CHAPTER 10: BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL: CULTURE, NATIONALISM, COMMUNITY

Social changes over the past fifty years have seemed to encourage people to live increasingly isolated lives. Since World War II, people have left their urban neighbourhoods to live in anonymous suburbs. They have moved locations as their employers expect them to work anywhere in the world. With new technologies, people can work from home, shop from home, bank from home, and even socialize from home. The common experiences that created bonds amongst people in the same place seems to be diminishing. Yet, human beings are social creatures; we want to live in webs of social interaction, even if we have to create them ourselves.

10.1. Imagined Community and Global Culture

As social beings, we live in groups. Until recently, these groups were geographically delimited: physical proximity determined our primary social relations, and economic, political, and social activities were constrained by spatial limitations. With the digital revolution, location is no longer a constraint, and distance no longer an obstacle. Phrases such as ‘networked society’ and ‘global village’, often used when discussing the Information Society, imply linkages that make distant places local. Other images such as cyberspace, electronic town hall, virtual community seek to apply the terms of localism to an dispersed networks of electronic relationships. All of these emphasize that physical distance, previously a defining feature of social relations, is now less significant. A common visions of the Information Society is the ‘death of distance’ (e.g., Cairncross 1997). What impact will this have on the communities that have been the focus of social life?

Children grow up in a locality, and learn the same history and literature, regardless of which school they are in. They meet each other in when playing sports, when ‘hanging out’, they watch similar television programmes and read similar magazines, they gossip about the same popular figures (whether music, movie, or soap opera). Once adult, they are concerned about the state of the local road, or the opening hours of the shop. Interaction creates and maintains a common sense of experience and common identification that we call community.

The creation of the a common national identity is more complex. People who believe themselves to be Irish, British, or any other nationality share common identification with others, even though they will never have face-to-face contact with most of those who they see as fellow Irish, British, or French. They are part of an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) - sharing common values with other people like themselves as though they were part of the same community. Creating and maintaining such an identity is a complex process, but an integral part of the process is the shared experience of similar education, similar mass media content, similar language, public holidays, and so on (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Fox 1990; Gellner 1983). Weber (1977) recounts the French experience in the late 19th Century and notes the impact of the educational system:

“The symbolism of images learned at school created a whole new language and provided common points of reference that straddled regional boundaries.... [A]ll children became familiar with references or identities that could thereafter be used by the authorities, the press, and the politicians to appeal to them as a single body. Lessons emphasizing certain associations bound generations together” (p. 337).
Effective as this was for metropolitan France, it is a bit incongruous when Moroccan children would recite, as part of their history lesson, “Our ancestors the Gauls...”. Irish people learn a similar history and language, they celebrate similar holidays and they have similar experiences of politics and government. Furthermore, these are experiences not shared by people who are exposed to different influences by living in other countries. Mass media, with access to the same newspapers, magazines, radio and television, as well as similar experiences of language and literature, schooling and government structures, all foster the sense of common identity and experience that is ‘national identity’. The creation and recreation of national identity has been aided by technologies such as mass newspapers, television, radio, and magazines.

If the geographical limitations of mass media technologies have fostered a geographically delimited collective experience and thus identity, then what impact will new technologies have on this process? If new technologies enable information to circulate without geographical limitations, does that mean a common global experience, and thus a global culture? After all, information has become available more widely than ever before in recent decades; increasingly, everyone in the world has access to the same information and same commodities: similar movies, television programmes, world-wide news programmes, fashions, children’s toys, fast food outlets, and so on. If culture is the result of common experience and shared information, then is global culture the inevitable consequence of people participating in the same common experiences? This global culture is a distinctly different proposition than a global information economy, which is the participation of people in a unified economic system, with international structures for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and service. Global culture is the sharing of beliefs and ideas, as well as commodities or artefacts.

There has been a long debate about globalisation (for a flavour of the discussion, see Harvey 1989; Featherstone 1990; Robertson 1992; Featherstone 1995; Featherstone, Lash et al. 1995; Friedman 1994; Appadurai 1996). With the development of global communications and domination by multinational companies, there has been a concern about a monolithic imposition of uniformity. Films produced in the United States are shown everywhere, to the detriment of locally produced films. The US media products are not necessarily better, but simply cheaper to buy. This is partly due to the economies of scale that arise from producing commodities that can be sold in markets throughout the world. In addition, these products were sometimes ‘dumped’ on foreign markets. Films have not been the only commodities that circulate in the global economy. There has been internationalisation of many commodities, especially relevant to ‘fads’ and ‘styles’. Whether it is fast food, jeans, skateboarding, Power Rangers, or Teletubbies, people increasingly have the same buying preferences in clothes, food, music, and so on, leading to uniformity in the films and news viewed, the clothes worn, the food eaten, and the music listened to. The concern is that there is an emergent global culture with a monolithic set of meanings, and that since these are products of the United States, the United States cultural values implicit in all these goods and products will become global cultural values. That is, all cultures will be subsumed within single set of meanings (US meanings) at the expense of local, indigenous cultures (Tomlinson 1991).

This is a real concern for many individuals and countries, and many countries have instituted regimes to restrict foreign media, and encourage indigenous media (c.f., Collins 1996; Preston 2001; and the discussion of the 1995 Green Paper on Broadcasting in Ireland, Kiberd 1997). Especially in countries where broadcasting is
controlled or supported by governments, there is a often a restriction on the amount of foreign programmes that can be broadcast, as well as financial support for the production of local programmes. This is partly to protect or encourage local employment, but also reflects a desire to protect local culture from foreign, usually US, media. In Ireland, for instance, local media production is explicitly linked with protecting and fostering ‘Irish’ culture, which is seen as being under threat. This attempt at control can sometimes also extend to other elements of global exchange. For instance, foreign music or clothes or food can be highly taxed or otherwise restricted, in order to favour consumption of local items.\(^{83}\)

This conflict between foreign and indigenous elements is now seen as overstated, and dependent on a somewhat simplistic view of the impact of mass media on local societies (Boyd-Barrett, Braham et al. 1987). The interaction relation between local and global creates a melange or mix of different elements, some internal but some external. Economic issues alter the relative prevalence of different media products. For instance, United States viewers are exposed to few non-US media products,\(^{84}\) while European viewers are more likely to be surrounded by US media products than by the products of their European neighbours. Small wonder that in Ireland, there is uncertainty whether the images used to conceptualize Irish society should be drawn from Boston or Berlin. The impact of this disparity is even greater outside of Europe. However, regardless of the disproportionate influence of external elements in some societies, these external elements are changed as they are incorporated into a local framework. The local meanings associated with these elements may have very little in common with any global meanings, as Wilk (2002) demonstrates in a discussion of the impact of United States generated sports programs, delivered via satellite, on a Latin American society. Television viewers are not passive recipients of global meanings; the meanings of global cultural products are altered by local circumstances, even within the same society (Morley 1980; 1992; Ang 1996; Silverstone 1994). The television show ‘Dallas’ is not interpreted in Delhi, Dublin, and Dallas in the same way; there is an interaction of the cultural product with local values and beliefs (Ang 1985; Liebes and Katz 1990). This is not to say that external products have no impact, but the elements combine to create a unique mix.

Instead of a uniform global information system, there are varying local versions or interpretations of global material. There have been similar trends in global news organisations, both print and satellite, which provide a ‘localized’ version of news for Europe, Asia, South American and so on. Satellite broadcasts introduce local advertisements for different national markets, even within the same broadcasting ‘footprint’. This has also extended to global Internet sites; yahoo.com has been replaced by yahoo.ie, yahoo.fr, and other national sites, each with its own local identity. These are responses to the preferences of users, and the result has been to create local diversity rather than global uniformity.

Although this book is focusing on information, the interaction between local and global is not restricted to mass media content or information services, but applies to the range of global commodities. One example would be food. On one level, there are national cuisines, such as Chinese food, that are distributed throughout the world. However, ‘Chinese food’ manifests itself differently in each location. First, the ingredients and seasonings vary, depending on local tastes. More importantly, the food in eaten by different types of people, at different times, on different occasions, and so therefore has a quite different social significance in different societies. In some cases, it is associated with twenty-something’s, emerging from pubs late at night; in other cases,
it is associated with forty-something’s concerned with organic food. Chinese food can become identified with specific activity or specific social or ethnic group. It may be the kind of thing you might do when a group are going out for a cheap night of socialising in the UK, while being a quite different event in India! Similar observations could be made about that archetypical symbol of US cultural domination: McDonalds. The social context of French people going to a McDonalds in Paris is different than McDonalds in Dublin or Manchester, the food is slightly different, and even the architectural design is different.

The outcome of local and global interactions in Ireland is complex. Ireland is a producer, as well as a consumer, of global commodities. Ireland has exported the commodity of Irish culture via music (Chieftains, Clancy Brothers, and so on), dance (the Riverdance ensemble), clothes (Aran jumpers), pottery and glassware (Waterford Crystal) and obviously literature. Ireland also incorporates products and ideas that emerge from elsewhere. Country and western music has transplanted itself, as has the celebration of Halloween. From France and Italy have come cappuccinos and café society. Dress styles from diverse locations such as the United States and the Middle East are combined together. Ireland becomes a unique local articulation of multiple global flows (Hannerz 1996; 1992). In the circulation of commodities, societies are clearly developing their own cultural specialties, branded in order to maximize market share.

Local cultures are under threat from external media alone; there is also the issue of internal diversity. Members of a nation have never shared the same experiences and views perfectly; regardless of the rhetoric of national identity and imagined community, as there have always been class, regional and ethnic divisions and conflicts. Common national forms and values accentuate the shared elements and minimize this diversity, but the diversity is never be eradicated. The domination of national media and national commodities simply restricted the amount of choice that individuals can exercise, which restricted the manifestation of diversity. New technologies have increased the amount of choice and the ease with which action can follow from choice, which has made it easier for existing differences to be expressed. Diversity seems to be increasing, but, in fact, it is only a diversity that was previously latent and is now overt. Each person chooses difference bits to incorporate into their own unique melange, which distinguishes him or her from others in the locality.

10.2. National Identity and Place

If new technologies are undermining a uniform national identity, the outcome of increased cultural flows and increased individual choice is not necessarily one of societies composed of isolated and differentiated individuals. An alternative is one of individuals participating in multiple collective groups, with no single group having a primary claim on individual identity and loyalty. The fragmentation of mass media (narrowcasting with satellite and cable), combined with increased access to a variety of information sources (WWW, email, video, etc) leads to a diminished sense of collective national identity and an easier assertion of alternative collective identities. For instance, in 1977, more than one half the population of the United Kingdom (twenty-eight million people) all did the same thing on Christmas Day: they watched The Morecambe and Wise Show (Clarke 2002). This was a collective national experience that is unlikely to be matched in the contemporary world of multiple television households, with satellite and cable choice of programmes. In 2000, the BBC, having purchased the rights to broadcast a major film on Christmas Day, secured only one-third as many
viewers as in 1977. The alternative choices provided by new technologies mean the end of such common experiences, which were important for their own sake, but also as the basis for subsequent conversations and discussions. In Ireland in the 1980s, the Late Late Show was not only a shared national experience of everyone watching the same television show on a Saturday night, it was often also the basis for radio and newspaper coverage the next day and personal conversations amongst friends and neighbours for the following week.

What happens when people grow up in a country, acquire that sense of national identity, and then leave? Irish people, for instance, migrating to Britain, Canada, or the United States for work, Jamaicans coming to London, or Turkish people coming to Germany? In the past, people had little scope for maintaining any contact with their home due to high communication and transportation costs. The high cost of telephone calls, as well as the high cost of physical travel back to the home culture meant that the amount of contact, through newspapers or letters, would be minimal. It was difficult to keep in contact with events ‘at home’, regardless of the strength of the emotional attachments to people or place. There was an inevitable assimilation process, during which the home identity remained more important than the host environment, but everyday contact was either with people in the host culture, or with others who shared a similar expatriate status. The home culture became more remote and the experiences of the host culture led to some degree of acculturation. Thus, we are used to the emergence of ‘hybrid’ identities, such as Irish-Americans, Pakistani-British, Turkish-German, Algerian-French, and so on. Eventually, there would either be assimilation into the host culture, or a sub-culture, such as ‘Italian-Americans’, would be emerge as a stable group that recreated itself generation after generation. These would be people who would maintain many elements of their home culture, but, without dynamic contact with people or events of their home culture, these cultural elements would be frozen in time, and there are many ethnographic studies of the enclave communities that have developed in such popular host societies such as the United States, Britain, Germany, and so on.

With new communications technology, it is possible to maintain contact with both people and events of one's home culture, even after leaving home. This was possible to some extent even prior to the digital revolution (as noted in the earlier discussion of illegal Irish-Americans in Corcoran 1993), but is much easier since the mid 1990s. Communications costs are reduced, so that one can maintain contact with friends and family via reduced telephone charges or electronic mail. The cost of high speed internet access and the capital costs of computer ownership have both lessened. Reduced transport costs also means access to ‘home’ cultural products such as clothes, food, books, movies, and so on. There has been a substantial increase in the amount and range of digital media available for worldwide consumption. With electronic newspapers, cable and satellite television, radio and television stations broadcasting on the web, it is easy to keep in touch with cultural and political events at home. With reduced transport costs, one even can afford to travel back to one's home culture relatively easily. It is now possible to participate in the public life of one’s home culture, as well as maintain social contacts with friends and relations, despite increased labour mobility (Gillespie 1989 provides an example from London). It is even possible to create cultural products that unify dispersed members of ethnic groups who no longer have a home providing cultural ‘source material’ (such as displaced tribal peoples exiled from Laos, Schein 2002).
Ireland provides the obvious example of this transformation. In earlier times, people may have wanted to maintain contact and return eventually, but it rarely happened. Air travel was expensive, as were telephone calls, so people drifted away. This inevitable outcome was realized in advance, though rarely admitted, and it lead to the ‘American wake’: a leave-taking ceremony that signified the permanent loss to the Irish community of that person. While such emigrants may not have assimilated completely into American culture, they and their descendants felt out of step if they ever did return. The height of their contact was money sent back to Ireland, either to relations or for ‘good causes’ (such as the Irish independence movement). This contrasts vividly with the current experiences of an Irish person in the United States. There are electronic Irish newspapers and many Irish radio stations broadcast on the Web. It is increasingly common for radio programmes to report email comments from people all over the world who are listening to the programme live via an Internet broadcast. This is ‘real time’ national participation and interaction on a global scale. An increasing amount of video output is also available on the Web. Nor is this simply a national phenomenon; local communities in Ireland increasingly publicize local events on their web sites and, amongst the numerous discussion lists and bulletin boards devoted to Irish topics, there are specialized sites for local events. Air travel has become significantly cheaper, and frequent return visits are possible, not only for special events such as weddings, but for the important cultural events such as Christmas, as well sporting events. The population of Ireland swells on such occasions and these events become important occasions for maintaining social cohesion (as well as personal contacts); since so many other Irish emigrants are home at the same time, these events provide opportunities to maintain contact with other emigrants.

What is the impact of this increased and richer communication? Does more contact with one’s home culture and the friends and relations one grew up with, just make the separation more difficult to tolerate and the homesickness worse? Does it permit individuals to maintain their participation and identification with their home culture and ignore their immediate surroundings, thus either delaying or reducing any integration with their host culture? Or is it only a minor theme in the overall process of integration, perhaps slowing but not really altering the process of either assimilating into sub-cultures (such as Irish-American) or forging new sub-cultures? Will people juggle multiple national ‘identities’ of home and host society? Perhaps the realities of everyday life will take precedence over a ‘long-distance nationalism’ supported by technologically mediated communication. After all, however effective ICT can be to maintain to maintain contact with events, friends, and relations, it is still impossible to replicate the many facets of being at home. One can't replicate chance contacts with acquaintances and friends of friends. Happenstance and serendipitous events cannot be re-created via intentional, narrowly defined, confines of computer-mediated communication. In addition, many face to face physical events are multi-modal -- it is one thing to read a newspaper report, but equally important are the subsequent discussions with friends or co-workers, followed up by a television report, and so on. Since technological access to one's home culture (including friends and relations) is a series of isolated, rather multiply reinforcing, experiences, there may be significant restrictions on the long-term impact of such access. The short answer to this question is that no one knows; the data is, as of yet, insufficient to be certain, especially in the face of rapid technological change. With every year, electronic communication mimics face-to-face communication more effectively, thus continually changing the constraints on culture and community.
Emigrants may also create an identity that is based on the home culture, yet distinct from it. Expatriates can maintain contact with each other, and fashion an identity that is no longer fixed or constrained by geographical factors. The members of these groups are dispersed but have a defined national identity, and, as a group, they can engage in collective economic and political activity. It is well accepted that emigrant populations often act, politically, on issues relevant to their home culture, and they use email, electronic discussion lists, and web pages to coordinate those actions. The most active electronic discussion lists in the world are lists whose members are expatriates of China, India, and Pakistan, and expatriates from many other countries organise, electronically, to effect changes in their home countries (Anderson 1998). There is now scope for a national identity that is not limited by geographic boundaries. What will be the criteria for ‘authentic’ claims for citizenship rights? Is one a citizen of Ireland by being the offspring of an Irish citizen, even if born in a different culture? Is citizenship an entitlement only of those who participate in the Irish state (e.g., pay taxes), and is it a permanent entitlement or dependent on continued participation? The days of simple criteria for state membership or national identity are over, especially as different states use different criteria.

Of course, in addition to national, ethnic, and religious identities, occupational identities often constitute a strong claim on loyalty. Not only do policemen or fire fighters feel strong loyalties to other policeman and fire fighters in their county, but this loyalty can span countries and override national differences. This has often been illustrated in reactions to disasters. The reaction of fire fighters throughout the world, to the enormous loss of lives of New York City fire fighters after the September 11th tragedy is an example of such cross-national identity. Most individuals participate in a number of distinctly differing cultural or social groups or locations: the experiences of one’s physical location, experiences of one’s home culture, experiences of work-based groups, and so on. Individuals now choose which groups to participate in, do not have to make exclusive commitments to one group over another, and, inevitably, have less commitment to any single collectivity. Modern identity is multiple non-exclusive affiliations, rather than single exclusive affiliations, and affiliations determined by choice rather than birth. People often juggle multiple affiliations, many of which have little to do with nationalism or ethnicity.

10.3. Virtual Communities?

New communications technologies enable individuals to work, shop, bank, and even socialize ‘on-line’, potentially resulting in less interaction with people and organisations in the locality (Nie 2001). Does this undermine the fabric of local communities, as neighbourhoods become populated by strangers who no longer know one another and help each other? The perceived demise of community has been a concern for decades, long before the advent of the Internet and home banking (Wellman 1988), and the threatened demise of local communities may reflect industrial and post-industrial economic change, rather than the digital revolution (Putnam 2000).

A community is usually understood to be a group of people who share a common sense of ‘belonging’ (although belonging to what, and in what sense, is the complex issue). Individuals have multi-faceted interactions with others (Barnes 1969; Frankenberg 1969; Gluckman 1971), and their lives are embedded in a web of relations and commitments. Community is somehow an amalgam of the interactions, common experience, and collective commitment among individuals who have long-term relations. Often, these relations are involuntary, as much as voluntary, forcing people to
interact with people they do not necessarily like. Living in a community involves public interactions, and often leading to unintentional and unexpected interactions with strangers and acquaintances.

These days, however, many proximate neighbours are no longer embedded in crosscutting networks of obligation and mutual assistance. For such people, there is no extended family in close proximity, and interactions with neighbours are fewer in number and more superficial in nature. This means fewer people who provide reciprocity, assistance, or reaffirmation. If you are a woman with a first time pregnancy, from whom do you get advice, if there is a problem? There may be no neighbours whom one feels able to consult, and relations, from whom one would feel the right to claim assistance, may be geographically distant. In addition, people work in locations from removed from where they live, and shopping, socializing, and recreation may also place in different areas yet again. The advent of on-line access to services has accelerated this isolation from the locality, as people shop, bank, work, and even view movies without leaving their home or having to interact with anyone else in their locality.

For some, the demise of local communities, and the personal isolation and alienation linked with that demise, has been solved by creating virtual communities. People use new technologies to find others with whom to share common experiences and concerns and, in so doing, create a complex web of interactions and experiences amongst themselves. These groups are composed of people who know each other, and help each other out, with reciprocal exchange. There is give and take or a barter system, there are rules about how one behaves, what one should do for friends and neighbours. The overriding notion is solidarity and that people put the interests of others and the interests of the group above self-interest, to create ‘community’, in this case, a ‘virtual community’.

There are arguments challenging the validity of the term ‘virtual community’. Traditionally, communities implied geographical contiguity, and face-to-face interactions, leading to overlapping, multiplex relations. People knew lots of different things about other people, rather than simply one facet of them. Participation in such communities was often involuntary: one lived in a locality and had little choice about who to interact with when out in public, nor could one be anonymously observing others without being seen. There were serendipitous meetings and unexpected events, there were public forums and private meetings. These characteristics contrast dramatically with electronic communities, where people only known one facet of others, participation is by choice, and people can sometimes ‘lurk’ without being observed. There is often no mechanism to verify that the person is actually who they claim to be and fake identities are easier to maintain in an electronic environment than a face-to-face environment. Critics argue that electronic communities lack the crucial elements of ‘community’ and are only ‘ersatz’ communities.

While virtual communities and proximate communities are different in many ways, this does not necessarily invalidate the existence of such communities. As with ‘virtual reality’, the descriptor ‘virtual’ in front of community does not mean that a virtual community must be a replica of a traditional community, but only that a virtual community encompasses the crucial elements of a traditional community. What are these elements? For some, face-to-face interactions over a long period of time are crucial, and these are, almost by definition, impossible in a virtual community. Despite improvements in technology, electronic communication does not mimic the rich, multi-modal communication of face-to-face communication. But is face-to-face
communication a necessary or sufficient criterion of community? Everyday, face-to-face interactions are often superficial and narrow, and most people spend an increasing amount of time interacting with virtual strangers. Thirty second interactions with the bus driver or the newspaper seller do not constitute interactions of social significance or meaning that create community, after all. Some of the other characteristics of traditional communities are long-term membership, multi-faceted interaction, mutual assistance, involuntary and unpredictable interactions, and a common set of practices or procedures that helps distinguish between members and non-members. Can any of these attributes be replicated in the electronic world, and, if so, would that replication constitute a community?

In times past, the proximate community was a source of information and assistance. Such information and assistance can now be obtained via computer-mediated communication, and these interchanges can create a sense of common identity. If a child suffers from leukaemia and the parents do not know anyone in the area who is knowledgeable, or if they do not want to keep asking their local doctor (whose knowledge of the specialized subject may be superficial, in any event), they can search for information using the internet. Often, the information may be available but difficult to evaluate or interpret. The most effective solution is to join a discussion list of other parents in a similar situation: they will have learned the specialised knowledge and will ‘repackage’ it in a way that the novice parent can understand. Out of this will often develop a community of people, who share knowledge and advice about this special topic. There is an support that comes from sharing experiences with others in the same situation, as well as the pragmatic benefit, of sharing solutions to common problems with others in the same situation.

Discussion lists develop to share information on a variety of topics. These discussions groups are communities of interest. Members share a common interest, either in terms of leisure activities (such as football), work activities (such as a particular computer programming language), or personal circumstances (pregnancy, illness, handicap), and they use new technologies to share information and even organise collective activities. Are such groups communities? They may have long term memberships, an internal social structure, and rules about how people communicate with each other. Most importantly, there is often a sense of common membership and identity that develops over time. People, through the course of interaction and communication, develop shared understandings that constitute a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998): “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor [.and].. practices emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor” (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992:89-99). Out of these practices comes a subjective experience of the boundaries between members’ community and other communities, and a sense of common identity. Some diagnostic characteristics of such ‘communities’ are:

- rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
- absence of introductory preambles and very quick setup of a problem to be discussed
- substantial overlap in participants’ descriptions of who belong and mutually defined identities
- specific tools, representations and other artefacts, shared stories, and inside jokes
- jargon and shortcuts to communication
a shared discourse that reflects a certain perspective on the world. (Wenger 1998:125-6)

Such communities of interest may have fluctuating memberships, and fluid boundaries, but members share a sense of common membership and share a cognitive system focused on practices and rules. The members create the shared social system that is one possible criterion of ‘community’.

It is sometimes argued that, since electronic communication isn’t ‘real’ communication, ‘real’ communities can not develop out of electronic communication. After all, electronic communication is a limited mode of communication, which excludes the communication channels (e.g., non-verbal) that are necessary for ‘real’ communication. Studies of computer-mediated communication from as early as 1984 (Kiesler, Siegel et al. 1984), and continuing since, often focus on the lack of cues and social context, and the diminished ‘social presence’ afforded by technologically mediated communication (for recent research, see Watt, Lea et al. 2002). The limits of computer-mediated communication are presumed to constrain electronic social relationships, and, since it is impossible for ‘real’ bonds of friendship and sharing to develop, it is also impossible for communities to develop. Ethnographic evidence shows this is not correct. Members of electronic groups can develop strong emotional links with one another, and this commitment can include emotional support and mutual assistance, or may be defined in terms of common commitment to a collective ideal. Indeed, the bonds amongst members can become strong enough to mimic the moral obligations associated with family and kinship. Case study evidence, based on numerous ethnographic and biographical accounts, provides clear evidence of such collective commitment in a virtual environment (e.g., Rheingold 1994; Baym 1995), even amongst individuals who have no prior, or parallel, face-to-face communication. In the early days of many electronic networks (such as Usenet, Bitnet, World Wide Web), individuals co-operated voluntarily for the achievement of common goals. Individuals expended long hours for very little personal return, sharing a commitment to common goals and ideology (Hafner and Lyon 1996). The same can also be said of many community electronic networks and bulletin boards. Such groups are similar to voluntary groups that exist within industrial societies: sports clubs, religious associations, and neighbourhood assistance schemes (see Kollock 1999 for an example involving large-scale co-operation). There are also support groups for a variety of illnesses and disabilities, and individuals frequently report their experiences of solidarity and mutual support with electronic groups (see Rheingold 1994; Rheingold 1993 for such accounts; as well as Nettleton, Pleace et al. 2002). There are also public interest groups whose members communicate electronically (such as environmental groups), and may share a strong collective loyalty to each other. All of these demonstrate a strong emotional commitment amongst people whose sole, or primary, mode of interaction is electronic.

Large-scale surveys of Internet use in the United States suggest that virtual communities are becoming an integral part of social life. A recent survey (PEW Internet and American Life Project 2001b) reported that 84 percent of all Internet users had contacted an online group at one time or another, and 79 percent of those identify a particular group with which they remain in contact. About one-quarter of this group exchanged email with other members of the same ‘community’ several times a week, and half of them reported the main reason for contact was to “create or maintain personal relationships with members”. Many of the reasons offered for participation in these communities are similar to the reasons that might be offered for participation in
face-to-face groups: discussing issues with others and creating and maintaining personal relationships with other group members, to discuss issues affecting the group, build relationships with others in the group. Some of these findings are open to question. For instance, it is not clear how strongly committed such people actually are to these virtual groups. One year earlier, the same research group reported that only 5 percent of those with online access participated in a chat room or in an online discussion on a average day, although 28 percent reported occasionally participating in a chat room or in an online discussion (PEW Internet and American Life Project 2000). Nonetheless, the trend, at least in the United States, is towards the emergence of collective, community-like, relations amongst people who communicate electronically.

This is not to say that people who communicate electronically always develop such strong loyalties, nor that communities of interest develop into groups dominated by reciprocity and collective commitment, but it is clear that such loyalties are a possible outcome of such electronic communications. After all, groups whose members communicate via face to face communication do not necessarily develop a strong sense of mutual loyalty; traditional face to face communities are often dominated by division and conflict, held together only by the necessity of co-residence. Whether one looks at groups whose members communicate face to face, electronically, or both, one must not confuse content of communication with mode of communication. It is clear that a wide spectrum of social relations can develop amongst members of a group, regardless of the mode of communication. Individuals who reside on the same locality and communicate face-to-face may have little in common with other (other than common residence), or they may share ties of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and loyalty. Equally, the same variation can exist amongst groups whose members communicate electronically. Virtual communities may consist of people who interact to share information, or people who are devoted to some collective purpose, or people who provide mutual support and assistance. Such varieties of virtual community are becoming increasingly important as another means by which individuals create bonds with others.

10.4 Community Networks

If industrial development over the past century has undermined the viability of local communities, the Information Revolution seems to have hastened the demise of such communities. Much of the social life of local communities depended on individuals leaving their home to carry out such economic activities as shopping, going to post office. The consequences of such activities were unintentional (sometimes) and often unavoidable interactions with friends and strangers. Going to the shop, one saw a neighbour and exchanged news. After going to the shop, one might have arranged to meet a friend for tea. Such activities helped create the sense of common knowledge, experience, and commitment that sustained a sense of community. If economic, and even social, activities can be carried out from the home, then where does the basis for collective experience and identification come from? Will the interactions and shared experiences that we think of as ‘community’ shrink to the point where local communities cease to be anything more than physical aggregations of isolated individuals? While new technologies seem to undermine local communities at the expense of virtual communities, can these technologies also enhance local communities? Does community life necessarily atrophy when people use new communication technologies and, if this is an undesirable thing, can the process be either arrested or altered?
It is certainly possible to use new technologies to supplement, complement, and, if necessary, replace traditional relationships and communications patterns in localities. If the information functions previously carried out via town meetings, bulletin boards in shops, church attendance, or other traditional patterns of information dissemination are no longer effective, new technologies can provide the same benefits in the local community. New technologies can provide an infrastructural resource for the provision of information that individuals need, encouraging the circulation of information and enhancing communication. Thus, if the disappearance of the local shop also meant the disappearance of the local notice board, which had helped to organise baby-sitting, the selling of second hand furniture, and so on, then an electronic notice board can act as a replacement. If the local shop has not closed, but people do not have time to visit it, then an electronic notice board can supplement the physical notice board. If discussion of local issues has decreased because people do not have time to meet together, then an electronic discussion list, which people can access and contribute to when it suits them, can complement any face-to-face discussions.

There are some intriguing examples of networks of neighbourly trust, and evidence of residents’ desire to recreate such networks. For instance, a woman named Angie Hicks set up Angie's list in 1995 in Columbus Ohio. She got together a group of friends and family and started a list of good and bad service companies. It has now spread to thirteen different markets, including areas in Ohio, Minnesota, Florida, Wisconsin, North Carolina, Massachusetts, and Illinois. It attracts homeowners who can rate companies in 250 categories. For a 35 US dollars annual subscription fee, they can sign up to the list, and either provide ratings for services or check ratings that others have provided. The list has ratings on more than 10,000 service companies, and has 50,000 members. Members can view companies online or they can call ‘neighbourhood specialists’ who work in call centres (Power 2001). A similar, but perhaps less ‘trustworthy’, service is offered by epinions.com, which allows consumers to recommend products, and also offers them the chance to shop online. It has about one million reviews and comments. These are both examples of new technologies solving a problem that has always existed in communities (e.g., where can you find a good plumber or electrician), which can not now be solved by people who are isolated from their neighbours.

The effectiveness of new technologies in sustaining local communities is difficult to evaluate because relatively few localities have sufficient density of computer users and information providers for the development of community networks. In so far as such community networks have developed, they have often been introduced to increase political participation and activism (see Chapter 7), with a presumption that strong civic participation will also strengthen internal community structures. The Freenet movement in the 1980s was the highest profile of these experiments, first starting in Cleveland, Ohio in the United States and spreading throughout the United States and Canada, with some similar projects in Europe (Graham and Marvin 1996). Other experiments have had a commercial focus, as organisations tried to see if the public would be willing to use, and perhaps even pay for, various information or entertainment services (Dutton, Blumler et al. 1987). In the last ten years, there has been a substantial growth in the number of towns and cities providing information about services and local activities, often linked with government support for such programs. Governments often support community networks in order to encourage community development, sometimes as part of a wider program for rural development or social inclusion (Haase and Pratschke 2003; McCaffrey, C. 2003; O'Donnell,
McQuillan et al. 2003; Loader 1998). While the FreeNet project has been central to community networking the United States, in other countries, governments have provided more direct support. In Canada, there has been a “Connecting Communities” to provide community access (http://www.connect.gc.ca/ Birdsall 2000), while New Zealand announced a similarly named program in 2002 (http://www.dol.govt.nz/cegcestrategy.asp, but see also Crump and McIlroy 2003). Similar projects have been undertaken in the United Kingdom as well (see, for example, Communities Online, http://www.communities.org.uk/). Some examples include Grimethorpe Electronic Village Hall (www.barnsley.org.uk) to help unemployed miners after the closure of the local colliery in 1995 as well as the Warwickshire Rural Enterprise Network (www.nrec.org.uk/wren) to help deal with rural isolation. Similar projects have taken place in urban areas as well, such as the Asian Community Centre, Chorlton Workshop and Woman's Electronic Village Hall, all in Manchester (Agar, Green et al. 2002; Carter 1997).

Even though governments often support community networks in order to encourage community development, there is not yet clear proof that electronic networks improve local community life. The evidence regarding the impact of technology on local community life is ambiguous, with some evidence suggesting that new technology supplements local communities and face-to-face social life while other evidence suggests that it undermines both (see Kavanaugh and Patterson 2002 for a review of issues; as well as Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2001; PEW Internet and American Life Project 2001b). Not only do different studies show different results, but the same data has been open to conflicting interpretations (Nie 2001). The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2002), while positive about the use of the internet for ‘virtual communities’, is less positive about its benefit for local communities. The greatest use of the internet, in terms of local communities, is local information: four out of ten Internet users report that they “often” or “sometimes” go online to look for information about local stores or merchants and about one out of three Internet users look for news about their local community or information about community events. These are community ‘replacement’ benefits from internet use, but the report finds little evidence for greater participation in local policy issues.

Local community networks require local information providers as well as consumers. This requires significant motivation from a large number of participants to provide relevant information, as well as a strong local interest in accessing such information. For the moment, most community networks are single sites, on which various local services are flagged and local events announced; these sites depend on specialist workers or volunteers. In some cases, service providers (plumbers, sports clubs) may also have their own sites, linked to the main site, but the majority of residents are not involved. This differs from the communication pattern of face-to-face local communities, and so the development of such local community networks has been slow. It remains unclear whether, if barriers were absent and density of usage was sufficient, the social, economic and political transformations discussed would actually take place. That is, if people were able to choose an electronic, wired life, would they? If they did chose such a life, how would that alter their everyday face-to-face life? Would one develop, to the cost of the other, would the two worlds exist side by side, or would the two world intermingle?

One detailed study of the impact of technology on community social life has been carried out in a Toronto suburb where, from 1997 to 1999, a newly built estate of about 120 homes was provided with high speed internet access, and the relevant
computer technology with which to access information and entertainment, and to communicate with others. This was done by a consortium of companies who wished to examine commercial potentials of such ‘wired communities’ (Hampton and Wellman 2000). About one-third of the residents either did not, or could not, participate in these high-speed trials, so it was possible to compare ‘wired’ residents with unwired residents. Based on surveys and examinations of data traffic, wired residents “recognize almost three times as many neighbors, talk with nearly twice as many, and have been invited, and have invited, one and half times as many neighbors into their homes in comparison with their non-wired counterparts” (p. 205). Similar results were also found in a study of the Blacksburg Electronic Village in Blacksburg, Virginia in the United States (Kavanaugh and Patterson 2002). The study found evidence of community involvement linked with new technology, but was unable to determine whether it was people already involved in the community who were now were using the new technology or whether the new technology fostered more community involvement. The Blacksburg project heavily supported by a local university, and the impact of that university may have distorted the relationship between technology and community development. However, evidence suggests that if community involvement is already strong, new technologies can maintain that involvement.

A notable example of community-based Internet and computer use has been in Ireland. However, in 1996, Telecom Eireann (the Irish Telephone company) held a competition for an “Information Age Town”. The company would ‘wire’ a community, providing inexpensive computers and telecommunications access, communications infrastructure, as well as training for both private individuals and commercial organisations. Towns with a population between five thousand and thirty thousand inhabitants were invited to submit development proposals, detailing how they would use the fifteen million pound investment for the benefit of the town. From the company’s perspective, the investment was intended to answer a number of questions:

1. What happens when every home has a telephone - not just an ordinary telephone, but one with sophisticated voice-mail, caller-line identification and other advanced services?
2. What happens when every business, large and small, has access to an ISDN connection and high-speed access to the Internet?
3. What happens when every student in the education system, from the age of five, has regular, intensive access to a computer with learning, knowledge-gathering and communications tools?
4. What happens when public services - from libraries to healthcare - are fully equipped to exploit the potential of the Information Age?
5. What happens when the majority of households have a personal computer linked to the Internet? (McQuillan 2000)

The underlying motivation was to use develop a test bed for the provision of various electronic commerce services, as well as other telecommunications intensive services, to see what the commercial future of a telecommunications provider might look like. Unlike the Blacksburg project, there was no direct involvement by a university, and technology intervention from external agencies provided only training and support in the initial phase.

The winner of the competition was Ennis, a town in the West of Ireland with a population of about 16,000. The investment involved the provision of subsidized computers for home use for those who qualified. Subsidized PCs were offered to 5,600 residents. Residents were required to contribute about fifteen percent towards the
multimedia computer plus software package, and a free PC familiarization plus one year’s free Internet connection was offered. Eighty percent of the residents qualified for the subsidy, and eight-five percent of those who qualified, then took advantage of this offer. As a result, in the first survey (McQuillan 2000), the results showed that Ennis had the highest household rate of computer ownership in Europe:

- 83% of households own Internet enabled, multimedia computers
- 91% of these households activated an Internet account
- 45% of Ennis households have at least one active Internet user

By the second survey, in June 2001, levels of PC and Internet access were more than twice the national Irish average (household penetration of PC’s of about 80%, whereas the national average was 32%). Interestingly, of those Ennis residents who had a computer, 76% had an Internet connection; while 63% of those with a computer nationally had an Internet connection which was about the same as national average. Since the major difference between Ennis and the rest of Ireland was rate of computer ownership, but had a similar proportion of computer owners with Internet access, the first lesson from Ennis would seem to be that if provided with cheap computers and training, a significant number of people will use them to access the Internet.

As with studies from the United States, the largest volume of Internet usage has been to maintain contact with friends and relatives, with seventy-eight percent of Internet users maintaining contacts, on an average of eight times per week. Email did not replace other modes of communication; while email was used to maintain social contacts by most Internet users in Ennis, the Internet accounted for only seventeen percent of actual contacts in this area. The balance of social contacts was by such traditional means as phone, fax or letter. This may suggest the emergence of a wired community, but not everyone uses the wires. Amongst houses with computers, almost all used their PCs, and accessed the Internet, at least occasionally, but only one in four used the PC/Internet on a daily basis. In the first survey in 2000, over fifty-five percent of households had no Internet user in the house, despite inexpensive access to training, technology and telecommunications. A substantial number of people did not find the Internet useful in their daily lives, at least in the initial phase of the project. One year later, while the reported daily usage was about one in four, over one-third of individuals used the Internet once a month or less.

The impact of wiring this community on local organisations seems to have been mixed. There are some examples of community organisations which use new technologies to at least maintain, and perhaps improve, local participation. However, on the Ennis web site, while there are thirty-three organisations, only some organisations host their own web sites with information on current activities. The evidence is still slight, but it appears that, as with the Blacksburg project, new technologies enable existing community activities in Ennis to flourish but it is not clear that new community activities follow from the introduction of new technologies. More evidence from long-term and in-depth community studies throughout the world are essential, but early data suggests that new technologies are a useful resource for communities and they can facilitate those who are committed to maintaining community involvement. However, there seems little evidence that the introduction of such technologies, of themselves, ensure the continuation of community life in rural or urban areas. It appears that a revival of community life and increased ‘social capital’, depends on more than an injection of information and communications technologies (Putnam 2000; see also Wellman, Quan-Haase et al. 2003; Prell 2003; Gurstein 2003).
One of the themes that often underpins discussions of community networks is that benefits for communities and individuals of such networks are so great that, if people are not using community networks, it must just be a matter of demonstrating these benefits to people or reducing the barriers and adoption will follow. One findings from the Ennis project was that even when there were no barriers to use (the computers were available cheaply and easily, training was free, and telecommunications charges were subsidized), a sizable percentage of people still have no interest in using the Internet to access local information or to “surf to web”. This conclusion is not unique to the Irish experience, as demonstrated by an increasing number of other studies (Wyatt, Thomas et al. 2002; Ward 2000; Lenhart, Horrigan et al. 2003). A significant number of people have no desire to access the Internet or participate in community networking. This is not due to fear, ignorance, high costs, or economic disadvantage, they simply do not see it as relevant. However, ‘opting out’ in this way may not be viable in the long run. As technology becomes more intrusive and pervasive, people may have no choice but adopt the technology. For instance, when the bank reduces staff costs by closing the local branch office and national governments do the same for the local post office, access to cash may become possible only via a automated teller machine and banking transactions may require Internet access. In which case, people would have little choice but to use banks cards and the Internet. It is an increasingly common complaint that people are being forced to use technology because they can no longer avoid it. This is not inevitable. In the case of the local bank branch and post office, governments could subsidize a service which may be uneconomic but which citizens prefer? Should individuals have to adopt technologies that primarily suit the needs of governments or corporations, or should the technologies be designed to also provide perceived benefits to individuals? There is scope for policy intervention by governments on such issues, and such interventions may be the prime determinant of the future of community networks.