memberships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Safety and privacy</td>
<td>Avoiding liability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five symbolic intentions as classes of users may be ‘walked through’ the site in an effort to determine how well those motives are supported by the site design. The below are presented as simplified examples.

**Informational Resource Seekers**

Mr. IRS is seeking useful information about the state of gay rights. Upon finding gay.com, they may see a new banner pointing to a story. Clicking this story presents less than satisfying hard reporting, and IRS deems the content insufficiently insightful or analytic content. IRS seeks out other stories but finds the same largely to be true, and the stories all pointing to other sites. This theoretical informational resource seeker would be less motivated to sign-up, as no real information is advertised as being offered by the site.

*The following components might help: The news ticker*

*He might use them in this way: Click the story on the main page. The likely result would be feeling that their motive is not well served.*

*Here’s what the site would get out of it: Nothing, except another profile added perhaps. Perhaps the user would be interested in another magazine that here owns, or click on an advertisement.*

**Social Users**

This social user might well sign-up. Mz. Sou is just looking for some new friends to chat with apart from her daily routine – preferably strangers in fact. She does not want to meet anyone in real life – she just wants to chat and relax after work as recreation. She sees there are several users with like interests and feels more comfortable around others who share her sexual orientation (it’s a non-issue). She can construct a minimal profile allowing some anonymity – or even a false profile – and join a chat room immediately.
She does not need to become premium, unless she is latter bothered by someone she needs to block. In time however, she finds that she is developing friendships and wants to keep in touch with her new found friends online. She cannot do this without signing on, perhaps at a regular time or going to her favorite chat room. At this point she needs to decide how she is going to handle safety and privacy. In order to gain the trust of others she may be expected to share more about herself. Gay.com does not offer her a lot of options beyond going outside of the system, which might jeopardize anonymity.

*The following components might help: chat rooms, profiles, user search
*She might use them in this way: She might sign up for a free profile, join a chat room, and eventually decide to become premium to keep in touch with her friends semi-anonymously and selectively reveal information while blocking pests.
*Here’s what the site would get out of it: Another profile, participation in chat, and possible a premium member.

Out For a Date

Mr. Ofad is looking for someone to go on a date with. He might want to have someone along on his normal social rounds or just be looking from someone to spend an occasional weekend outing with. Mr. Ofad would likely want to search members. Mr. Ofad could make clear in his profile that he is not looking for one night stands, but a date (if not a serious relationship). Mr. Ofad could avoid making a premium profile and upload only G-rated photos. However, other potential dates might look down on him for using gay.com at all, as might his employer, so Mr. Ofad might choose to remain more anonymous. Mr. Ofad might have to do the finding rather than be found. When he does this finding, he would have to contact the user somehow – via email on the site, for example or via instant message. Given then culture of the site, many users would quickly request a photo. Since attaching photos to emails is not possible in gay.com, he might lose his anonymity. Therefore he might want to join so that he could upload a photo which he sets to private.

*The following components might help: Search, profiles, instant message and chat, photo and selective sharing
*He might use them in this way: He might join as non-premium, search profiles, and find that he is not getting responses due to his lack of photo. Since he wishes to remain discrete, he may join to be able to share his photo but selectively.
*Here’s what the site would get out of it: A membership, and possible a premium membership.

Cyber-sex

Ms. C just wants to have safe, anonymous encounters where she can engage in fantasy. She is primarily joining for the chat rooms and perhaps the instant messages with specific users who have like goals. The benefit here is the potential pool of receptive and like-minded individuals who would not judge the goal or find it distasteful. She may search wish to search for specific key words but there are not provisions for words beyond what the system has defined. Therefore she may go to chat rooms that are similar or fantasy oriented.
Assuming she finds interested parties (this may be frustrating since she cannot create her own chat room or customize her search sufficiently), she may want to keep in touch with them but retain her anonymity. While the environment is likely non-judgmental, other alternatives likely exist elsewhere. She may seek partners elsewhere.

*The following components might help: search, chat, instant message
*She might use them in this way: Sign up for a free membership, search for closest proximity available with predefined criteria, go to general chat rooms to seek out likeminded people by instant message. If she is not fetish oriented, or if her fetish is sufficiently represented, this may work out. Otherwise, she may go to another medium/site.
*Here’s what the site would get out of it: A member but probably not premium.

Looking For “Hook-ups” in Real Life

Mr. Hook is looking for someone to hook up with. He will likely not want to ‘waste a lot of time’, so he will need to upload some explicit photos – perhaps headless. He may upload additional photos that he keeps private. He will likely need premium membership. He can search for local people that are on-line and meet his criteria and that seem to be interested in the same. He could also go to a local chat room for people who are ‘on now’, scan profiles, and instant message selectively with members.

*The following components might help: Search, selective sharing, profiles, chat rooms, instant message
*He might use them in this way: Join, become premium, upload photos, set some to selective sharing, fill out profile, go to chat room, instant message users.
*Here’s what the site would get out of it: A premium user that rewards other premium users with similar goals.

Motive Summary and Conclusion

The most reliable premium member suggested by the above examples (that would fully utilize the system and offer the most value to other like-minded members) would be the hook-up user. This user might be on “a lot” but would likely not tax the system much. This type of user is likely not to leave due to frustration or embarrassment or having their goal met, so long as they are occasionally successful. However, the presence of this user might convey an impression that is not desirable to other users that have different goals. This is again an indication that a site may benefit from segregating those seeking long-term relationships off from those who are not. A problem is that those seeking long-term relationships would need to be willing to set limits without feeling rude, and to somehow end the advances of others they were not interested in (“let’s just be friends.”).

The least well-supported motive suggested by the above examples would be the information seeker. Gay.com offers very little to reward their objectives. Therefore, the site was not designed with the assumption that their target market would be seeking information or that providing it to them would be a lucrative model.
Virtual Personas and Real Communities

Gays have long suffered from a normative disapproval and even persecution offline. This makes online social networking sites more attractive to some. Individuals may turn to an environment like gay.com for help with their unique situations. Some may conclude that what is being offered isn’t really designed for them, whether seeking mates or community members. Others will conclude it is, at least for a time. Even with the domain name gay.com, it would certainly be a mistake to over-identify any minority group too generically with their online presence. Culture is changing in some form of relationship with technology, but culture is not monolithic – even at a single site.

Technology may not be responding to the community so much as shaping it, as directed by those with the financial control over the medium. Technology’s impacts may be liberating and amputating at the same time. These changes are not just related to the gay community.

In general, the easiest part to communicate about homosexuality is the sex. This is also the easiest part to sell. Perhaps as a natural consequence of this, online sites catering to the gay community can tend to be more sexually charged (like perhaps the gay community itself) than non-gay-oriented sites. Commercial sites can have significant economic incentive to exploit this, while claiming to serve the community.

The communication content on gay.com is somewhat shaped by the decisions to include certain information within the profiles, and to create chat rooms with certain names. The overall design of the site, as has been shown, more deliberately supports ‘hook ups’ than intellectual debate about activist causes. Yet there are intellectuals, and there are individuals who choose to chat about love & romance. These themes are perhaps undersold, but they have been included (if weakly). As online behavior changes, and as the presence of the medium integrates into our lives, our outward behavior can change and even our communities and relationships themselves. Some doubtless will find true love online. Others will find the system frustrating.

If a site identifies itself with a community, it could choose to make the welfare of that community part of the discussion. Gay.com has not actively done this. Gay.com has designed its site in alignment with the view that members are consumers. There is little evidence of community supporting influences on identification and behavior. Several minor positive steps have been taken, but the scope of those steps seems stifled by the overarching commercialization of lifestyle that is being sold like any other product or service. There is copious evidence of non-supporting influences on holistic and positive community-oriented identification and behavior. Gay.com does not present itself or conduct itself as a responsible member of the gay community. Gay.com and its parent company do aggressively market to the gay community. The design of the site appears to be driven primarily by their commercial interests. This site promulgates and enables casual anonymous sex while doing nothing to educate its members about the risks (or what they can do to be safer). No evidence was found in this study that the emphasis of Gay.com’s design is fundamentally geared to activity beyond promoting videos. No evidence was found that the design was geared towards community beyond facilitating the identification of the community with a broader group of other individuals who also have related sexual proclivities. This does not necessarily oppress resourceful users, but there is little concrete evidence of any unique value that users are being specifically offered beyond the attractive qualities of the domain name.
References


Chapter 7
An Analysis of Other Sites
Chapter 7.
Other Site Analysis

To analyze other sites, an abbreviated version of the same analytic methods applied to gay.com can be used as well. In this chapter, I will use this abbreviated method on downelink.com and fngaychat.com. If the method works as desired, it should help to assess what makes these sites distinctive in a quantifiable way as it applies to the gay community. The first site I will look at is downelink.com.

Downelink.com
First page:

Note the location of the hands for the white outline, at the same level as the arrow next to sign up. This may or may not intentionally line up with the other figures. However the text says ‘YOUR COMMUNITY.’ The images look young, cool – kind of like an Apple commercial.

Bottom: Copyright © 2010 LOGO / MTV Networks, a division of Viacom International Inc
The images seem to be favoring younger members. This persists throughout the site, although there are ads for expensive “luxury” cars.

Clicking Signup:
Filling this form out and selecting Register, the user next sees:
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Next, the user is taken here:
Users tend to be younger males in the pictures. Almost no one is shirtless – photos are PG at worst. Most photos look real – only one was not an actual person. Slightly less than ¼ had multiple people – likely friends, including male and/or female friends mixed in. Some tag lines are a bit odd or ‘cocky.’

Following registration, the user is sent a confirmation email. Clicking the link to confirm, they are taken to my profile.
Clicking on chat the user sees the chat rooms:

**Male Chat**

Your chat name will now be your profile URL name.

Your profile URL: [http://www.downelink.com/1225724](http://www.downelink.com/1225724) [edit]

### Male User-Created Rooms

- **BAKLA... (0 Users)**
- **HORNY 4 CUM (1 User)**
- **Baguio's lonelyboy (3 Users)**
- **BATANG HAMOG. (0 Users)**
- **BISAYA KMII... (3 Users)**
- **BISAYA sila KMII hinted!!! (0 Users)**
- **California (1 User)**
- **Canada (0 Users)**
- **cute ph with cam only (1 User)**
- **Europe (1 User)**
- **Florida (0 Users)**
- **Hawaii (0 Users)**
- **KAPWA KO MAHAL KO!! (0 Users)**
- **LaMaNg LuPa (LEVEL UP) (3 Users)**
- **LOBBY (1 User)**
- **Lounge (193 Users)**
- **Lounge 2 (12 Users)**
- **MARKRYAN (1 User)**
- **New York (2 Users)**
- **P_h_BOYZ (0 Users)**
- **PARK MOE (0 Users)**
- **PatrickMt3 (0 Users)**
- **Philippines (2 Users)**
- **SINGLES and LOOKING... (0 Users)**
- **tunopang mabait at matino (15 Users)**
- **u I LOVE U DEE (0 Users)**
- **u NAKA WEBCAM PA WTF (0 Users)**

### Male General Rooms

- **Breakups/Rebounds (0 Users)**
- **18-20 Something (0 Users)**
- **Dating (0 Users)**
- **20 Something (0 Users)**
- **Relationships (0 Users)**
- **30 Something (0 Users)**
- **Singles (12 Users)**

*Inactive rooms are auto-removed after 10 minutes.*

*To create a new room, go into any of the rooms under "User-Created Rooms" and click "New Room".*
Anonymized forums graphics:
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Groups:

DOWNELINK GROUPS

Looking for others who have the same interests or views? Join or create a group to share experiences & communicate with others through forum topics, discussions and announcements.

Featured Groups

- Guitarists 214 Members
- Vegetarians 2 Members
- Latino!
  - Forward Latino! 11 Members

Random Groups

- Latinos Obama
- Neptune/Obamas 11 Members
- Sex studs and fannnz 113 Members
- Y A H F A 14 Members

Browse Groups By Category

- alumni/schools (210)
- fashion & style (463)
- nightlife & clubs (365)
- automotive (61)
- film & television (109)
- non-profit (61)
- business (82)
- food & beverages (31)
- other (881)
- cities & neighborhoods (315)
- games (54)
- pets & animals (25)
- companies/co-workers (20)
- gov't & politics (24)
- places & travel (44)
- computers & internet (46)
- health & wellness (61)
- recreation & sports (113)
- countries & regional (83)
- hobbies & crafts (39)
- religion & beliefs (58)
- cultures & community (323)
- gay & straight (756)
- romance & relationships (1518)
- entertainments & arts (314)
- money & investing (68)
- schools & education (110)
- family & home (385)
- music (387)
- science & history (11)
BLOGS:

MY RECENT BLOGS

A 'blog' is an online journal. It is a place for you to share your daily thoughts and occurrences with others in the DowneLink community.

You do not have any blogs. Click here to start blogging!
Anonymized Flirt Graphic (selecting the flirt tab, which shows search members):
Financial

The owning entity of Downelink is Logo/MTV Networks (which is owned by Viacom). As mentioned previously we see again a specialty media outlet that is also a media distributor moving into the online social networking arena. Such moves by media conglomerates might be generalized as likely stemming from a desire to preemptively respond to the writing on the Internet wall.

Viacom “brands” (as they indicate on their home page) include BET, CMT (Country Music Television), Spike TV, MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, Paramount and Paramount Vantage (Viacom, 2008). Many of these brands are niche targeted, and many of them tend to court younger or hip market segments. The marketing of this site seems designed to attract this audience, not just to display it as a commodity.

Viacom recently brought suit against Youtube (which is owned now by Google). The suit alleges Youtube (before being acquired by Google) was intentionally operating as a haven for massive copyright infringement. Viacom launched the suit after their own failed take-over attempt at acquiring Youtube (Zinn, 2010).

Viacom is publicly traded on the NYSE, with the symbol of VIA (Class A common sock with voting) and VIA.B (non-voting common stock) (Viacom, 2010). Current market buzz is recommending purchasing VIA.B, after a number of financial obligations of National Amusements have been met.

(Firstrade securities, May 3, 2010).
Sumner Redstone is chairman of the board of National Amusements; he and his sister own National Amusements, which has a controlling interest in Viacom (and CBS). Redstone claims to be a Democrat, but endorsed George Bush in the 2004 election, citing business advantage. This followed the Dan Rather scandal, which caused some to brand the network left leaning and biased. In spite of this endorsement, Redstone did also donate money to the Kerry campaign. The political orientation demonstrated does appear to be one of expedience (Asian Wall Street Journal, 2004).

**Overall Layout**

We see again a consistent navigation feature across the top – like tabs. The left-hand column of the page is used generally for contextual submenus based upon the tab that is selected at the top. The navigation options are: messages, blogs, flirt, chat, forums, groups, photos, downetv, contests, SEARCH (for content) with a web search option.

Advertising is more constrained spatially than on gay.com. There is an ad consistently in a banner across the top, and several pages have an advertisement banner vertically across the right-most portion of the page. The majority of most pages is taken up by content, clickable links, or utilities. Self-promotion exists (ring tones, radio) but there is less overt cross-selling. While there are links to fashion, etc. these are actually referenced by forums and groups where users have their say interactively. The user is not simply seen as a consumer.

The name downelink.com contains connotations of ‘down low’, ‘link’, and ‘being down’ with something. It is a young term – with a natural sort in the URL favoring the young. The e on the end of down makes it hip-hop (or for you old timers like myself ‘funky.’). The tag line is ‘your community.’ This clearly implies there is a chance for more than sex on the site.

There is less of a ‘Bored and directionless? Click here!’ approach, or to state it more positively there is less of a guided approach to the space. The features are easily accessible as if usability were considered, and not simply added on to say they are there for marketing. Messaging seems to be expected to be used frequently, but TV is as accessible as blogging or chat in a transparent and efficient manner that remains consistent through out the site.

**Site Categories**

This is a Social Networking site. Like gay.com, as a broad category the site has tight integration of “personals” style functionality into the rest of the site. However, while search is prominently featured there are more activities that are supported by this site which could be engaged in regularly by those who already know each other (for example, blogs – which can be part of relationship maintenance longer-term). There are birthday reminders as well. Membership is open in that anyone can join, but access to anything requires membership. Unlike gay.com, there are not levels of membership and the site is truly free. All members have equal access. Customization of content and networks is not truly supported here. Operational participation is not encouraged or supported. Users may however create new forums and groups. As much as community is mentioned there is no real affordance for community ownership of the site. Moderation is not in evidence and mash-ups are not supported.
Mediations

Beyond some additional sorting mediations (additional options such as forums and groups) and behavior-supporting mediations (the same), there is little remarkable or different immediately obvious about the other mediations on this site from a similar analysis to what was applied to gay.com. It is unclear if user reactions have been validated by the site, but since nothing controversial or detrimental to the site is present we can assume either the users are happy/accepting or the site has removed dissent.

There is no mention of policy ownership and the site has not expressed the language and philosophy of transparency beyond using the word community a lot. The fact that the site truly is free, in combination with the reduced amount of advertisement, does suggest and lend itself to an environment that is more friendly towards community orientation.

Metaphors, Myths & Texts

Like gay.com, a club metaphor is communicated, and the administration of the site is delivered in an occult fashion (hidden and handed down). Like gay.com also, the interface is largely frozen. No remarkable differences exist in the mythological undercurrent from a similar analysis to gay.com. Textual analysis indicates a younger, hip, somewhat rebellious theme recurrent. Screen names, profiles, posted messages and pictures convey this.

Individual Components

An abbreviated look at individual components including Navigation, search, and profiles confirms the initial site categorization. Navigation has already been discussed as part of overall layout. Search features prominently in the flow of the site from login. One distinguishing characteristic of this site is the amount of space and the number of resources allocated for components that were not present on gay.com. For example, the percentage of space and the depth of functionality offered by the freely available components including blogs, forums and groups is a significant distinction. The usage of this site could realistically be appealing to a user who wishes to for example debate politics or religion, and this is supported by the existence of these components as a site design choice. Without these components, the question naturally becomes less open regarding what does one of the recurring regulars do on this site for hours at a time several nights a week?

Since this is an abbreviated analysis, I will focus upon distinctive components that directly bear upon the character of the site in significant or mediating ways. This will be determined by the degree to which the site design emphasizes and supports them, as well as the representative goals they are well suited to fulfill. Finally, if these components contain significant implications about the character of the users or the culture of the site that are especially relevant or distinctive they will be specifically selected.

Search has categories only, and doesn’t allow open relationship. This suggests that the site was not designed with those in open relationships to cruise online. Search criteria is sorted by (drop down): last login, new people, last update; only user with photos (check box), ages between, zodiac sign, gender (including male to female and female to make), orientation (check boxes for gay, hag/stag, bicurious, lesbian, bisexual, net sure, downe, queer); ethnicity (check boxes); relationship status (check boxes for
single, talking to someone, rebound, married, in a relationship, dating, whatever); Country (drop down), proximity (free text); zip code. Users may be ‘bookmarked’. No explanation is given for any of this terminology.

The blog component allows a lot of text, but it is not rich content enabled. There is a “bulletin” feature similar to microblogging that also serves in a similar manner to a headline for the profile, and readers can add comments. This is available through the user profile, but you can also search for new blogs or find them randomly through public pages. There is little evidence of monitoring or moderating. The community does have some self-policing here. For example, on one blog the members friends indicated what they had posted what sounded like a suicide letter. The members were very supportive of the individual and encouraged them to take care of themselves and do what is best for them. There is no obvious “report” button for those who are offended. The blogs link to profiles. A brief view of the blog texts seems to indicate most blogs are about the members lives, although nothing prohibits social commentary. Occasional statements are made related to the larger community but these are generall originating from a personal context.

The motive for including the blog does not appear to be to encourage pick-ups, since they are not being used this way. The blogs largely seem to be a communicating what life is like for the individual and what they are thinking about/experiencing. The blogs are easily accessible and subscribing does make keeping up easy. Therefore it is not difficult to imaging a user signing on to keep up with their existing friends using this utility in this site’s context (see user motive and site motive 9 from the motives chapter).

The forums component is broken down into topics: downelink.com (inviting feedback), arts, automobiles, beauty/grooming, business, campus life, culture, entertainment, fashion/style, food, heath/fitness, hobbies/interests, lifestyle, music, news/politics*, other, personal finance, relationship, religion, sex, sports, technology, and travel. Presumably a user might go to these forums to see input from other users on these topics. This is peer input, and it does not appear to be heavily moderated or given oversight/correction/shaping. The categories themselves are pre-existing. Under news/politics, there are polls, topics related to current events, and requests for people to join in who are involved in certain issues (such as gays in the military). Some events are announced, including activist gathering. Links may be given and replys are allowed. Topics can also be forwarded. You can check a box to be notified of new pots, so you can keep up on the issues.

The groups component is similar, but could be used more for enthusiasts who want to share photos of their cats for example. Non-profit is one group category, and it includes groups such as the ACLU. Photos, members, bulletins and topics are available here. Bulletins are from the group, topics are threaded discussions. Theoretically, the groups would be used to help an existing or new actual group, while forums would be discussions. Group categories are: alumni/schools, automotive, business, cities & neighborhoods (an example of localization here), companies/co-workers, computers & internet, countries & regional (again localization, likely for those outside of the US), culture & communities, entertainment & arts, family & home, fashion & style, file & television, food & beverage, games, govn’t & politics, health & wellness, hobbies & craft, lgbt, money & investing, music, nightlife & clubs, non-profit, other, pets & animals, places & travel, recreation & sports, religion & beliefs, romance & relationships,
schools & education, science & history. What this conveys is a broader understanding of the gay identity and community as a peer group being represented on this site explicitly – gay identity is not reduced down to hook-ups. At the very least the site is not limiting itself in the identity of gay community to utilities explicitly designed for hook-ups. Many of these groups address themselves to larger social issues outside of unconnected personal opinions. Posts can be more thoughtful than chat.

**Motives**

The presence of these components indicates the site supports all 12 user motives (finding other users, presenting and advertising yourself, evaluating other users, signaling receptivity, screening users (and segmenting), building relationships, recreation, keeping in touch, meeting, other, and safety/privacy. In the process, the site also address all 12 site motives, though in a different manner (getting members, encouraging users to contribute and become a resource, collecting marketing information, continuously hooking users’s interest, facilitating habituation, categorizing and targeting marketing, building trust and branding, providing novelty, distraction and drama, keeping the user coming back, and getting the user to refer/attract others, getting members to buy from ads, and avoiding liability).

The five symbolic intentions as classes of users may be ‘walked through’ the site in an effort to determine how well those motives are supported by the site design.

**Informational Resource Seekers**

Mr. IRS is seeking useful information about the state of gay rights. Upon finding downelink.com, she may go to the forums, groups, or downeradio. Downeradio is non-political and is a collection of internet music sources, so this would be discarded except as entertainment. The forums offer a culture as well as a news & politics category. Clicking on news & politics, she would be presented with what had been most recently posted by fellow users. This might or might-not be relevant. The forums are searchable. Content exists here, but it is not really a news type service. No direct links to news-type service are presented. Under groups, she could click government & politics. Here she might be solicited to enter a survey about the site as an optional advertisement. Here a number of groups, with their own resources, many of which are related to current issues, would be presented. While the site is not a news site, it is useful in connecting to many resources and individuals of similar interest. This informational resource seeker would likely sign-up if they were looking to collect resources and connect with other individuals but not if there were seeking a hard-news feed. They could use the groups component to do further digging as well as the forums component to discuss and perhaps their blog as well. In exchange, the site might get an active contributor and an interesting member.

**Social Users**

A social user might well sign-up. Mz. Sou is just looking for some new friends to chat with apart from her daily routine – preferably strangers in fact. She does not want to meet anyone in real life – she just wants to chat and relax after work as recreation. She sees there are several users with like interests and feels more comfortable around others who share her sexual orientation (it’s a non-issue). She can construct a minimal profile allowing some anonymity – or even a false profile – and join a chat room immediately.
She does not need to pay for the service. In time she finds that she is developing friendships and becoming involved in groups/forums related to issue and interest, and wants to keep in touch with her new found friends online. She cannot do this without signing on, perhaps at a regular time or going to her favorite chat room. Posting opinions about political issues exposes her to judgement by her employer and perhaps her friends and family if they also may visit this site or find out about it. At this point she needs to decide how she is going to handle safety and privacy. In order to gain the trust of others she may be expected to share more about herself. Downelink.com does not offer her a lot of options beyond going outside of the system, which might jeopardize anonymity. The thoughtful nature of these delayed communications might not have the value of a diversion and validation to the same extent as real-time chat, however.

The following components might help: chat rooms, profiles, user search. This may lead to forums and groups or blogs as well. She might subscribe to others blogs to keep connected with them. Multiuser audio/video chat is also available, which is an advantage over some other sites.

She might use them in this way: She might sign up for a free profile, join a chat room, and eventually decide to subscribe to blogs and join groups to keep in touch with her friends semi-anonymously and selectively reveal information while blocking pests. The site would gain another profile, participation in chat, and possible a premium member.

Out For a Date

Mr. Ofad is looking for someone to go on a date with. He might want to have someone along on his normal social rounds or just be looking form someone to spend an occasional weekend outing with. Mr. Ofad would likely want to search members. Mr. Ofad could make clear in his profile that he is not looking for one night stands, but a date (if not a serious relationship). Mr. Ofad could choose to upload only G-rated photos. However, other potential dates might look down on him for using downelink.com at all, as might his employer, so Mr. Ofad might choose to remain more anonymous. Mr. Ofad might have to do the finding rather than be found. When he does this finding, he would have to contact the user somehow – via email on the site, for example or via instant message. Given then culture of the site, some users might quickly request a photo while others would spend the time to get to know Mr. Ofad. This itself would convey something. Mr. Ofad could keep his options open and approach individuals tentatively – rather than with the assumption that all contact is for a pick-up. Photos may not be set to private on this site, and “photos may not contain pornographic or sexually explicit material, violent or offensive material, or copyrighted images.”

He might lose his anonymity but should not feel necessarily worried about this since he can present a publicly acceptable personae and decide to reveal more selectively as the situation merits it. Therefore he might want to join.

The following components might help: Search, photos, profiles, instant message and chat, photo. Note the absence of selective sharing – this is a minus. However the less charged atmosphere could also help him to get to know members better.

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4 see http://www.downelink.com/member/editprofilec.aspx
He might use them in this way: He might join, search profiles, and find that he is not getting responses due to his lack of photo. He might also get lots of responses. Since he wishes to remain discrete, he may approach rather than try to be approached, and reveal information selectively.

Here’s what the site would get out of it: A membership.

**Cyber-sex**

Ms. C just wants to have safe, anonymous encounters where she can engage in fantasy. She is primarily joining for the chat rooms and perhaps the instant messages with specific users who have like goals. The benefit here is the potential pool of receptive and like-minded individuals who would not judge the goal or find it distasteful. She may wish to search for specific key words but there are not provisions for words beyond what the system has defined. However, Downlelink does not have explicit chat rooms that are similar or fantasy oriented. The site conveys that explicit activity is not appropriate for public consumption therefore she would need to evaluate the receptivity of the individuals she was interested in and message them privately. Assuming she finds interested parties (this may be frustrating since she cannot create her own chat room or customize her search sufficiently), she may want to keep in touch with them but retain her anonymity. While the environment is likely non-judgmental, other alternatives likely exist elsewhere. She may seek partners elsewhere.

The following components might help: search, chat, instant message

She might use them in this way: Sign up for a free membership, search for closest approximation available with predefined criteria, go to general chat rooms to seek out likeminded people by instant message. If she is not fetish oriented, or if her fetish is sufficiently represented, this may or may not work out. Otherwise, she may go to another medium/site.

Here’s what the site would get out of it: A member but probably not a big public sharer.

**Looking For “Hook-ups” in Real Life**

Mr. Hook is looking for someone to hook up with. He will likely not want to ‘waste a lot of time’, so he will need to upload some explicit photos – perhaps headless. Downlelink will not allow explicit photos or overly explicit profiles. He will likely need to keep everything explicit private or show some subtelety in his profile and public communications. He can search for local people that are on-line and meet his criteria and that seem to be interested in the same, but not using criteria that will necessarily indicate their receptivity. He could also not go to a highly local chat room for people who are ‘on now’. He could scan profiles for proximity, and instant message selectively with members but would have difficulty knowing if they were interested in hooking up now.

The following components might help: Search, profiles, chat rooms, instant message. Selective or adult sharing is again not an option, presenting an obstacle.

He might use them in this way: Join, upload photos, fill out profile, go to chat room, instant message users. He might be in the active role more than the passive in this search.

Here’s what the site would get out of it: A user that rewards other likeminded users with similar goals.
Conclusion & Comparison

Downelink.com is a site that is less hook-up oriented because the site does not support explicit photos or profiles, selective sharing of photos, or adult-themed searches. The site still does support searches for online now members and based upon proximity. With some subtlety and effort, the hook-up could still be accomplished but the design would require a more active orientation that is elaborative and selective. Meanwhile the site supports maintaining connection and engaging in a fuller spectrum of behaviors that are related to gay identity or just identity in general. This is largely accomplished through forums and groups and blogs. Some affordances, such as friend birthdays and invites are provided for this, just as topic-based affordances exist to support sharing about hobbies and activities or interests that are not immediately sexual. It is speculation, but it may be reasonable to consider that the design of the site was tailored to the younger generation, and therefore consideration was given to the potential reaction of parents to the discovery that their child was using this site.

Fungaychat.com

A comparison with a minimalist interface, fungaychat.com, might test the premise that that analytic technique reveals something of the supported behavior and character of the site. Fungaychat.com is its own private company, without many publicly available details. A whoislookup of the domain shows weirdtown.com in SanFrancisco, CA as the registrant with GoDaddy as the host.

The initial screen is simple – a login or signup option with a list of rooms. The terms of service link contains nothing significant. There is no real ‘about’ information presented. There is an option to send a message to everyone right on the main page. Clicking join asks for user name, password, password confirmation, email (with a hide email option checked by default), birthday drop down boxes for month day and year, gender (m/f), and country. You must click agree in this window to proceed. You are then presented with countries as chat rooms, whos online button, menu, and log out. Menu simply takes the user back to the list of countries. There is an edit note and edit profile button. The note is free text that is kind of like a status message.

User names are clickable and show age, sex, location and email (which may be obscured). There is a pvt button for private messages. States and cities are listed below as links. A message across the top of the room when Tampa Florida was selected reads “You must be 18 or over to chat. If you're younger than 18, please go to Tampa teen chat rooms.” An advertisement banner appears under the chat room when it is selected. The advertisement is for a dating site.

There is not a lot of interface to analyze on this site. However, the text includes sexually explicit statements and the users are expressing overtly sexual intentions including the details of their desired hook-ups. A list of similar chat rooms appears underneath when one is selected.

Some key observations here include that the site need not expressly support hook-ups for the site to become a hook-up oriented spot. It may be in fact that the nature of ‘gay chat’ itself is suggestive enough that in the absence of specific affordances to broaden the context, user may see the utility of chat most suited to this behavior. The topic is sexualized.
The free, anonymous, unmoderated nature of the connection may tend to become thusly oriented when the commonality is orientation without affordances made or explanations given to intervene in support of broader usage and contextualized focus. This suggests that the chat room has not been seen as well suited to be utilized for maintaining friendships and discussing other topics. It can not be concluded that this one moment in time or this one chat room is representative in a definitive manner, but repeated trips to the same chat room at version times have resulted in similar experiences.

The suggestion here is that minimalist design also tends to support and enable minimalist activity. The nature of the medium must be designed with broader community support in mind in order to foster broader use (with users thus interested). If it is easier to create hook-up sites and the financial rewards are sufficient, market forces alone will tend to foster such hook-up sites and not community sites. Users with other motives might need to be afforded some protective mechanisms in potentially chaotic minimalist environments with sexualized themes. Therefore, community intervention or proactive community leadership is required if Internet social networking is going to serve the broader gay community.
References


Chapter 8
Impact of Social Networking Sites on Sexual Activity
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The Medium is the Community Message

This author has found surprisingly few studies, and fewer conclusive, answering the question “Do social networking sites impact sexual activity?” There is little reason to fund these studies in terms of immediate corporate benefit. The benefits of such studies would rather be altruistic and perhaps disturbing. Such studies would need to rely upon self-reported activity and willing participation, which might have the effect of skewing the results. First-hand accounts will be presented in an effort to fill in some of the gaps left.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when direct intervention is not exercised the nature of the social networking website medium can be hook-up oriented. One such intervention as done by downelink is to limit “X-rated” content. Users can still hook up in private chat and through subtle innuendo, but the restriction has the effect of protecting those who are interested in other things (have other motives). Without this protection, it can be more difficult for those users simply because of the nature of the medium as previously discussed.

Since such intervention requires extra effort, there is no direct economic incentive to create it. The motive for creating it would have to be cultural – either marketing considerations, community expectation, or a genuine sense of responsibility towards the community. Taking such intervention seriously may be seen as beyond the scope of what is expected.

The very concept of social media being a service provided by large media outlets is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, social media does offer a significant degree of control to the users in what they say. On the other hand, treating this community as a commodifiable service and guiding its design by economic forces will tend to produce environments where particular types of communication will be supported and others not. To some extent, this is inherent within the medium itself.

Branding around sexually charged or related themes, even indirectly, can exacerbate these tendencies. Some goals and forms of identity will find the experience more satisfying than others. The ubiquity of the service itself becomes a larger culturally shaping force. In effect, the service draws users in and may exert an influence upon how it is used just by existing and being what it is. Ultimately, the presence of this community online contributes in some sense to the impressions of identity the community is left with. One could claim this impression is generated by the users, and to some extent it is. However, this impression is mediated by the medium.

Sites like Second Life make the ability to take ownership and the ability engage in cybersex ‘premium’ services. Obviously users value these, and choose them. In one sense however this creates clear a distinction between the Serfs and the land owners. Such a community has classes. Furthermore even the upper-class have limitations that have been designed.

The need to attract people, the requirement for a lot of them, and the easy ability to disconnect combined with the ease with which one can just go elsewhere (its not a physical trip to go elsewhere) modify what culture gets created in commercial sites. Getting to the site is easy – even for rural individuals. Getting what you want might
involve new obstacles, and commercial interests will represent what is offered in the way they see best for marketing. Commercial interests will also consider the return on investment from the user in commercial terms – certain users with certain goals will be less expensive to serve and provide more “bait” to other users.

To broaden the sense of community, intervention is needed even more than in physical environments because of the lack of accountability in online environments. The physical removal exacerbates the sense of unreality and removes the users from confrontation as well as immediate peer pressure, with both positive and negative consequences. The very sense of public is changed. Public in the real world has different properties, that are necessarily self-evident towards a peer-group just as a natural consequence of occupying a natural space in the way we have been biologically adapted to. There is no ignore button in real life. In real life, we are likely to see the same people over and over again even if we don’t like them initially. In real life, opportunities are limited spatially and social norms impose a way of relating that is seen as traditionally acceptable and civil.

Online, disconnecting is trivial. In a community, disconnecting is not trivial or always even possible. Real life communication conveys the spontaneous and our natural body language whether we wish it to or not. Online, to some extent, we may be forced into being desensitized to behaviors and ways of relating that would be considered rude or inappropriate in real space. Our expectations for this space are different. Our approach to meeting and relating is therefore different. Users are freed from conventional reproach with both positive and negative consequences.

The Internet and Sex

The existence of cybersex has rendered false the assumption that individuals must meet to have sex. It has also rendered false the concept that individuals must meet to become friends, although this could to some extent be true via the far older practice of keeping a ‘pen-pal.’

“Scholars studying Internet use have long identified sex as a main motivation for going online” (Watkins, 2009, p. 151). As evidence, Watkins cites Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet by Sherry Turkle (1997). According to Turkle (1997), the pursuit of virtual sex is common and, “for many people, it is the center-piece of their online experience” (p. 223). Using Turkle and others throughout the book as supporting evidence, Watkins states “from the moment humans began role-playing, exploring, and participating in computer-mediated communities, sex has been established as a fact of online life” (Watkins, 2009, p. 151).

Watkins also states that “there is mounting evidence that in many American households a serious challenge to the maintenance of personal and intimate relationships occurs when family members choose to spend more time online than with each other” (p. 153). He cites Dr. Jerald Block, who first raised concerns regarding Internet addiction in an editorial for the American Journal of Psychiatry (165:306-307, March 2008), and who has raised three concerns about some user’s relationship with their computers
Dr. Block believes that the intense attachment to the Internet can undermine the quality of our most personal relationships. Block says, ‘First it [the computer] becomes a significant other to them. Second, they exhaust emotions that they could experience in the real world on the computer, through any number of mechanism: e-mailing, gaming, porn. Third, computer use occupies a tremendous amount of time in their life’ (Watkins, 2009, p. 153).

Little evidence exists that as a group gay men who engage in cybersex are confining themselves to it. Some users doubtless do engage in cybersex that does not lead to real life sex, or may engage in cybersex only outside of their primary relationship. The benefits of cybersex include that it is physically safe and disease free. It may serve as a ‘trial’ before real sex to help identify if partners are compatible. Regardless, cybersex may represent a kind of ultimate reification of sexual interaction and therefore changes the concept of interdependent relationships into an inherent abstraction.

“For the youth it [the Internet] remains a place to learn about safe sex without going ahead and risking the danger of having unsafe sex.” (Roy, 2003, p. 184). In theory this is an understandable sentiment, and the sympathy towards the medium expressed by a people who are fearful of retribution for their sexual orientation is understandable. However, in my research I have been unable to locate evidence that anything of consequence is being learned about safer sex in many cases. It is true that online simulated sex is disease-free as it is essentially a mutually assisted autoerotic engagement in the physical sense. The fact remains that unless the users of this service are going to confine themselves thusly or are fortunate enough to encounter an educationally minded individual, the site must assist with this goal if it is to be achieved.

Working in reverse from the statistic that “1 out of 5 single people have dated someone they met on an online dating site. (Table 5) 1 out of 5 people in a new committed relationship (including marriage) met their significant other on an online dating site.” (match.com, 2010), it would be a reasonable presumption that some online activity, at least, leads to real encounters. The evidence that individuals are meeting in real life and forming relationships (not just having sex) is prevalent. “… among those who met in just the two years before the survey, 23% of heterosexual couples and 61% of gay and lesbian couples met online. (Of those surveyed, 474 were gay or lesbian.)” (Jayson, 2010, Lifestyle section). Anecdotal evidence that happy long-term couples have met online is easily obtainable, and likely supported by hard studies.

Many advertisements for dating sites are eager to position SNgS hook-up sites (according to the categories presented earlier) as dating-oriented. Their popularity is exploding. Yet, questions remain. When advertisements ask, “Why do you Cupid?”, they may be presenting potential users with justifications to ally their own inner censors. Why do I need to be told that the user is looking for “Mr. Right, not Mr. Right now?” To a lesser extent some advertisements on gay.com that mention relationships might be allying the users inner query “why do you gay.com?” One answer might be cybersex. This answer could be as dishonest as those who claim to be looking for Mr. Right when they are not. To be sure some users are in fact looking for “Mr. Right.” However,

For an example, see The Observer: http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/mar/23/news.internet. In this article, Block indicates that he does not feel the websites are responsible.
psychology clearly suggests, as advertisers are well aware, that our motivations might be more complex and even self-deceptive than we are conscious of. Recent commercials for cupid.com are available online.

Site Design and Sexual Culture

Website design can to some extent subtly shape user behavior, communication, and users sense of community identity. Two points in case are communication behavior and sexual behavior among members of the gay community. The concerns raised by social networking’s use of virtual personas to represent real communities may not be a concern of the site operator’s, but they are a concern of those communities. Issues from privacy to safer sex are raising themselves through a new medium, and this medium makes a difference. Social networking websites are not analogous to previous technologies or mere amplification of them. Social networking websites break from historical assumptions and patterns of behavior and even traditional ideas of identity, while introducing new scales and forms of relationships. The forces involved in this shaping are not always overt, and rarely what is presented. Therefore answering the question “why do you gay.com?” requires more than simply asking users.

In America, we are taught that individual choice is ever expanded in a competitive free market. However, in the current environment, the very way we make decisions and the way we get information to make those decisions can be designed as never before. “…companies are not only collecting information about us but also processing it in ways that lead to ‘decisional interference.’ Search engines make money by matching our desire to buy with someone else’s interest in selling. They are coming to know so much about us, however, that they are increasingly in the position to shape our desires in the interests of their paying customers” (Duguid, 2010, p. 30). The content and design of such sites is often protected as intellectual property and regulated by terms of service designed by the owning agency. No such protection or input in the interest of the users is in place.

In his manifesto You Are Not a Gadget, Lanier (2010) asks, “Did that search engine really know what you want, or are you playing along, lowering your standards to make it seem clever?” (p. 32). He also states “I know quite a few people, most of them young adults, who are proud to say they have accumulated thousands of friends on Facebook. Obviously, their statements can only be true if the idea of friendship is diminished” (p. 53). Friendship is obviously not sex, but the most basic persistent form of interdependent relationship that is forged by individuals at their discretion. What is relevant here is the relationship towards the medium contextualizing the relationship between individuals and how they view each other.

Lanier (2010) makes an essence point, in my view, when he states that “the combination of hive mind and advertising have resulted in a new kind of social contract. The basic idea of this contract is that authors, journalists, musicians, and artists are encouraged to treat the fruits of their intellects and imaginations as fragments to be given without pay to the hive mind. Reciprocity takes the form of self-promotion. Culture is become nothing but advertising.” (p. 83). This also applies to sex.

In previous chapters I have attempted to apply HCI concepts to analyze the selection of components and overall site design to determine the supported categories of usage and to some extent the goals of the site designers. In some cases, this can reveal information about the culture of the site that is supported, the user goals that are not supported, and in determining if the site is “hook-up” driven. A separation of the site operators motives from the user motives is crucial to any such analysis, and an objectively measurable object of such an analysis is the site design and its components.

Few sites offer intervention in an active way regarding condoms or safer sexual practices. Many offer pornography. Such interventions might be seen as a tacit admission that user may be there for casual sex, which could decrease sales. Such interventions need not be judgmental or fear-based. In fact, they are far more effective if they are neither.

Such an absence itself communicates something. If users view a website a passive medium, such an intervention would not make sense. If on the other extreme the user were to view the website as a ‘program’ that drives users towards an objective, such an intervention would be irresponsible not to include. In fact the website is not either of these. It falls somewhere in between.

This being the case, it makes sense to ask more about the users being served (or not) by the site. Just as we are free to sell cotton candy to diabetics and alcohol to alcoholics, a site is free to offer up unhealthy fare to users who are behaving in a self-destructive fashion. It is not the responsibility of the site nor is it always deemed feasible in any in depth fashion for the site to assess its users.

Marketers are inherently interested in conveying the positive experiences their site can offer. Communities are interested in more. This is one reason why community can never be a product. In a later section there will be some firsthand accounts of experiences with social networking. It would behoove any community-minded site designer to consider what the sites marketing says it does, what the users of the site wanted it to do, and what really happened for them. If the trend represented in these examples continues, it may in fact be the market that causes reform since many users are becoming jaded in regard to such sites. A site that better meets the needs of the community may, in the final analysis, be more ‘sticky.’

“Mark Keenan, Managing Director of Divorce-Online said: ‘I had heard from my staff that there were a lot of people saying they had found out things about their partners on Facebook and I decided to see how prevalent it was. I was really surprised to see 20 per cent of all the petitions containing references to Facebook’ “ (Telegraph.co.UK, 2010, top of page).

Facebook’s design does not fit the mold of a social networking site designed for hook-ups, based upon the definition of this thesis. This seems to present some compelling evidence that hook-up usage is not only simply the result of design (however inadvertent or otherwise). Facebook is not full of affordances catering to this motive. This does seem to support the supposition that the medium itself requires active intervention to promote usage in the interest of broader social aims. It may be that the ubiquity and popular familiarity with this particular site is simply attracting (disproportionately adolescent) users to a medium that has inherent properties and opportunities that are best suited to such aims as hook-ups. Research may be merited into whether just having ‘secret friends’ and chats can lead some towards to sex.
There may also be a case to be made that usage patterns outside of Facebook can spread to this site since it is a similar online medium. The constraints on production might have filtered out unpopular ideas (good and bad) in old media, but the quality of the content was also more of a factor. In a sense, quality content is always going to be more expensive and time-consuming to produce. The openness of the Internet allows dissent, but it also buries and to some extent suppresses quality controls. Facebook is not a content producer, the users are. Those users will find more validation for the effort involved, in general, when focusing upon what the medium is suited towards.

“Nothing that McLuhan said could adequately articulate the relationship between media, power and commerce. Johnathan Miller accused him of ‘abdication of political intelligence’ ”(Horrocks, 2001, p. 9). However his theories may have proven accidentally prescient in that “new technologies and media have not only been accompanied by discourses of virtuality, but have been constructed by them”(Horrocks, 2001, p. 32). As we have joined this new medium, friendship, individuals, and culture have been to some extent remediated by it and begun reflecting its properties.

In his essay The Heart of the New Machine, Gregg Easterbook refers to the common failing humans have experienced in trying to mould others to fit our dreams and desires instead of seeing them as they are. He notes that computers crave this kind of tampering instead of resisting it. We are free to program the personality and traits we desire (Zerzane and Carnes, 1991). In using this medium to search for friendship, we are functionally rewarded by use of this approach. Computers present databases of people to match our interests. Finding sexual matches can easily be accomplished, isolated from the traditional courtship activities. More than in traditional venues, what is presented in such an environment may reduce down to the rawest beauty pageant assessment of identity and therefore of sexuality. This is not new, but in few forms has such an overt mentality been legitimized.7

Gays and the Internet

The unique appeal and interest in using the Internet for social interaction has already been established through such statistics as the 2001 Study cited in Your Picture is your bait. For example, “17% - 34% of gay men have used the Internet to find sexual partners” (Brown, 2005, p. 63). He also raises another interesting point – “The Internet provides an opportunity for men to disclose their actual or believed HIV status without identifying themselves and to search out other men of the same HIV status.” (Brown, 2005, p. 67). While HIV is not a gay disease, it has especially impacted this community historically in the United States and the UK.

7 One such form: “The Miss America Organization is one of the nation's leading achievement programs and the world's largest provider of scholarship assistance for young women. Last year, the Miss America Organization and its state and local organizations made available more than $45 million in cash and scholarship assistance.”(Miss America, n.d., Retrieved on August 16, 2010, from http://www.missamerica.org/.)
“The Internet is a popular and easy way for men who have sex with men to meet partners, and our findings suggest that online sex seeking neither promotes nor discourages unprotected anal intercourse,” said Keith Horvath, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health and investigator on the study.

Rather than focusing on the dangers of online sex seeking, Internet-based programs, similar to offline interventions, should encourage at-risk young men who have sex with men to decrease the frequency at which they engage in unprotected anal intercourse, reduce their numbers of sexual partners, avoid alcohol and other substance use in sexual situations, and seek HIV testing, Horvath said.

More than one-quarter of the men in the study had not been tested for HIV. "There is a need and a demand for online health promotion and disease prevention services, and the Internet creates an opportunity to access large numbers of otherwise difficult-to-reach and vulnerable people." Horvath said.

(Hanson, 2008, middle of page).

A key point here being the frequency of risk. Not all gay men are looking for hook-ups or practice unsafe sex. Not all gay men online belong to high-risk categories. Some may use the medium in significantly positive ways. Individuals in repressive environments may benefit from the opportunity to meet with others like themselves. However, just as roads are not designed for highly skilled drivers under ideal conditions, the designers of social networking sites would be doing their due diligence to remain mindful of those users who might be reaching out to their community through their site and are vulnerable.

Gay and bisexual men with “psychosocial vulnerabilities” (e.g., safer-sex burnout, depression, and social isolation) may be particularly prone to disengage, or avoid thinking about HIV, in the anonymity of a virtual world where they can meet sexual partners for engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors.9 Using the Internet to meet partners outside one’s regular sexual network may also create an environment where sexual mixing between high-risk and low-risk persons occurs.10 These new, expanded sexual networks can, in turn, increase the rate at which HIV and other STDs are transmitted.

(Rebchook PhD, 2007, under "does the Internet contribute to risk?").

Intervention can be incorporated into sites in such a way as to maintain the relaxing and fun atmosphere they seek to cultivate. There is evidence that such interventions can have a positive impact. “This study provides some evidence of the efficacy of a video-based online intervention in improving HIV testing among non-gay-identified MSM in Peru. This intervention may be adopted by institutions with websites oriented to motivate HIV testing among similar MSM populations.” (Blas, et al., 2010, p. 1).

Online resources are available outside of social networking sites. Some social networks and sites, described in the next and last chapter, have offered alternative and
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socially conscious designs. The Internet as a whole has given rise to these as well as ‘hook-up’ sites.

“It is also important to affirm the practical existence of counterpublics with different norms of access, conduct, participation and representation. These challenge a class- and gender-biased model of publicity that continues to underwrite ideals of undistorted communication, disembodies reason and universalistic interests as the singular form of public discourse... In this respect, the public value of popular media culture lies in making visible issues, identities and needs that are not readily aired in more formal arenas of public debate and decision-making” (Barnett, 2003, p. 79).

Intervention efforts may be flouted by social squeamishness which ultimately devolves down to fear in the acknowledgement of pleasure combined with the legitimization of that pleasure in non-sanctioned ways. “However, the condom has been desexualized to make it more palatable to the masses. It is no longer a device of shared intimacy and pleasure; instead, it now merely ‘helps reduce the risk.’ Fear-based campaigns are less likely to be effective at motivating behavioral change than those based on pleasure, but fear is the driving force behind such campaigns – not just fear of disease but fear of offending the delicate sensibilities of the self-righteous few.” (Abramson and Pinkerton, 2003, p. 167).

At risk populations must take into effect those who “cover” their sexuality up. The need for this covering itself drives behaviors into patterns that are more anonymous and likely untoward. The last thing these individuals are likely to respond to is a sense of responsibility toward the gay community. Beyond the suppressed self-reproach that may underlie these behaviors there is a common theme such individuals may respond to in outreach. “My real commitment is to autonomy – giving individuals the freedom to elaborate their authentic selves – rather than to a rigid notion of what constitutes authentic gay identity. I focus here on the demands of coerced assimilation because I think American history has shown it to be the greater threat to gay autonomy. Surveying gay rights litigation, it’s uncommon to find gays suing for being forced to flaunt” (Yoshino, 2006, p. 93).

This thesis has said little about mainstream Internet use by gays in their efforts to express their identities and to find peer-groups. It has focused upon gay media. However, it is a simple matter to understand why many homosexuals would feel more comfortable using gay-oriented media than general mainstream media to connect. Youth culture presents ample examples. “Within certain environments, bullying can even be a ‘cool’ thing to do, as when sentiments or prejudices of a majority can be played on. This happens a lot in gay bashing cases, and is worsened by the fact that so many kids are now mean or disrespectful to each other online. This was previously referred to as uncivil aspects of social computing and an element of digital youth culture. It relates to the ways in which cyberbullying has advantages over physical bullying and why youth who would never engage in face-to-face bullying will cyber bully” (S.C.M. III, Colt, et al., 2009, p. 35).

While acceptance of homosexuality has increased, “…bringing gays into the circle of good sexual citizens would still leave in place a sexual order that unnecessarily restricts the range of desires, behaviors, and relationships that are considered acceptable and worthy of value and social support.” (Seidman, 2002, p. 16). So while gays might not be getting bashed quite so often, in part due to the changes brought about by their
visibility on the web, this is a far cry from gaining true acceptance and equality. Preventing a bigot from overtly bashing is not the same thing as allowing an individual to live openly and have their relationships treated with the same sacrosanct sanction and value as heterosexuals. Family emergencies called into work, for example, might be a serious source of trepidation and self-censorship even in a workplace that prohibits overt discrimination.

First Hand Accounts

The film Hooked… Get It On (line) (Ahlberg, 2003) contains several first-hand accounts of gay social networking site users. Reports are mixed, but themes do emerge. While some users make statements indicating they may still be in the closet if the Internet community didn’t exist, most mention points of concern related to their usage experience.

David from Houston Texas shared “A lot of people have replaced real life with online life.” Joe from Cody Wyoming indicated “I haven’t been on a date for at least a year… I’m not even sure I would know what to do…” The director asked, “How old are you?” Joe answered “23.”

Other observations included that the user does not have to look at people and play the little look-at-me games you do at bars. Alan from San Diego said, “‘Stats?’ hits your screen and you are sort of forced to equate all of your self-worth into a few numbers and a pound sign. There’s lots of times I want to meet somebody online and they just like shut me down just because they look at the numbers and so sometimes I won’t even put the numbers” (Ahlberg, 2003).

The somewhat explicit film Party and Play (Putzel, 2008) contains first-hand accounts of meth-abusers who seek sex online. While this refers to a subculture within a subculture, there are parallels with other forms of abuse (such as alcoholism). Tom, a meth addict who has moved into a hotel, was asked how often he finds people online. He answered three times a week. Later he indicated that if no one asks him about his HIV status he is not going to say anything, but if they ask him he will tell them. The interviewer asked, “Do you think you might have ever infected anybody?” Tom answered “yes.” (Putzel, 2008). The question was never asked, “how would you do this if there was no Internet?” One could also ask how often they would hook up anonymously.

While the media will always focus upon the sensationalistic and tragedy, and a community that seeks to gain acceptance will need to ‘correct itself’ actively, there is inherent resistance to acknowledging some of the problems and issues related to that community for fear of undermining it. Homosexuality suffered under the disease model for so long and so pervasively, that many gays instinctively resist criticisms for fear of validating this flawed view of their sexual orientations. There is precedent for this concern.

“Although insufficient data are available to assert with great confidence that teens who identify as gay are less healthy than non-gay identified teens with same-sex desire,

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8 According to Paul, Stall & Bloomfield (1991), more recent studies show significantly lower rates of alcoholism than were suggested by earlier studies (which contained methodological problems). See http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0847/is_n2_v15/ai_12490663/?tag=content;coll1.
my main objection is to the overarching deficit model. This view leads far too many to search for, and thus unearth, problems among gay adolescents. Indeed, this bias is so entrenched that it causes researchers occasionally to interpret positive findings in the worst possible light” (Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 181).

Factual accuracy matters in intervention, along with tone. Experts require peer-reviews. In the compilation Culture on the Brink, the chapter AIDS, Identity, and the Politics of Gender by Paula A. Treichler (1994) cites an apt example. Cosmo released an article attributing the spread of HIV to secret homosexuals and marginally racist characterizations of cultural norms related to sex. “[Women from]…(ACT UP) identified errors of fact, flawed assumptions, outdated statistics, and claims contradicted by their own knowledge and experience. To challenge Gould’s misleading advice to women, they began with their knowledge that women were infected with HIV and were dying of AIDS” (Bender and Druckrey, 1994, p. 139).

Research

According to Bowen (2005), rural men seeking men are rapidly increasing their use of the Internet. She also states that some MSM from Wyoming have indicated that the Internet was a primary resource for making contact with other MSM. Some MSM indicated that internet-delivered risk reduction interventions would be welcomed” (p. 317). This same study indicated that participation was more likely in the survey (offered as a banner ad) when participants were aware of their own potential HIV risk.

The commodification of sexuality may not be a historically new characteristic of gay culture, but the Internet reinforces this approach. Ross (2005) refers to a study from 1963 to establish this. “Rechy (1963) and subsequent commentators noted this consumerist aspect of gay subcultures in large urban areas, and it pre-dates the Internet by many decades” (p. 347). Ross agrees with the assessment of Bauman (2003) in Liquid Love, that the Internet “brings the calculations of sexual cost and benefit more front-stage and distances them from existing moral economies.”(p. 347). Up front negotiation may be increased in such online sexual encounters, to the benefit of safer sex but perhaps the detriment of traditional courtship.

The claim might be made that most users of gay-oriented social networking sites are not interested in an expanded representation of their identity beyond commodification. In contrast to this, recent data indicates a measurable interest in community oriented activities as well as socially conscious issues beyond sex. Carpenter (December 2009), using a wide sample of data over time, determined that gay men spend 40 - 50 percent more time volunteering or participating in student organizations.9

A site catering to the gay community could reasonably therefore be expected to be more likely to present opportunities for volunteerism. This would be one example of giving the users what they want. While the potential for social networking in this arena is enormous, it seems the niche-market identity being sold by most commercial sites does not include this type of empowerment, despite advertising them selves as based upon their (marketable) definition of gay identity. One might speculate that advertisers could

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be more frightened by activists than passive users, and therefore commercial sites would not court them.

How deep these sites dive into their target market matters because the environment designed can be uniquely shaping upon both culture and behavior, through the medium of online social networking websites. A questioning individual may more easily be able to locate commercial forms of community, and therefore have first impressions shaped from them. So long as commercial interests control, commodification is what will be sold (even when under the guise of community). Commodification does not lead to social responsibility. While heterosexuals visiting such [heterosexual] sites may be impacted in their impression of sexual norms, these heterosexuals are encapsulated in a culture that is hetero-normative and connects sexuality with an expected life script as well as an institutionally overarching idea of citizenship.

Conclusions
Websites like gay.com impact sexual activity among gay males in that they provide increased opportunities to meet other homosexuals, online or in real life. These types of sites also provide increased opportunities to “hook-up” anonymously or otherwise. Such sites present a sexualized medium that is inherently geared towards commodification, which tends to support a utilitarian relationship towards other members. The image presented to the community is one of the community’s preoccupation with casual sex. This is promoted for commercial interest but at times in a dishonest way.

Such websites enable cybersexual encounters, which are disease free and present no real physical danger. However, unless users will confine themselves to such activities, the palpable absence of gay-positive, supportive, and to some extent enjoyable interventions or identity extended beyond sexual intercourse will do nothing to decrease risk behavior while increasing the opportunities for it. Such sites validate promiscuity in a socially irresponsible way that is detrimental to the gay community while doing nothing of significance to promote safer sexual practices such as condom use.

The Internet has been lauded as a forum for the free exchange of information, and in many respects this is fitting. However, for the free exchange of information to promote safer sexual practices it must be reaching the individuals who need the information. For the gay community to be positively impacted by the enabling technology of social networking, in both identity and behavior, intervention upon the commercial motives of site operators must be enacted. The gay community could exert pressure upon such sites through identification of the adverse effects of the nature of the culture of Internet social networking they create, and by identifying how this culture is created, along with concepts of identity and promotion of particular behaviors. In any such effort, research could be a powerful persuader in keeping the community focused.

Marketers are afraid of activists, and rightly so. Yet it is my contention that these marketers are afraid of exactly the wrong activists. Exposing the motives behind sites that claim to be catering to the gay community, and demonstrating how commercial interests may not hide behind the time-honored strategy of blaming the users (we are giving them what they want) are advised. These themes can serve as a unifying focus in rallying the gay community towards a more complete representational identity in the
symbolic landscape of media. As marketing clearly understands that behavior can be influenced, these very strategies can be brought to bear in assessing motives. As technology is the medium that promises a more egalitarian society, an analysis of the design of social networking sites can be undertaken to assess the validity of this promise. They gay community may fear appearing radical or bringing its issues forward due to a historical lack of acceptance and the prevalence of the diseases model. However, if the gay community does represent more than sexual activity, it should not fear confronting its challenges as a community. It is in this, and not in hook-up websites, that true community can be strengthened.
References


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Chapter 9
Conclusions and What These Sites Could Be
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In the introduction to chapter one, I indicated that while Internet social networking technologies may support the sense of community among members of the gay community, the specific forms and structures employed (such as interfaces and workflows) may also impact behavior and identity among this group. I have attempted to identify some key elements of the media and design decisions (along with their associated impacts) that are relevant to the changing nature of gay identity and community.

The hypothesis of this thesis is that social networking website design can exert a mediating influence upon the culture of a site by supporting certain behaviors more than others; this influence can be analyzed in an active and structured way that takes into account the culture of the community it addresses. Evidence was offered by demonstration of specific mediations and analysis. This hypothesis was tested with specific reference to the gay male community.

The scope of this paper was limited to the analysis of gay-oriented social networking websites as new media, in general and through specific examples. I presented frameworks for categorizing and analyzing these websites that consider the mediating influences associated with site design. In this chapter, I propose community-enhancing design.

Evidence has been offered that design does play a role in mediating the behaviors of users in that certain behaviors are better supported on particular types of sites than others. For example, downelink.com mediated by preventing explicit images from being displayed in public areas. Correlated to this, the textual communications on the site involved a greater depth and breadth of gay identity than those displayed on gay.com. In addition, the affordances offered in the design of this same site encouraged users to participate in a wider range of discussions and activities. This was analyzed successfully in the structured fashion presented, using site typology categorization, mediations analysis, component maps, and media analysis.

Some unexpected conclusions were also reached, however. The nature of the media itself does tend to produce “hook-up” sites even with minimal design, which suggests that not all hook-up sites were designed as such. This further suggests that intervention is needed in the design efforts to counterbalance the impacts of the media’s inherent properties, especially when these are in combination with anonymity, localization, search-orientation, and sexualized themes (such as ‘gay’). Users who do not wish to use the site in a manner which commodotizes individual identity will need to be ‘protected’, even if this activity still occurs. Without this protection, such users may feel frustrated by the medium and develop negative impressions of the representation of the gay community on that site.

Old Media, New Media, Other Media

The gay community has become more visible than many would have ever thought possible. Yet chapter one demonstrated that the increase in gay visibility actually began in old media, before the Internet. The identities presented here were also largely not complete or well-rounded, as has been criticized later in reference to new media. The
phenomenon of personals in old media has largely been adopted in new media, with its related benefits and concerns. The ‘personals’ approach to meeting others has become ubiquitous and universally accepted as disseminated through new media. A key difference however is that with old media, the media itself was not a ‘place’ where extended interaction occurred or the relationships themselves normally existed.

Communication networks have become much larger and richer for the gay community due to new media, at least in terms of visibility and depth. However, all media cater to stereotypes. This problem becomes exaggerated when the media itself is seen as the users literal presence in an extended sense. While distribution is no longer the challenge (with some provisos), users are largely presented with an obvious choice of services provided by market-driven forces that tend towards assimilation or searching for radicalized media that remains illegitimate. The service offered by either is imperfect.

While censorship can stifle community, simply relying upon human nature is not going to elevate the conversation or the community. A new influence economy has emerged that can in some ways be more challenging and less to the benefit of marginalized communities. Users may feel more lost in the crowd or separated out more than ever. The forms of mediation in new media are structurally unassailable – there is no recourse other than to try to promote an alternative elsewhere which can be difficult amidst the vast landscape of the Internet. Relationships with new media environment’s mediating forces and with interfaces can supersede our relationships with other users.

Yet human values are persistent, even when oppressed by business and technological forces declaring such concerns “out of bounds” for their disciplines. If we as a people choose media over community or as a substitute for community, the inherent danger of disconnection from real life becomes more perilous. New media has remediated institutions that have played key roles in community identification and threatened their ability to exist. One key difference being, with traditional institutions, it was expected that the owner really did care about the community itself.

Social Networking Sites as Cultural Mediums/Mediators

The history of the gay community has led them to naturally gravitate towards and be open-minded about new types of communication networks. It has yet to be determined where online communities fit within the real world, but it does appear that medium itself has certain properties that influence the viability of differing approaches to community. Time will tell if communities in cyberspace will be more like fashion statements or vibrant commons. Transparency is a keystone to real community and a protection against exploitation. In chapter two, three test of transparency were proposed. First, that user reactions were validated by the site. Second, that users were given policy ownership. Third that administration was expressing the language and philosophy of transparency. It may be that placing users into the sorting mechanisms of the market reduces involvement to brand identification in place of ownership.

Online social networks are owned, including the membership roles, and deliberately designed to conform to the wishes of the owner down to the level of not supporting or allowing specific actions in a way that real space cannot. The medium changes the chances of success in fulfilling individual user goals, based upon different factors. The very existence of the medium itself can modify existing group behavior patterns. Instead of being a good member of a community in an effort to achieve one’s
goals, success online might entail more clever advertisements and better programming of requirements. The system itself is utilized and therefore intervenes in the process. Cultivation theory suggests that a website may become a primary source for normative concepts, and I would add especially when that website is where everyone really is ‘at.’ There has been a cultural shift towards instrumental and mediated approaches to befriending and this has led to an increased emphasis of the artificial.

SNgS sites are designed to support meeting new people. SNS sites are designed to support maintaining existing relationships (See danah boyd). Hybrids exist, but most sites cater best to one or the other. Fully open sites allow anyone to join, while fully closed sites are completely inaccessible except to a select few. Charge sites and non-charge sites exist, as well as hybrids that offer limited membership for free. Customizable sites allow content and presentation to be tailored to the user, while non-customizable sites do not. Sites that support custom networks let users cluster networks within networks around their own affiliations and designations, while others do not. Sites that provide affordances for participation in operational details are rare. Community owned sites are also rare, with market-owned sites largely dominating. Heavily moderated sites tend to be SNS sites as opposed to SNgS sites. Few sites allow users to mash-up services from other sites. These categories for sites were presented in an effort to understand the type of site that was being analyzed. Each of these types has inherent forms of mediation, but this mediation may be necessary or help to make the experience more comprehensible and beneficial even though it raises certain ethical implications.

Mediation itself comes in several forms. Legal mediations include user agreements, often recasting members as something other than citizens. Modal mediations are limitations in types of communication channels offered (visual text, audio, etc). Economic mediations may commoditize the community and create a new influence economy. Behavior supporting mediations are design choices or accidents that make certain ways of utilizing the site easier or harder, or more or less rewarding. Identity embodiment mediations are the elements that influence the representation of self online. Self-identified identity is emphasized online, and usually in an inflexible manner but one that is not validated and allows for fantasy still under the user’s control. Role-supporting mediation refers to the relationship of the user to the site and to other users. Sorting mediation refers to methods of categorization. Power mediations refer to the limitations of power that the user can exercise. Political mediations refer to the political view the sites regulatory orientation towards members and to indirect influences upon concepts such as individual rights, participation and ownership. Ethical mediation refers to the implications in the site design related to the ethical framework a user would be successful there with. Goal achievement mediation refers to how a user knows a goal has been achieved and how that goal is articulated. There is overlap in these categories but different emphasis.

Several “revenge effects” have been observed correlated to SNgS sites, including the bemused wasting of time, the absorption of reality into virtual media, enforced roles (the system puts the user into a position and not any other), the rewiring of our brains around the technology, and new stages of relationship formation and community building (we pursue relationships differently).

Metaphors can be identified in an effort to understand a site, including club member vs. citizen, openness vs. occult, and interface vs. space. Mythologies can be
examined to identify attitudes towards the technology – are these sites stealing fire and creating utopia, or are they opening Pandora’s box and flying off too far into the ungrounded like Icarus? The texts presented by the users and the sites can also reveal efforts at encoding culturally relevant information or may contain themes that reveal something of the culture present.

Media ecology engages concepts such as environments, modes and codes to contextualize the environment created. Surely SNgS sites are part of a larger media ecology. Media ecology suggests that mediation may not be isolated in specific agencies but is an embodied phenomenon that involves complex interactions. Mediated discourse theory acknowledges how discourse cycles social actions into practices and environments that ultimately feed back into social actions. Ultimately this affirms that user and environment are synergistically connected, but the ability of the user to influence this environment is limited by SNgS site operators.

Common Elements of Social Networking Sites

Each social networking site creates a space for a type of culture, and components are the basic building block for this. Traditional social network analysis involves analysis of the ways that individuals (nodes) structurally interconnect. As sites support particular behaviors, so do components. Actor-network theory acknowledges that while individual users are the intentional actors in systems, components may also be viewed as actors. ANT does not properly account for the hardening agencies in a technological environment, however. In truth, a network may continue to exist after it ceases to serve our goals.

In analyzing these components, the screen may be divided up like graph paper to identify prominent features in terms of size and location. Each component can be identified and linkages between then mapped. Each component can be categorized using categories such as navigation, forms, self-presentations, utilities, affiliations, indicators, content, and marketing. Considering these categories, emphasis may have been given to a particular category. Each component can then have details filled in, including characteristics. Assessing patterns of prominence, linkages, and types of components selected can be useful in determining more about the site. The process is not to be followed slavishly, but useful as an assessment tool.

User Goals and Site Goals

The gay community has been an early leader in use of online services, but this does not mean that their aims have been well served by the online environment. While the visibility afforded by an online presence is largely seen as positive for the community, it can also provoke reactions. User representation and visibility on particular sites can be misleading in new ways. The niche nature of gay social networking sites might cater to particular interests while neglecting others, portray particular representations, and ultimately reduce motivation for interaction between members of the community and the outside world.

While users in chat are basically free to say whatever they wish, they need to do so through the components and designs that convey or indicate motives. Chat rooms have titles as well as other elements that indicate motives. While SNgS have increased the visibility of the gay community, design has mediated and supported particular
representations and goals. Commercialism may have contributed to the greater exposure of “hook-up” sites as opposed to information-oriented sites geared towards the gay community. Each component is designed to be used, and given a certain prominence and place in the manufactured space of a social networking site.

The analytic method presented does not claim to know the private or emotional motive of any real individual. It does employ theoretical classes of users and assesses how well a discrete goal or objective is supported by a particular design. “walking through” the site as this theoretical class of user can help to reveal the character of the site and in assessing the usefulness of the components as designed and where they are less useful or convenient.

Users can have several goals. Certain sites cater to particular types of users and user goals. Informational resource seekers might be looking for health information. Social users might simply want to be in “the loop.” Out for a date users might be looking for a relationship. Cyber-sex users might be logging on for cybersex. “Hook-up” users might be logging on to meet someone in real life for sex. Real users are more complex than any of these categories but they were selected to elucidate particular traits and orientations inherent within design. In practice, a user might find that they can best meet their needs by assimilation into the culture of a site regardless of how well it actually suits them. A site might be driven to increase membership above and beyond serving their members, due to the economic context in which they operate.

A table of theoretical site and user “motives” (personas) is presented in Chapter four, and each component can be evaluated for how well it serves these. The overall site design can also be evaluated by walking through such user classes mentioned above. The components chosen collectively may better serve particular motives, and the components not chosen may indicate neglected motives. The presence or absence of components may be due to technological or economic constraints, but this is not always the case. Looking into components and component maps and user personas/motives, an analysis can begin to identify mediation and motivation that is supported structurally or conveyed along with cultural assumptions for the given site. It can be supported through this evidence that SNgS websites insert cultural assumptions and emphasize particular aspects of culture or behavior.

Virtual Personas and Real Communities

Virtual communities have at times impacted real communities. However the benefits of virtual communities come in tandem with a change in the way we view people. Seeking communities online can become tied-up with the pursuit of virtual personas. There are risks to viewing real people, communities and relationships in terms of “cheap digital words,” alongside the benefits. There is heightened risk of disclosure, risky sexual behavior, and cyber-bullying. Some dismiss these concerns as myths, such as Mimi Ito from The Digital Youth Project.10

Regardless, the nature of online communications is well suited to fantasy and tends to work well with (perhaps even foster) short, affirmative statements or rejections as a form of brand affiliation. Avoidance becomes immediately possible, along with successful deception. Different mechanisms have evolved but these are different from

natural and traditional body language. The web lets users represent themselves however they wish and there is no certainty. Individuals may fall back into familiar online communication patterns when and if they do meet in real life. New normative patterns have been established online regarding friending behavior. New concepts of privacy have emerged, for example. Privacy and the requirement for a performative identity (in order to exist) do not work well together. Individuals can chose to live in a technology bubble.

Often with social media the focus is contextually expected to be thematic to the service. Posting activist content on a ‘hook-up’ site may be met with a perception of dissonance. Chat rooms are designed for the kind of conversation that could take place in a football stadium. This is not the ideal spot for all kinds of discussions. Private messages address this somewhat, but not entirely. As someone enters a chat room devastated with grief or wild-eyed with rage, users will not know this until that user types something to spell this out.

The identity that is shared can be as brittle and vapid as ever, if not more so. Most commercial social networking sites designed for the gay community are not well suited to foster friendships or forge community. Re-embodied deliberate communication acts are all that these site’s components can convey. Questions arise about the dismissive and utilitarian approach supported by social gadgets and if this can translate into a more instrumental and dismissive approach to friendship and community off line. Much of what is called community online does not possess the characteristics of what has traditionally been known as community. There are no homeless. Victimization is largely compartmentalized. Being a part of the community is a task that occurs in a space specifically designed for it. Much of what is done online to get attention and interact is overtly social for its own sake.

Despite this, the positive aspects of human nature can be enabled in some exciting ways. Many SPCA shelters are placing photos and descriptions of pets online. It may be that, for some (especially with children), this allows them just the right amount of distance and type of information to make the perfect choice. For others, this might be the least attractive option. Others might fall prey to the all to human tendency to project into such an experience, like a Rorschach inkblot. The elusive quality of “chemistry” is harder to trust online for some, and easier for others. Anecdotal stories are easy to find of true love being discovered and lasting from online communication. So are the negative stories.

Many users, including those with few real links, find the experience liberating and deeply rewarding. Such individuals’ lives may have changed for the better due to the opportunities to find community online. Contesting theories argue that stereotypes and norms are greater pressures online or that particular media allow an individual to truly shine through. Regardless, as individuals form relationships online this activity becomes acculturated and the greater culture adapts to the technology. It may be that a tipping point will be reached where this phenomenon, though shaped by the owners of SNgS sites for their own purposes, becomes the primary source for many users sense of culture.

Not all community building needs to be activist in order to benefit the community. Affectionate communities can also become centers of power. However the influences and players controlling online media tend to craft the spaces in such a way as to fail to successfully support activism. Specifically the marketing of gay social networking sites
Interventions can have an impact upon the community. The suitability of online media to exert influence upon current events is an emerging question but one with some positive indications. Charitable forms of activism online have resulted in successful fund raising in cases such as RIT’s *Picturing the Impossible*. The very existence of these sites produces tangible benefits. However, the democratic potential for any online presence does not become realized without active efforts. Communities online are generally not like communities in real space. They are generally not used for activism. The concepts of individual identity and community are to some extent being remediated by this new medium.

**An Analysis of Gay.com**

Applying the above technique to gay.com resulted in some interesting insights. However, the analysis also revealed that some of the suggested techniques are less useful than others, and some of the assumptions regarding the site that I began the analysis with were incomplete. Firstly, the tests of transparency did demonstrate that the site was not transparent. However, this was better demonstrated in this case by the financial analysis. Heremedia are not interested in making their financial operations transparent to the general public. Advertising revealed that a major goal of the website was to attract viewers for videos offered by Here! Media. The user is positioned as passive and placed into a consumer orientation by the design, except towards other members when chatting with them. The design is unfriendly to those seeking specific information. Design changes largely corresponded with the economic activities of the site owners. 1/6th or less of the screen is given over to active utilization by an original goal-directed individual on the main page. There is no evidence of any special efforts being made to support an active community that is aware and involved in changing their world or their lives beyond meeting someone. In response to changes in the site design, users were placated with business tactics. Gay.com is not transparent.

The site is a SNgS site, with open membership that is effectively semi-open due to using the hybrid charge/free model. Customization is not allowed and neither are customized networks. Operational participation is not encouraged, which is common if the site is market-owned as this one is. Moderation rarely occurs, and “mash-ups” are not allowed. The legal mediations are standard, as are the modal mediations and economic mediations. Behavior supporting mediations favor watching videos, searching for members, and chatting. Identity embodiment mediations favor textual profiles with predetermined criteria, photos, and screen name (again, common). Role-supporting mediations favor customer orientations. Sorting mediations favor profile, chat names, and membership status. Cultural assumptions are somewhat unique, including sexual interest. Power limitations include the ability to ignore and be ignored, and lack of ability to create your own chat room, but to my surprise many options exist here for different chat rooms. A brief textual sample suggested that different cultures could indeed exist at the same site, in different rooms. Gay.com is not overtly oppressive or stifling, and participation is defined as chatting or working on your profile. No significant explicit affordances are provided for long-term relationships, which is a kind
of ethical mediation. User goals are not made explicit beyond finding someone and chatting, which constitutes a type of goal achievement moderation. Most of this is common elsewhere, particularly on ‘dating sites.’ At the very least this analysis served to justify the understanding of the site as a SNgS with a culture that is sexualized and entertainment oriented.

Some revenge effects were identified, such as reinforcing the stereotype that gay men are always cruising. Complex and constructive interaction that takes thought and time is likely to fail in most conversations here, though it is not impossible. The club metaphor is adopted along with the occult metaphor and the interface metaphor. Mythologically, little is unique here except for the Utopia presented by advertisements and the idea of falling in love with someone of the same gender. Sex is overly idealized. An analysis of texts revealed that a mix of friendship and indirect (not typed) indications of interest in sex characterized the self-reported goals of the majority of members in ways that may appear contradictory. This indication was provided on the self-advertisement that was the profile, so it might have been chosen strategically. The textual analysis was more revealing but more difficult to categorize than originally suspected, while the site categorization, mediations, and mythological and metaphorical analysis was less immediately insight producing. User statements in the intellectuals chat room indicated that conversations could be conducted in a reasonable fashion. Some self-policing occurred within the room as well, which was unexpected. In essence, it may not be a mere-pretext to claim that gay.com is both a “pick up” site and a relationship site.

Component analysis forced me to look at parts of the system I had been ignoring, including the multitude of chat rooms. Textual analysis indicated that the site could in fact support divergent minority cultures communicating with distinct differences in tone and content in differing chat rooms. Further research may be merited to determine any related impacts that correlated with greater general awareness of these other chat rooms.

The capturing and anonymizing of the graphics was far more time consuming than originally anticipated. However, digging into the design and the specific components was useful in providing evidence for the site typology and component categorizations. The membership agreement is in fact largely self-protective legalese. Feedback is in fact not encouraged anywhere on the site, but there is access to customer service. The fundamental products being promoted are other members and videos. The advertising monopolized a significant area of real estate and does convey attitudes and cultural assumptions. User information is tailored in profiles towards specific searchability criteria. Adult themed material is somewhat segregated into premium content, but in essence this distinction is largely meaningless as users connect in chat rooms and many degrees of the risqué exist outside of compartmentalization. Allowing pictures to be locked and unlocked for individual users does serve member needs as it promotes use of private material. The faceting ends with the pictures, however. There are not a lot of privacy options beyond ignore. The analysis also revealed that searching was central and could be used for different motives, but best supported particular ones such as “hook ups.”

Profiles, searching and chat are main components of this site. News is de-emphasized. The strongest activation of components is related to meeting others and watching videos.
Motive analysis shows that the information seeker would likely not sign up or stay long. A social user might sign up but not become premium, and might be troubled by what options are available for her to protect her image. A user out for a date would likely upload photos and make them private, but might be troubled by the tone of the site elsewhere. A user interested in cyber-sex may join if their experiences were rewarding, but the site does not offer much special for them. A user looking for “hook-ups” would likely join and find the site useful. This user is well catered to by the design.

In general, the easiest part to communicate about homosexuality is the sex. This is also the easiest part to sell. Perhaps as a natural consequence of this, online sites catering to the gay community tend to be more sexually charged than other sites. Gay.com clearly sees its members as consumers first and members of a minority community second. There is little evidence of community-supporting influences on identification and behavior. The site does nothing to educate users. While the site may be used in a positive way as a recreational medium, the site has invested more effort in designing an effective hook up tool. Gay.com does little to benefit the community beyond helping them to find each other in a sexually charged environment.

Analysis of Other Gay Networking Websites

Chapter seven presented an abbreviated version of the same method to analyze downelink.com and gayfunchat.com. The name downelink contains connotations that will self-sort well with a younger target audience. With downelink, we again saw a major network (MTV) behind the curtain. The financials for MTV are a matter of public record, although the company is largely controlled by Sumner Redstone and his sister. The images presented focused upon young and hip users. PG images at worst were presented. Most of the images looked real. Slightly less than ¼ of the sample had multiple people in the photos.

The majority of most pages is taken up by content, clickable links, or utilities. Self-promotion exists (ring tones, radio) but there is less overt cross-selling. The user is not simply seen as a consumer according to this layout. The tag line for the site is ‘your community,’ which implies more happens there than hook-ups.

This is a social networking site, but more activities are supported by the site which could be engaged in regularly by those who already know each other. Examples include blogs, birthday reminders, and groups. There are no levels of membership. Customization of content and networks is not truly supported. Users may however create new forums and groups. There is no real affordance for community ownership of the site. A key difference here is the existence of the interactive components that support more thoughtful engagement and the tone set by the ban on X-rated public content. Moderation is not in evidence beyond the ban on explicit images, and mash-ups are not supported.

Beyond some additional sorting mediations (via forums and groups) and behavior supporting mediations (the additional components), little is immediately evidenced regarding other mediations. There is also no user policy ownership in evidence on this site. The club metaphor is communicated but there is a “hanging out” feel to it conveyed. The occult orientation is also sustained here, and the interface is still largely frozen. Textual analysis also indicates he younger, hip and somewhat rebellious theme in screen names, profiles, posted messages and pictures.
Search also features prominently on this site. Search uses categories and doesn’t allow open relationships to be indicated. Blogs, forums, and groups exist here where they did not on gay.com. A user could realistically debate politics or religion here, as supported by these components. Some self-policing occurs, as indicated by the reaction of several users to a post that sounded to them like a suicide note. The blogs largely appear to be communicating what the user’s life is like and what they are thinking. A user can check a box to be notified of updates to blogs. It is not difficult to imagine a user signing up to keep in touch with friends, meaning this site is also an SNS.

Among the categories of groups exists non-profit, which includes groups such as the ACLU. Theoretically the groups would be used to help a new or existing group while the forums would host discussions. As such posts can be more thoughtful, it would be reasonable to conclude that users would be engaging in more thoughtfulness here.

Informational resource seekers could not immediately search for news, but could connect with other individuals with similar interests to debate and discuss. A social user might well sign up for the interaction and to meet or keep in touch with other users, although selective sharing is not truly present if they have this concern. This might lead to anonymity. A user that is out for a date might have to do the finding rather than be found if they do not wish to disclose too much. However they would be somewhat protected by the PG nature of the site and able to maintain civility as they progressively choose to disclose information directly. There is no obvious pressure to “get serious” too quickly. Photos may not be set to private, which means beyond a point the users may need to go ‘off the system.’ Cyber-sex users do not have any specific provisions within the design. The cyber-sex user would need to evaluate the receptivity of the individuals they were interested in a little more carefully than at gay.com generally. Search customizations do not cater to this directly. A user looking for hook-ups may be frustrated by the fact that downlink does not allow explicit photos or overtly explicit profiles.

A younger person might be able to explain what they are doing to their parents with less difficulty and simply use the site as a spring-board to ‘off-site’ activity. With some subtlety and effort hook-ups could still be accomplished through the agency of localization in searched and online status, but the site also supports maintaining connections that are not immediately sexual. In part, the toning down of the site design might have been an effort to justify targeting it towards a younger audience, but the results on the site do show a difference in text from those on gay.com.

Gayfunchat.com is a minimalist site that was selected in an effort to determine the correlation between minimalist design and utilization patterns. There are still components – and these components do follow the pattern presented for ‘hook-up’ orientation, but clearly the site is not making a significant overt effort at being used this way. The conclusion this leads to is that intervention needs to happen in the design if a gay oriented site (or perhaps any thematically sexualized site) is to become well-suited to being more than a hook-up destination.

Gayfunchat.com has few public details as to its ownership. The initial screen presents a simple login with a list of rooms. Name, password, sex, obscure email and self-reported birth date, and country are all that is required, thus supporting a degree of anonymity to other users. A free text note may be appended to the user profile. Immediately localization occurs – a list of countries is presented for chat room categories.
User names are clickable and present the age, sex, and country of the user. Private messages may be sent. The banner above the room reads “You must be 18 or over to chat. If you’re younger than 18 please go to the Tampa Teen Chat Rooms.” An advertisement for a dating site appears on a banner below. All of these factors collectively (anonymity, localization, age and sex prominence, the identification as gay, private messages and profile prominence, the dating site banner, and the warning that you must be 18) do correlate with hook-ups despite the fact that users cannot be searched. However, that is largely it for the interface. A user may drill down into states and cities, further enhancing localization.

Text here included sexually explicit statements that users desired hook ups and the details related to this. This text clearly indicates that some users believe this site is useful for that purpose and this is how they are choosing to utilize it. In the absence of any specific affordances or interventions (textual, design, or otherwise) to broaden the context, and in the presence of anonymity and sexualized themes, a free and unmoderated chat room can be seen by users as better suited to hook-ups than to other activities. In this sense, the medium apparently is the message. However, the medium with little design is not the same as the medium that is carefully designed. Such chat rooms are no doubt also used to forge and maintain friendships elsewhere if not on gayfunchat.com. Minimalist design tends to support minimalist activities, which in this context includes hooking up. It is easier to create these sites and therefore this is where the easy financial incentive for commercial sites lies. Community intervention and pro-active community leadership is required, such as is expressed to some extent by downelink.com, if Internet social networking sites are going to serve the broader gay community.

**Impacts Upon Sexual Activity**

SNgS sites have impacted sexual activity among the gay community. Given the fact that without direct intervention the nature of social networking media may tend towards the hook-up oriented if provided even minimal design and presented in ways that are sexually thematic, an economic incentive needs to be provided to commercial sites in order for their designs to be more geared towards holistic representations of gay identity and positive impacts upon the gay community. Few sites offer such intervention, but many of them offer increased opportunities for casual anonymous sex. The ubiquity of these services themselves becomes larger culturally shaping force. Unfortunately such forms of moderation imposed by corporate entities risk creating a class distinction that are more authoritarian than community oriented. The lack of accountability in online environments has resulted in different expectations for this space, and different approaches to meeting and relating online. One is the acceptance of commodification. The relationship towards the medium has contextualized the relationships between users and how they view each other. While content on SNgS sites is protected by intellectual property rights and regulation, little has been done to protect the rights of users or provide trusted mechanisms for evaluating how well their interests are being served. Commercial interests are free in the United States to hide behind the excuse of giving users what they want, with few exceptions. The openness of the Internet allows dissent, but it also buries and to some extent suppresses quality controls, thereby setting institutions up again as authorities. Such authorities are primarily interested in profit.
The Internet allows individuals to disclose their HIV status anonymously, which may make it easier for those individuals to do so. The Internet also provides increased opportunities to meet sexually interested individuals and risk spreading HIV. A key concern then is how to decrease the frequency of risky behaviors. Vulnerable individuals may turn to SNgS sites due to their very anonymity. As such, this is the venue in which intervention may be the most effective. Yet, intervention is largely not incorporated into site designs. Social squeamishness is perhaps one reason for this. Historical rejection of the gay community is another, and fear of projecting a negative image by confronting hot button issues that can lead to radicalization.

While some users indicate that they would still be in the closet were it not for SNgS sites, many mention concerns associated with their SNgS usage. Considering these concerns in site design may lead to additional marketing opportunities. Failing to address them may lead to studies that condemn them. Websites like gay.com present a sexualized medium that is inherently geared towards commodification that tends to support utilitarian orientations towards relationships and other human beings. The image generally resented by these sites is one of preoccupation with casual sex. These sites are often promoted in a dishonest way, as if they catered to the community.

For the gay community to be positively impacted, intervention upon the commercial motives of site operators must be enacted. Research may be the basis for the effort to persuade regarding the behaviors that are promoted or discouraged by the very design of the site. If they gay community does represent more than sexual activity, it should not fear confronting its challenges as a community. This is the way the community is strengthened.

**Synthetic Summary with New Insights**

The evidence of this analysis which does represent a limited sample (a related series of small case studies), suggests that simply creating a website with a chat room does tend to support a hook-up spot. The spot does not have to be used this way, but creating specific affordances that broaden the opportunities for thoughtful use and expanded forms of identity will protect users who do not wish to use this spot in that way, and allow them the opportunity for more thoughtful utilization in accordance with a more holistic sense of identity. The chat room itself supports certain types of communications if intervention is not introduced into the component design itself. The site itself does not have to be desexualized and intervention does not have to be preachy; in fact the most effective interventions have been demonstrated to be somewhat enjoyable for the users themselves rather than fear based.

This phenomenon exists in the absence of commercialization, but the commercial nature of sites can exaggerate this tendency and structurally reinforce commodification of identity. Market forces have contributed to the formation and dissemination of a cultural norm that could be described as a mating ritual between consumers and companies (Marvin and Ingle, 1999). The properties of Internet social networking were aptly described in a McLuhanesque fashion even before McLuhan, by C. Wright Mills in 1958 (delivered as an address). Mills was less enthusiastic about technology and did not neglect the economic and political dimensions. Summers collected this address, among other works, in the volume *The politics of truth: selected writings of C. Wright Mills*. “It is as if the ear has become a sensitive soundtrack, the eye a precisions camera, experience
an exactly-timed collaboration between microphone and lens. And in this expanded world of mechanically vivified communications, the capacity for experience is alienated, and the individual becomes the spectator of everything but the human witness of nothing” (Mills and Sommers, 2008, p. 165). Mills was speaking about television primarily, but the only difference here is that the users are supposed to inhabit the screen in some sense. On this screen the user exerts an effort to perform their identity through the interface provided, and is rewarded or not by the laws of this manufactured environment and its properties, or they effectively do not exist.

In combination with the properties of the media itself, commerce is further ruled by an economic paradigm. IT systems are currently oriented towards supporting economic activities by acting as a form of media that interacts with users. Economic activities tend to follow organizational principles of military command and control and to employ military-like tactics. IT systems are well suited to institutionalizing this as well, as IT systems were originally developed and employed as instrumentality of the military. In addition, in order to get a slice of the economic pie certain computerized reporting systems must be in place to win a contract with the military.

“Higher education’s dependence on federal dollars empowers the DoD to bend universities ever more easily to its will. For example, as Chalmers Johnson noted, until August 2000, Harvard Law School ‘managed to bar recruiters for Judge Advocate General’s Corps of the military because qualified students who wish to serve are rejected if they are openly gay, lesbian or bisexual.’ However, thanks to a reinterpretation of federal law, the Pentagon found itself able to threaten Harvard with loss of all its federal funding, some $300 million, if its law school denied access to military recruiters…. Harvard caved, ushering in a new era of dwindling academic autonomy…”(Turse, 2008, p. 35). We see here economic strong-arming trumping the concept of citizen’s rights. The funding is not provided in the interest of academia but as a mechanism of controlling it.

**Recommendations**

There is nothing inherently wrong about adults being able to visit a “pick-up” site, and these sites should be allowed to exist. All sites do not need to take an activist orientation towards the gay community just as all adult book stores do not need to provide free condoms. Pornography is allowed and should be allowed to depict risky behavior in a glamorized fashion even if it is found offensive within the limits established by the law. Companies remain free to profit without regard to the potential damage they may be colluding in so long as they obey the law. The law is changing, however, as society begins to see its own interest in limiting the extent to which reckless abuse of and disregard for customers well being has a cost to us all collectively. The finer points of this debate are undoubtedly complex and important, and I will not pretend to provide adequate answers to them here. The relevant point is that there are those whose conscience calls them to consider such questions and those who are being dragged into such consideration against their wishes.

Unfortunately, this author’s limited experience in this research has shown little evidence that the most visible “gay-oriented” sites have chosen to engage in this debate. When new sites are revealed (admittedly often due to scandal which taints the sample), such as rentboy.com via the recent George Rekers scandal (Thorp, 2010), these sites
seem to fit the patterns established for other sites with questionable redeeming social value. This is what is seen in the news – not ‘wonderful resource for gay and lesbian citizens who want to help their community and be fantastic citizens.’ Yet again, the “gay” story of the “gay” site is one of disgust and anger. While being gay is not about being a wonderful citizen, and gay citizens deserve the same fair-minded assessments as straight citizens, the sites I am referring to have done almost nothing to further the conversation or to empower the community beyond helping them to meet each other. What makes them gay is the sex, and the unspoken implication of this is that what makes anyone gay is just the same type of sexual proclivities. If the gay community is a community and not just a behavior, then that community needs to extend beyond the hook-up website mentality in credible ways.

My first recommendation is that a group be formed to promote the interests of the gay community online, including its diversity. These interests include broadening out the sense of community and individual identity to include a holistic sense of identity and to posit the gay community as an actual community of citizens and not just a ‘lifestyle.’ I do not necessarily suggest one authoritative body overseeing the online world, but simply some form of organized effort or working group. This group must arm itself with research and establish credible analytic techniques for assessing how well the interests of the gay community are being served as well as what can be done to promote the gay community being served. Those who oppose homosexuality out of hand would doubtless see such a group as sinister. Therefore this group must be prepared to demonstrate their sound research methodologies as well as their positive orientation towards the greater community as a contrast to their detractors.

My second recommendation is to promote a discipline of community-enhancing design. Community-enhancing design is not simply about participation or new media. In this sense, community-enhancing design is about communities and how well they are served. In this assessment, specific sites could be analyzed by objective criteria to determine how well they serve various representative types and members of the community in their goals. From this assessment, patterns can be isolated and theories can be derived regarding what is actually well supported by a site’s design. I have presented some of these techniques and theories in previous chapters for preliminary consideration. In this discipline, moral judgments are not to be ruled entirely out of bounds but must of course be clearly identifiable as such and supported through evidence and argument. The thrust of the argument should be evidence optionally followed by moral judgments based upon the conclusions of that evidence.

My third recommendation is to reward sites that demonstrate community-enhancing design in tangible ways. Promotion, membership, active use, and publicity for what makes them community supporting is one type of reward. Rallying to the defense of said sites when they are threatened is another. Creating a climate in which advertisers know the community supports said sites will also make them more attractive. Tying in to other community positive activities and advertisers and products can be presented in ways that are fit for wider publicity outside of the community can expand the marketable area for the site beyond niche and make the site credible and safe as a reference for those outside of the community seeing information or materials that are non-threatening. In this other sites need not be bashed. Other sites simply lose out on the expanded
opportunities available to those sites that have demonstrated a commitment to a broader sense of gay identity.

In terms of actual structural design, I have the following recommendations:
1. Leverage the recognition of these sites as New Media with the associated properties to test the site’s interactivity for goals that extend beyond hook-ups.
2. Test the transparency of the site and take active steps to make the site more transparent, even outside of the site.
3. Blend SNS with SNgS designs, which will allow new friends to keep in touch through the site for more than sex.
4. Design sites that anyone can join and that allow real options for free membership. These sites should be customizable and allow customized networks. Additionally, these sites should provide affordances for participation in operational details and be community-owned. In addition, the sites should not be heavily moderated while protecting the ability of those who do not wish to use the service as a hook-up site to do so. Finally, these sites would ideally integrate into the broader Internet world by allowing mash-ups of services. Not all of these criteria need to be met, but ideally all are.
5. Carefully identify and structure mediations be they legal, modal, economic, behavior supporting, those of identity embodiment, role-supporting mediations, sorting mediations, cultural assumptions, the limitations of power, political mediations, ethical mediations, goal-achievement mediations, or others.
6. Identify the revenge effects that a site may introduce including those that tend to be associated with the technology in general, and take pro-active steps to address them. For example, consider any impacts upon existing institutions.
7. Identify and design with consideration towards the metaphors presented, favoring citizenship above club membership and openness over an occult approach.
8. Identify any mythologies being promulgated by or inherent within the design.
9. Consider the site’s location within the media ecology
10. Create a ‘component map’ (as used here) and assess what components are given prominence and where the site is most easily responsive.
11. Identify theoretical classes of users with various goals representative of their identities and ‘walk through’ the site as this user to identify what goals are best supported and what goals are not supported.
12. Consider real communities in terms of the virtual personas present on the site, and the virtual personas on the site in terms of real communities.
13. Design interventions in the design based upon the above which broaden the usability of the site to better support a holistic sense of identity.
14. Consider “at risk” populations in design decisions as part of an effort at greater community responsibility. Include safer-sex interventions that provide actual support for the users within the context of community helping community out of concerns for the community, and which are more fun than preachy.
Conclusions and What Could Be

Two sites will be mentioned here. The first is onegoodlove.com. The tag line of the site is “A community for relationship minded gays and lesbians.” The advertisement at the bottom reads “oneGoodLove.com (oGL) is the best online dating site for the relationship-minded GLBT community. oGL is the only relationship-focused site for built and by the LGBT community and unlike the other larger dating sites out there, our personality profile test was crafted specifically for us.” (oOneGoodLove.com, 2010). Clearly this is not being advertised as a hook-up site, and it does indicate that it is built by LGBT for LGBT.

However, the main page shows a form to search for someone local. On this form it indicates “I am interested in a serious relationship with…” instead of just “find.” This site is getting ready to launch GLAM (Gay Love Advice Magazine) and specifically affords recognition that some members of the gay community are seriously seeking long-term relationships. Further the site says, “At oneGoodLove.com we believe it is important to be involved with and give back to the GLBT Community. That's why we've created partnerships with gay and lesbian not-for-profits, like the Human Rights Campaign, The National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, and GLAAD. We give our members the option to donate up to 5% percent of their subscription cost to a charity that oGL has partnered with, at no additional cost. Join our community and give back to our community, simply by becoming a subscribing member” (oOneGoodLove.com, 2010).

While the design of this site is mostly changed in advertisement and textual messages, these are primarily used to intervene against the inherent properties of the medium. Operationally, the site has created more opportunities or members to act as participants within the gay community and to engage in philanthropy. The site is geared towards personality matching rather than just profile searches. Suggestions include “Don’t upload photos that are too limiting in showcasing your personality. You should take the time to have photos created just for your oGL profile” (oOneGoodLove.com, 2010).

This site represents an alternative approach that is simpler to implement towards positive design intervention. The success of such a site at meeting broader user goals may be more difficult to assess with actual surveys. A survey is included in the appendix for informational purposes that may be considered in such an assessment. In the final analysis, this new medium is ever-emerging and as technology develops, new forms will continue to emerge that challenge existing models and analytic techniques. Whatever the data may ultimately conclude regarding this approach, it remains important not to take advertisements at face value. The site may in fact be exactly what it claims to be. This has not been assessed. The final word on this must come from analysis, not sympathy towards the stated objectives. The successful site for the community, by design, has learned the lessons from experience with the gay community that the unsuccessful sites have failed to.

A final site to mention here as consideration of what could be is related to the crackdown in Zimbabwe against homosexuals and particularly gay activists (newZimSituation.com, 2010). Facebook, which has no agenda but is supposed to reflect that of its users, hosts the Zimbabwe Gay and Lesbian Group is on Facebook. Facebook is not a gay site or an activist site or a Zimbabwe site. However, it is certain that among the 74 members currently belonging to this group, there are activists, homosexuals, and
Unfortunately moles. Several porn type sites are linked to by members, as is the social network African LGBT Youth – Pride Alive (also on Facebook). Among the interventions required here are protections for users, which would include anonymity.

Surveillance via networks such as this is trivial, and pressures may be exerted upon the operators through economic incentives (such as banning the site at the ISP level for an entire nation). Use of this resource is a risk to those who truly need it. In such a scenario, nations that support the human rights of their citizens must be unified in keeping the pressure on sites like Facebook to protect the vulnerable users of such sites from the tyranny of their governments. Such sites must be made to care, if they do not already, because lives are at stake. A site like Facebook that operates within the United States primarily (and started there) presumably benefits from the political mediation of its traditional institutions. In evaluating such a site, the primary concerns must be for the most vulnerable. This is where a community is needed. Were this site to devolve into smut, the defense would be much harder. If the community is serious about this injustice, it needs to conduct itself with the appropriate tone and gravity.

Concluding Remarks

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to cover all details of designing and running a website that supports the gay community, but it is not beyond the scope to provide some conclusions related to an analysis of certain factors that are at play within these details. Social networking applications are largely sold “out of the box” based upon an existing paradigm that is inherently limited. New designs need to be introduced to encourage the full potential of this new medium to empower marginalized communities rather than simply exploiting them or leaving them to view online sites as mere hook-up venues.

While it is not the responsibility of any website to address the whole spectrum of a community’s needs, the negative impacts of design decisions need to be identified and understood if social networking websites are to be designed with the intent of supporting the community. Consumers have had to adapt to the pitfalls and limitations of other mediums on their own historically, and they will to some extent adapt to these, but there are unique problems introduced in part by the richness of website based networking and I contend that it has a unique presence and power upon marginal communities. Life may imitate art (and reality may imitate virtual reality). Marketing seeks to tell us our true selves in an effort to sell ourselves back to us; it doesn’t really ask us to find it. In an environment where money is speech, those without economic means will ultimately lose their rights and become mute witness to their interests being bulldozed by commercial interests. Unless a point is made to give consideration, there is no reason to believe that any will be given. Unless some protection is created, people may become equal citizens only in theory and all will become captive to commercial interests. After all, these are people not just “users.”

For those who are interested, there is the question of what these networking websites could be and should be. If we accept the conclusion that website design and component design can subtly but significantly impact the identity and behavior of a marginal community such as gay subculture, then it is not enough to simply criticize the status quo. A community that is concerned with taking responsibility for itself and its external identity (to the straight world) and internal identity (self-definition) must strive to counteract the flattening impact of technology and indifferent commercialism with
viable alternatives. A holistic view of identity that is more responsible to the community can be incorporated into design decisions. The community can be given ownership and control of the structure as well as content of their common space, and individuals allowed customization based upon their goals as they see them. These sites could be more responsive towards the community, more responsible towards the community, more community designed and created, more customizable and based on a more holistic idea of gay identity (not just hook ups).

The seven steps for grassroots change indicated on page 71 of Empowering Marginal Communities with Information Networking propose mapping issues to spaces to identify an agenda roughly corresponds with what has been proposed earlier here. The next steps include identifying resources, proposing an agenda, and expanding the network (Rahman, 2006). These are steps for users of networks that can be supported by the networks themselves.

The nature of society has changed over the past few decades, and the Internet has a lot to do with that. Attitudes towards gays have also changed significantly. Still, even with new media, there are setbacks. These setbacks exist as far away as Zimbabwe and as close as California with Proposition 8. Along with the benefits of new media, several revenge effects have emerged. Langdon Winner’s 2001 comments call us to consider revenge effects and the almost heretical possibility of disconnection.

There is need to reflect upon and discuss which social practices and relationships need to be sheltered from the pressure effects of global, commercial networking. At a time in which people are frantically trying to get connected, we would do well to ask: when and where does it make sense to remain unconnected? While leaving in tact many of the burdens of the industrial/automotive era, we have come perilously close to achieving complete slavery to email, digital work, and the wired and wireless apparatus that surround us.


Cause and effect can be difficult to establish when considering human behavior, as people are different and have minds of their own. What is less difficult to establish is that correlations exist between an environment and an organism’s behavior in that environment. Facebook might attract younger, more sexualized users and therefore site design could be less of a factor than the current user base. The factors that contribute to that user base or support particular types of use can be analyzed.

The changes that have occurred in the gay community and in the wider community’s view of homosexuals have doubtless been conveyed through technological

11 For more on prop 8, see http://online.wsj.com/article/NA_WSJ_PUB:SB122586056759900673.html. In addition, while Wikipedia sources need always be verified, the following can assist with perspective: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Same-sex_marriage_legislation_around_the_world.

12 Originally distributed as part of the netfuture.org newsletter TechReview. See http://www.netfuture.org/2001/Jul2701_121.html.
developments and how these have reshaped society in general. The anonymity allowed by such communications may protect the persecuted, which is not by any means unimportant, but this same anonymity has removed the vulnerable from their own concerns about consequences in some cases. Sites such as onegoodlove.com clearly believe that certain individuals needs are not being addressed by mainstream gay hook-up sites. If users find this site and it does address their needs, presumably onegoodlove.com will prosper. If they gay community is getting what they are being sold as opposed to what they want or need, this may have negative consequences upon both their sense of identity and their behavior. The site in this scenario is colluding in this negative impact. With all the potential that exists for mobilization of gay activists through the Internet, relatively little real activism has successfully come forth.

If positive impacts are to be created upon identity and behavior, from sexual behavior to a broader sense of identity as a community, design must be used as a tool in supporting this. The designs currently employed by social networking sites that have been studied largely do not support this. They do support “hooking up.”

This being said, a uniform condemnation of all social networking sites or all users of such sites is not justified. There is hope for more positive utilization through further study, greater community involvement, and non-commercial alternative sites. The future of these sites (and how they are used) is not merely a matter of technological or economic determinism. These systems may be reshaped, reformed, and utilized with wisdom for numerous positive purposes.

The appendix contains an informal survey (for interest purposes) that asks identity and behavior questions, and how these may have changed over time. These may be correlated with usage patterns and compared to other mediums. Specifically, communication behavior and sexual behavior are queried.
References


Appendix

An Informal Survey

1. AGE_______
2. SEX_______
3. RELATIONSHIP STATUS________________
4. EXPERIENCES PREVIOUS TO USING ONLINE DATING SITES____________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
5. EXPERIENCES USING ONLINE DATING SITES______________________________________________________________________________
6. HAVE YOUR VIEWS OF THE GAY COMMUNITY CHANGED SINCE USING ONLINE DATING SITES?_______________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
7. DO YOU PREFER ONE SITE TO ANOTHER AND WHY?_______________________
   ______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
8. WHAT IS ONE POSITIVE EXPERIENCE RELATED TO A SITE AND WHICH SITE IS IT?____________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
9. WHAT IS ONE NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE RELATED TO A SITE AND WHICH SITE IS IT?____________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
10. DO YOU THINK USE OF ANY SITE HAS BEEN GOOD FOR YOU AND HOW?___________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
11. DO YOU THINK USE OF ANY SITE HAS BEEN BAD FOR YOU AND HOW?___________________________________________________________
    ______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________
12. HOW OFTEN DO YOU/HAVE YOU USED THESE SITES?______________________________________________________________________
13. HAVE YOU EVER CHANGED SITES AND WHY?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

14. DID ANY SITE EVER IMPROVE YOUR VIEW OF THE GAY COMMUNITY AND HOW?

__________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________

15. DID ANY SITE EVER LESSEN YOUR VIEW OF THE GAY COMMUNITY AND HOW?

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16. WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST WISH FOR A SITE TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE?

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17. WHAT ARE YOUR OTHER WISHES FOR ANY OF THESE SITES AND DO THEY HELP YOU ACHIEVE THEM?

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18. Comments/thought?

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Thank you! Your responses will be kept absolutely confidential except for analysis purposes only; individual names will not be kept but a number will be assigned to this survey to represent you.