

Localising the Internet beyond communities and networks¹

Dr John Postill
Sheffield Hallam University, UK
j.postill@shu.ac.uk
2 December 2007

Abstract

As the numbers of Internet users worldwide continue to grow, the Internet is becoming 'more local'. This article addresses the epistemological challenge posed by this global process of Internet localisation by examining some of the conceptual tools at the disposal of Internet researchers. It argues that progress has been hampered by an overdependence on the problematic notions of community and network whose paradigmatic status has yet to be questioned by Internet scholars. The article seeks to broaden the conceptual space of Internet localisation studies through a ground-up conceptualisation exercise that draws inspiration from the field theories of both Pierre Bourdieu and the Manchester School of anthropology and is based on recent fieldwork in suburban Malaysia. This exploration demonstrates that a more nuanced understanding of the plural forms that residential sociality can take is needed in order to move beyond existing binaries such as 'network sociality' vs. 'community sociality' (Wittel).

Keywords: Internet localisation, community, network, residential sociality, field theory, banal activism, suburbia, Malaysia

¹ This paper has been accepted for publication in *New Media and Society* and the final (edited, revised and typeset) version of this paper will be published in *New Media and Society* 10(3), June 2008 by Sage Publications Ltd, All rights reserved. © Sage Publications Ltd, 2008.

Localising the Internet beyond communities and networks

Introduction

Until the mid-1990s the number of Internet users worldwide was small and most users could not help but communicate with others at great distances. But as the numbers continue to grow, the Internet is gradually becoming 'more local' (Davies and Crabtree 2004). This global process of Internet localisation poses a set of logistic, methodological and conceptual challenges to researchers. Logistically, it demands of researchers that they spend sufficient time in a local setting in order to get to know – both online and offline – those who live, work and/or play there. Methodologically, it renders the very distinction of online vs. offline social domains even more problematic than it has been hitherto (Hine 2000), more so as Internet and mobile technologies continue to converge. Conceptually, the challenge is how to keep track of the fast pace of technological change while avoiding the default position whereby a seemingly stationary 'local community' (or local college, local council, etc.) is assumed to be impacted upon by 'global' technologies.

In this article I concentrate on the third challenge. How can we conceptualise the relationship between technological and social change at the local level? More specifically, what conceptual tools have we got at our disposal to study the emergence of new Internet-related forms of local sociality? To address these questions, I first review the existing literature on Internet localisation, suggesting that this research area's progress has been hampered by an overdependence on two key notions: community and network. Both notions have had uneven careers as social scientific terms, careers that are yet to be critically debated in the Internet literature and that I outline below. But more important than their strengths and limitations is the unrivalled paradigmatic status that these paired notions currently enjoy among scholars of Internet localisation. I suggest the need to think beyond the community/network paradigm by broadening our analytical lexicon to do some justice to the plethora of forms of sociality that anthropologists and sociologists have identified down the decades.

I carry out this conceptual broadening through ethnographic examples from my recent fieldwork in suburban Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia. I explore the potential uses of concepts that lie outside the community/network paradigm (e.g. field, arena, forum) by means of a fine-grained analysis of emergent forms of residential sociality, arguing that this kind of ground-up conceptualisation reveals the inadequacies of overly general notions such as 'community sociality' or 'network sociality' (Wittel 2001). The article closes with a discussion of the wider theoretical implications of this investigation for the study of Internet localisation and with suggestions for further research.

The community/network paradigm

Two approaches to the study of Internet localisation stand out in the existing literature, both hinging on the notions of community and network. First, there is the

‘community informatics’ approach in which researchers study a ‘local community’ and assess its specific technological needs¹. Researchers of this persuasion regard local communities as ‘the bedrock of human development’ (Gurstein 2004). To withstand the onslaught of capitalism and become empowered, they suggest, local communities must take control of the very networked technologies that threaten their survival (Gurstein et al 2003).

Second, there is the ‘networked individualism’ approach led by the Toronto network analyst Barry Wellman. Wellman has denounced the smuggling of obsolete notions of community from an earlier period of North American community studies into Internet localisation studies. Where the old communities had ‘streets and alleys’, Internet researchers are now imagining communities bound ‘by bits and bytes’ (Hampton and Wellman 2003). For Wellman this is an analytical cul-de-sac, for the crucible of North American sociality has long ceased to be the local neighbourhood (Wellman and Leighton 1979). This does not mean, Wellman insists, that communities have disappeared. Rather they have survived in the form of geographically dispersed *personal communities*, i.e. personal networks (Pahl 2005). The Internet merely reinforces a global trend towards networked individualism that was already well under way (Wellman et al 2003, Castells 2001).

Despite their differences, both perspectives on Internet localisation share a heavy reliance on the inseparable notions of community and network. Although ever popular among Internet scholars, policy-makers and activists, both terms have had troubled careers as theoretical concepts. These conceptual difficulties, I suggest, demand closer attention if we intend to further our understanding of how the Internet is becoming ‘more local’. Here I shall merely sketch them out, starting with the notion of community.

The anthropologist Vered Amit (2002) has reviewed ‘the trouble with community’ as a theoretical concept. Amit argues that the term’s strong emotional resonance makes it an ideal choice in public rhetoric, even though its empirical referent is seldom specified, or indeed specifiable. Amit cautions that expressions of community always ‘require sceptical investigation rather than providing a ready-made social unit upon which to hang analysis’ (2002: 14). Relying on emotionally charged, bounded notions such as community (or diaspora, nation, ethnic group, etc) is unwise, she adds, for there are numerous sets of social relations that cannot be brought under these banners. Such sets include neighbours, co-workers and leisure partners – people who many nevertheless share ‘a sense of contextual fellowship’ that can be ‘partial, ephemeral, specific to and dependent on particular contexts and activities’ (Rapport and Amit 2002: 5). Countering the often heard idea that community remains a valid term because it is a notion dear to millions of people around the world, Amit urges us not to conflate cultural categories with actual social groups.

This point has strong implications for the study of Internet activism and other forms of social mobilisation, since ‘the assignation of membership in a particular cultural category does not tell us, in itself, which categories will actually be drawn on for the mobilisation of social relations’ (Amit 2002: 18). For instance, members of a local organising committee may assure a researcher that all revellers at a street party are one ‘community’. It does not follow that the same set of people will mobilise against the building of an airport in their vicinity. In sum, community merits attention as a

polymorphous folk notion widely used both online and offline, but as an analytical concept with an identifiable empirical referent it is of little use. As one Internet researcher aptly put it during a recent discussion on the ontological status of community: ‘Fears of goblins do not goblins make’².

Turning now to network, in the 1950s and 1960s this notion appeared to offer anthropologists a way out of the entrapments of structural-functionalism (Sanjek 1996). By following individuals across social fields they hoped to be able to capture the open-ended nature of social life, particularly in the urban settings where numerous anthropologists were now finding themselves (Mitchell 1969, Amit 2007). However, they came to an impasse as they pursued ever more systematic ‘morphological calculations’ within increasingly small units of analysis (Amit 2007). Consequently social network analysis (SNA) was all but abandoned by social anthropologists by the 1970s (Sanjek 1996).

Interestingly it was precisely in the 1970s, as computers became more widely available, that SNA became popular with other social scientists (Freeman 2007). One milestone was Granovetter’s (1973) ‘strength of weak ties’ thesis in which he showed that jobseekers in Boston found their ‘weak’ connections (e.g. with friends of friends) to be more useful in the job market than the ‘strong’ bonds of close friendship and kinship. This work helped to popularise SNA among North American sociologists and economists (Knox et al 2006: 118). Today SNA is used in a vast range of research areas, including mental illness, the spread of diseases and information, the sociology of organisations and Internet studies (Freeman 2007).

In recent years we have seen renewed anthropological interest in social networks, but anthropologists are still weary of this concept. Thus, in a recent review article, Knox et al (2006) warn about the lack of critical reflection on key SNA notions such as ‘whole network’. Whilst whole populations are extremely difficult to research, drawing an arbitrary boundary around the network to be investigated in order to overcome this problem (e.g. by limiting the study to children in a few school classes) contradicts the fundamental idea of networks being unbounded and cutting across enduring groupings and organisations. In a similar vein, Amit (2007) urges us to reclaim the original promise of network as a notion that offers researchers the freedom to explore interpersonal links without any prior assumptions about what kinds of links or collectivities are more worthy of study (Hannerz 1980).

Here I am concerned, though, not with the limitations or potentialities of community and network as theoretical concepts, but rather with their *unchallenged dominance in the local Internet studies literature*. This paradigmatic dominance blinkers our view of the ongoing adoption of Internet technologies by local authorities, firms and residents around the globe. I argue that one effective way to loosen the hold of community and network is to broaden our sociality lexicon. In the sections that follow, I carry out such broadening in two directions. First, by introducing a set of field theoretical notions such as ‘social field’, ‘social drama’, ‘field law’ and ‘arena’. Second, by conceiving of sociality as being inherently plural and context-dependent (Jean-Klein 2003, Amit and Rapport 2002) rather than in the overly general terms that we find in the existing new media literature, e.g. ‘community sociality’ vs. ‘network sociality’ (Wittel 2001, see below).

Field, network and interaction

One available exit from the community/network bottleneck is the Habermasian concept of ‘public sphere’. Holub (in Webster 1995: 101-102) defines public sphere as

[a]n arena, independent of government [and market]...which is dedicated to rational debate and which is both accessible to entry and open to inspection by the citizenry. It is here...that public opinion is formed.

Despite Habermas’ insistence that the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) was a phase in European history not a universal phenomenon, most new media scholars have used it as a normative, democratic ideal that all modern societies should aspire towards (Benson 2007, Chadwick 2006). Thus, Dahlberg (2001) has evaluated the citizen-led initiative Minnesota e-Democracy, built around an email list forum, against five predefined public sphere criteria: autonomy from state and market, reciprocal critique, reflexivity, sincerity, and discursive inclusion. The problem with Dahlberg’s strategy is that it prescribes what counts as a domain worthy of investigation. Like community, public sphere is used both as a ‘rhetorical token’ (Benson 2007: 3) and as a normative notion that guides research away from what is and towards what *ought to be*.

A further difficulty with this concept is that its advocates, starting with Habermas, have failed to explore how public spheres are internally differentiated (Peters 2002: 4, Benson 2007: 4).

[W]hatever its qualities, any public sphere is necessarily a socially organised field, with characteristic lines of division, relationships of force, and other constitutive features (Calhoun 1992: 38, quoted in Benson 2007: 4).

In view of these difficulties with public sphere, I wish to propose instead the concept of ‘social field’ as one possible way of overcoming the community/network impasse³. Put simply, a social field is a domain of practice in which social agents compete and cooperate over the same public rewards and prizes (Martin 2003). One advantage of field is that it is a neutral, technical term lacking the normative idealism of both public sphere and community. Field theorists have developed a sophisticated vocabulary that is increasingly being recruited to the study of media (Benson 2007, Benson and Neveu 2005, Couldry 2007, Hesmondhalgh 2006, Peterson 2003). More pertinent to the case at hand, field theory offers us a framework with which to analyse the Internet-mediated relations between local authorities and residents by treating these two parties not as discrete entities but rather relationally, as two sectors of a porous, conflict-prone ‘field of residential affairs’ (see Epstein 1958, Venkatesh 2003).

Today we associate field theory with Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 1996), yet this theory has a far longer history originating in physics and Gestalt psychology (Martin 2003). Bourdieu was critical of social network analysis (SNA) for what he regarded as its naïve commitment to interaction as the basis of human life and developed his field theory in opposition to SNA. He argued that by concentrating on people’s visible interactions and ties, SNA practitioners fail to grasp the invisible network of objective relations binding human agents within a common cultural space (e.g. France) and its fields of practice (art, sociology, photography, etc). For Bourdieu, SNA conflates structure with interaction, exaggerating the importance of ‘social capital’, i.e. the

capital that accrues from social connections, whilst neglecting other species of capital such as cultural and symbolic capital (Knox et al 2006). For example, two Parisian artists who have never met may nonetheless possess similar amounts of symbolic capital (prestige, renown, etc) and occupy neighbouring positions within the field of art. In Bourdieu's field theory, it is agents' relative positions and amounts of field-specific capital that matter, not with whom they interact.

Although in this article I draw partly on Bourdieu's field lexicon, I find his dismissal of interaction unhelpful on two accounts. First, it is hard to envisage how one could study the Internet without considering its interactivity, e.g. the ease with which mailing list users can reply to posts (on media and interaction, see Thompson 1995). Second, Bourdieu's opposition to SNA's interactionism conceals the fact that within the SNA tradition there has always existed a tension between its interactionist (or connectionist) and its structural (or field) strands. Whilst network analysts who adopt a contact approach do indeed map interactions and ties onto 'sociograms' (e.g. de Nooy 2003: 313), field-oriented SNA practitioners, in contrast, are more interested in 'structural relations usually opaque to actors' (Knox et al 2006: 117).

In fact, a number of scholars have managed to successfully graft the notion of interaction onto their field analyses. Thus, Wouter de Nooy (2003: 323) has shown how the interactions of literary critics and female authors in the 1970s helped to establish and naturalise the category of 'feminist literature' within the Dutch literary field. To this theorist, a field of practice is shaped by objective power relations 'insofar as they influence the interaction within the field' (de Nooy 2003: 323). Similarly, Victor Turner's (1974) reconstruction of a failed uprising in colonial Mexico, the Hidalgo Insurrection, tracks the interactions that took place in a series of 'arenas' over a period of six months. Turner understands the Insurrection to have been a 'social drama' unfolding across a rapidly shifting political field made up of the people, institutions and other resources mobilised to assist or thwart the rebellion (cf. Zald and McCarthy 1988).

Suburban frontiers

Victor Turner was a leading exponent of the Manchester School of anthropology whose members were keenly interested in social change, particularly in the urbanising regions of Central and Southern Africa during decolonisation (Evens and Handelman 2006). The situation there was curiously analogous to that faced today by suburbanites in many parts of the world. Like rural migrants in the booming urban areas of post-War Africa (Epstein 1958), many present-day suburbanites find themselves in densely populated settlements with inadequate social and public facilities. The result is the mushrooming of ad-hoc initiatives seeking to resolve the more pressing problems.

Newly built suburbs are ideal settings in which to rethink our current dependency on community and network as the paradigmatic sociality notions in the study of Internet localisation. These are frontiers where newly arrived people, technologies and ideas shape one another in unforeseeable ways. Over time new forms of residential sociality arise out of this flux as residents, private firms, local authorities and other human agents strive to 'produce locality' (Appadurai 1996). In such unsettled conditions, any

attempt at positing an existing ‘local community’ being impacted upon by a globalising ‘network logic’ is doomed.

New suburbs are particularly well suited to the study of emerging forms of residential sociality linked to ‘banal activism’ – the activism of seemingly mundane issues such as traffic congestion, waste disposal and petty crime⁴. Banal activism has been neglected by Internet scholars, particularly in East and Southeast Asia where attention has centred on the ‘serious’ cyberactivism of the intelligentsia and on the actual and potential uses of new digital technologies for political reform at the national level (e.g. Abbott 2001, 2004, Gan et al 2004, George 2003, Hachigian 2002, Hill and Sen 2000, Holmes and Grieco 2001, Loo 2003, Nain 2004, Rafael 2003, Uimonen 2003).

The two main suburban Internet studies to date to discuss residential sociality and banal activism provide useful entry points but are marred by their adherence to the community/network paradigm. The better known study was conducted by Keith Hampton in the Toronto suburb of ‘Netville’ (a pseudonym) in 1997-1999. Hampton combined survey research with participant observation in this new ‘wired-up’ locality to study the impact of the Internet on ‘local community’ (Hampton and Wellman 2003). He found that the Internet helped Netville’s settlers to make new friends and acquaintances both in their own immediate neighbourhoods and across the suburb, as well as being able to maintain older ties with geographically dispersed friends and relatives. Residents with the most online contacts also tended to have the most offline contacts in the suburb. In accordance with Granovetter’s ‘strength of weak ties’ dictum, local residents drew on their new contacts to make further contacts for information, socialising, mutual aid, etc, in the process increasing their local ‘social capital’. The web of social ties thus created had important political implications as well, for it allowed residents to mobilise effectively when the developers attempted to withdraw the very technologies that had facilitated the collective production of sociality (Hampton 2003, Hampton and Wellman 2003).

A more recent study was conducted by Yael Levanon in the Tel Aviv suburbs of Ramat Beit-Shemesh and Modiin, the former settled by orthodox Jews, the latter by both religious and secular families. Levanon’s starting point was, like Hampton’s, the North American literature on the reported decline in community social capital (Putnam 1995, see also Putnam 2000). His aim was to study ‘community networking’ and its effect on local ties. On the basis of a questionnaire delivered to users of two local mailing lists, Mesch and Levanon (2003) argue that the Internet has allowed residents to find like-minded others across their suburb with whom to exchange information, socialise and cooperate – a finding that echoes the Netville study. Another similarity was the use of the Internet for banal activism, in the Israeli case to oppose the building of a new mall that would open on Saturdays and offer non-kosher food. Yet, in contrast to their North American counterparts, the Tel Aviv settlers had little need for the Internet at the immediate neighbourhood level, for in Israel the neighbourhood remains a fulcrum of sociality.

These two studies further our understanding of Internet localisation in suburban settings in a number of ways. First, they point at cross-cultural similarities as well as contrasts in the Internet-shaped making of suburban socialities. In both countries, suburban families with young children and dual-career parents are driven by the imperative to find and maintain a social environment conducive to family-building

and class reproduction (see Miller 1995); an imperative that shapes their use of Internet technologies. However, the specific ‘banal’ issues that matter to residents can vary greatly from one locale to another, even within the same country. For instance, plans to build a non-kosher restaurant were resisted by orthodox not secular Jews in suburban Tel Aviv. Second, the two studies demonstrate the continued usefulness of Granovetter’s theory of ‘weak ties’ in contexts other than Boston’s 1970s job market (see also Haythornthwaite 1998, Amit 2007), enabling their authors to correct the overemphasis on ‘strong’, affective ties found in the community informatics literature (Hampton 2003). Third, these studies shed light on the critical importance of two specific ‘Internet affordances’ (Wellman et al 2003), namely its interactivity and asynchronicity, to suburban residents who are able to engage with local issues despite their work and childcare commitments.

These studies are not, however, without their shortcomings. First, they are both examples of the connectionist strand of social network analysis (SNA) discussed earlier. This weakens their explanatory power when it comes to structural or ‘field’ questions. Murali Venkatesh (2003: 344-345) has broached such field-related questions with reference to Hampton’s Netville research and suggested, following Melucci (1996), that collective action is always tethered to relational structures (or fields) that constrain action, although ‘breakthrough social agency is always possible’. This relational line of inquiry is not pursued, though, in Hampton’s own work.

Both studies are furthermore caught up in the community/network semantic tangle, for instance by making contradictory use of the term ‘community’. Thus, in Mesch and Levanon’s (2003) analysis, community is used in places to refer to a pre-existing, unspecified collectivity (‘the local community’), in others to the future outcome of an ongoing effort (‘community-building’), yet in others to the suburb in its entirety (‘the extended community’) as opposed to the neighbourhood. As I have argued earlier, community is a vague notion favoured in public rhetoric, not a sharp analytical tool with an identifiable empirical object. Amit (2002: 14) puts it well: ‘Invocations of community... do not present analysts with clear-cut groupings so much as signal *fields* of complex processes through which sociality is sought, rejected, argued over, realised, interpreted, exploited or enforced’ (my emphasis).

I turn now to an examination of such a ‘field of complex processes’ and its Internet-related socialities by drawing on my ethnographic research in suburban Malaysia.

A field of residential affairs

Subang Jaya and its twin township, USJ, form a largely middle-income suburb of Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia. In 1998 the Subang Jaya municipality as a whole had an official population of 480,000, consisting of some 60% Chinese, 25% Malays, and 15% Indians and ‘Others’ – predominantly immigrant workers from poorer Asian countries⁵. The local Creole is Malaysian English (see Nair-Venugopal 2001). I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Subang Jaya (mostly in USJ) for 12 months in 2003 to 2004, followed by intermittent online research since my return to Britain. The aim was to study whether the Internet was making any significant difference to the governance of this multiethnic locality⁶. Subang Jaya-USJ is renowned in Malaysian ICT policy circles for its rich diversity of ‘e-community’ initiatives, ranging from a federal-funded ‘smart township’ project to a municipal cybermosque

and multimedia libraries to a self-funded residents' Web forum, among numerous other projects. It was this vibrant Internet scene that attracted me to the locality.

Following the same suburban imperative that drove the Tel Aviv and Toronto suburban settlers described in the previous section, most Subang Jaya residents arrived in the 1990s in search of a green, safe environment to raise their young families while pursuing careers in the private sector. The omens were auspicious for the award-winning township dotted with small neighbourhood parks (*padang*). Yet as the decade drew to a close, familiar urban problems that incomers thought they had left behind began to surface, including traffic congestion, petty crime, degraded civic amenities, and a shortage of Chinese schools. As a result of the growing discontent, a manner of banal activism emerged around these issues in the late 1990s, one in which the Internet played an important part.

It would be entirely possible to discuss Subang Jaya's residential activism in its own right, as its own 'field of striving' (Martin 2003), but I think it more productive to cast the net wider so as to encompass the local authorities and their grassroots initiatives as well (see Epstein 1958). This is because the activities of local residents, politicians and municipal staff are inextricably entwined. To this end, I shall be examining what I call Subang Jaya's *field of residential affairs*, that is, the field of organised striving in which residents, politicians, municipal staff, journalists and other social agents compete and cooperate over matters of concern to local residents – often by means of the Internet. In addition to bringing under one analytical umbrella both residents and local authorities, the coined phrase 'residential affairs' has the virtue of avoiding the sort of tacit normative commitment to a cohesive 'community' found in formulations such as 'community building'.

An invisible line divides Subang Jaya's field of residential affairs into two main sectors: a non-governmental sector led by Internet activists and a governmental sector led by the local authorities. The 'fundamental laws' (Bourdieu 1991) of the field differ from one sector to the other. Thus, residents wishing to amass symbolic capital are expected to freely volunteer their valuable time for the greater good of 'the community'. This 'interest in disinterestedness' (Bourdieu 1993, 1998) can be described as the unwritten law of selfless volunteerism. In contrast, agents from the governmental field sector must abide by a different fundamental law: the law of *turun padang*. To solve local issues, however banal they may seem to an outsider, local politicians and civil servants must first *turun padang* – Malay for 'to go down to the ground'. It is only by going down to the ground, the belief goes, that powerful outsiders will be able to resolve concrete issues, thereby gaining the residents' trust and support.

Field socialities

Fields of striving do not necessarily exhibit a homogenous 'field sociality'. This is certainly the case with Subang Jaya's field of residential affairs where a plurality of socialities has arisen over time. The perils of reducing sociality to totalising categories such as 'field sociality' or 'community sociality' are apparent in Andreas Wittel's (2001) discussion of the new media industry in London. Wittel distinguishes two broad kinds of sociality: community vs. network sociality. Community sociality is the pre-modern, sluggish sociality of physically localised collectivities. By contrast,

network sociality is fast-paced and based on fleeting, instrumental encounters (e.g. speed-dating) with a large set of ‘contacts’. Young urban professionals working in new media industries epitomise this latter form of sociality, which Wittel (following Wellman and Castells) regards as the defining sociality of our era.

Wittel’s notion of network sociality glosses over notable differences in how people interact with one another within the same field of practice, e.g. the new media industry in London. Surely the quality of a social interaction within a speed-dating session differs markedly from that in the office canteen or in a board meeting? How do media industry workers in London navigate these different micro-social settings while pursuing their goals (advancing their careers, socialising, mating, etc)? These questions cannot be answered unless we develop a more nuanced understanding of sociality.

In this section I unpack the notion of sociality ethnographically, suggesting that it cannot be reduced to a community/network binary. Instead I am suggesting that researchers need to approach this question with an open mind, with the expectation that sociality may take on plural forms even within a single universe of practice. The three distinct forms of field sociality that I discuss are committee sociality, patrol sociality, and Web forum sociality (other emergent forms that I cannot discuss here would include ritual sociality, street party sociality, and sporting sociality). I shall outline their specificities in terms of the type of interaction, mode of discourse and field articulations. It is only through these fine-grained distinctions derived from empirical research on the ground, I suggest, that we can begin to theorise the elusive relationship between Internet usage and the emergence of new forms of residential sociality.

Committee sociality

Despite the prominence of committees within social and political activism worldwide, ‘the sociality of committees themselves has remained a largely unseen ethnographic object’ (Jean-Klein 2003: 557). My account of committee sociality is based on participant observation at a number of meetings in Subang Jaya and USJ. The JKP⁷ or residents’ committees system was launched in February 2001 by the municipal council. The then council president, Ahmad Fuad, linked the pioneering scheme to Local Agenda 21, a United Nations programme aimed at improving local governance around the globe. Fuad used the public rhetoric of community to call on ‘the involvement of the community as a whole’ in the new initiative. In practice, however, most committee members are political appointees drawn from the subfield of residential activism. Wishing to ‘delegate some authority to the people’, Fuad launched a plan to allocate RM 100,000 (US\$ 29,000) annually to each of the 24 committees ‘for small and immediate projects’ such as drain repairs or tree-cutting (Yeoh 2005).

Residents’ committee sociality is the co-present, synchronous sociality of monthly meetings devoted to discussing local issues (cf. Jean-Klein 2003). Meetings are held at night in air-conditioned rooms and attendance is restricted to committee members and their guests. The bodily orientation is primarily face-to-face – although this will depend, of course, on interlocutors’ seating positions relative to one another (Pink n.d.). Food and drinks are usually provided and consumed in the room during the

break. These ‘ephemeral items... live on in the form of the social relations that they produce, and which are in turn responsible for reproducing the comestibles’ (Gell 1986: 112). The discourse is oral, polylogical and gesturally rich but it is also mediated by texts (e.g. the agenda, emails, letters, websites, etc.), i.e. meetings are ‘literacy events’ (Street 2000). Albeit a largely sedentary activity, attendants undertake a metaphorical journey whose itinerary is the agenda. It is the task of the chair to ‘bring to order’ participants who stray too far from this discursive itinerary (Pink n.d.). These sessions are deliberative in that participants aim at reaching consensual decisions⁸. Even though meetings are held behind closed doors, minutes are in principle open to all local residents for inspection.

As regards the committees’ articulation with the rest of the field of residential affairs, these hybrid organisations are located on the border between the field’s governmental and non-governmental sectors. This ambiguous location is a perennial source of friction. The predominant mood at these sessions is neither one of open conflict nor of fellowship. Instead, there prevails an atmosphere of frustration with the council’s seeming inability to solve but a fraction of the myriad issues brought to the table. As one chair put it once: “But what is it we’re doing? We cannot just come to meetings!”.

Patrol sociality

This form of USJ sociality springs from a deep-seated fear of crime in the severely underpoliced suburb. In 1999, a neighbourhood watch committee was formed in the precinct of USJ18. Each member was entrusted with organising night patrols for a single street. In its heyday, the scheme boasted 330 volunteer patrollers – virtually all of them middle-aged men – guarding over the precinct’s 536 houses. Night patrol sociality is the side-by-side (not face-to-face), outdoors sociality of the night beat, when volunteer patrollers take time out to walk the streets in pairs. Patrollers carry torches, whistles, batons or long sticks, mobile phones, pen and paper⁹. The discourse is oral, informal, agenda-free as well as gesturally poor on account of patrollers’ collateral bodily orientation and the nocturnal conditions. Because of the physical and cognitive constraints of verbal discourse (Hutchins 1995), the two partners take it in turns to carry forth the single conversational thread. In keeping with the dyadic nature of patrols, the discourse is dialogical rather than polylogical (see Mulkay 1985). Unlike the discourse of committees, patrol discourse is non-deliberative, unrecorded and private.

Turning now to its field articulations, patrolling is a result of the collaboration between local residents, the police and the national IT council (NITC) who seed-funded a neighbourhood watch Web portal under an e-community scheme. Despite this governmental connection patrolling itself is largely free from the political tensions and frustrations that beset committee meetings. The mood is one of camaraderie and fellowship – the shoulder-to-shoulder fellowship of the beat. Whilst committee members live off meagre extrinsic rewards (i.e. the occasional resolution of a pending issue), patrolling is both a rewarding activity in its own right as well as epitomising the fundamental field law of selfless volunteerism (on the rewards of practice, see Warde 2005).

Web forum sociality

A unique quality of social intercourse has evolved on Subang Jaya's thriving Web portal, USJ.com.my. Founded in 1999, this portal is proudly independent from government. At the time of writing, the USJ.com.my forums had clocked close to 15,000 threads (topics of discussion), 232,000 posts and had some 13,000 registered members. The main forum is ostensibly devoted to 'issues related to USJ Subang Jaya Community', although in practice it is open to any topic so long as participants tread carefully on 'sensitive' subjects such as Islam. Thread starters compete to attract posters to their own threads by choosing topical issues. In contrast to the gesturally rich committee meetings, Web forum sociality relies on emoticons and avatars to compensate for the reduced bodily cues of online communication (*pace* Hine 2000: 14-27). As noted in connection to the Israeli mailing lists, the asynchronicity of most Internet communication allows busy suburbanites to participate at their own leisure. The discourse is polylogical, non-deliberative, recorded and public.

How does Web forum sociality articulate with Subang Jaya's field of residential affairs? First, its independence from the state places the forum firmly in the non-governmental sector of the field. But it is important, once again, not to conflate our folk and technical terms. If during calm periods the forum lives up to its name as a cordial informational market, the collective mood can change very rapidly from one of conviviality to another of confrontation and inflammatory language ('flaming'), sometimes leading to collective action. At such times the forum morphs into an *arena*. In Turner's field theory, an arena is a 'bounded spatial unit in which precise, visible antagonists, individual or corporate, contend with one another for prizes and/or honour' (Turner 1974: 132-3). Arenas are 'explicit frames' in which 'nothing is left merely implied' and major decisions are taken in public view (1974: 134). With his notion of arena, Victor Turner was distancing himself from game theory and other rational actor models that had dominated political anthropology since the 1960s. Turner emphasised that an arena is neither a marketplace nor a forum, although they can both become an arena 'under appropriate field conditions' (1974: 134). These conditions have arisen a number of times throughout USJ.com.my's short history, e.g. when residents have been pitted against the local authorities over an issue of general concern.

Conclusion

The field of local Internet studies appears to suffer from semantic agoraphobia – a fear of open semantic spaces. Yet researching local settings should not necessarily limit one's conceptual space to one or two familiar notions, especially if these are of questionable sociological value, as is the case with community. This is particularly noticeable in suburban studies where a reliance on community and network is strangely at odds with a frontier-like scenario in which people, technologies, and other cultural artefacts are co-producing new forms of residential sociality in unpredictable ways.

By drawing on the field theoretical lexicon of both Bourdieu and the Manchester School I was able to bring a set of concepts that lie partly outside the community/network paradigm (field, interaction, sociality, arena, etc) to bear on the ethnographic analysis. Like Eric Klinenberg (2005) in his study of US youth media, I have found

field theory to be ‘a useful way of seeing patterns within a messy domain of social action’ (Couldry 2007: 211), in my own case the domain of local governance in a Malaysian suburb. This ground-up theoretical exploration (Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee 2006) revealed not a homogenous ‘field sociality’ but rather an internally differentiated field of striving with various forms of sociality distinguished by the nature of their interactions, discursive practices and field articulations. Subang Jaya residents and local authorities are not appropriating the Internet wholesale. In common with countless people around the globe they are selectively appropriating Internet technologies for specific purposes (Miller and Slater 2000) and within fields of self-organised striving. My analysis suggests that which Internet technologies are adopted will depend not only on their cost and technical affordances (Wellman et al 2003) but also on the adopting field’s inner differentiation. Thus, all three initiatives analysed above have sought to foster online discourse and conviviality through Web forums, but only USJ.com.my has succeeded. Such success can be attributed in part to this portal’s symbolic location at the heart of the non-governmental field sector (a location that attracts civic-minded residents), and in part to the virtual lack of thematic restrictions, which gives it an edge over the neighbourhood watch forum with its narrow crime remit. The analysis also showed that certain field socialities are more prone than others to fluctuations in their ‘moods’. Careful diachronic attention to these mood swings can teach us about a field’s uneven patterns of socio-technological change and continuity, with some field niches enjoying better insulation from external pressures than others (Epstein 1958, Bourdieu 1996).

There was much ground that I could not cover in this brief discussion, including questions about Internet localisation and social identity, other Internet technologies besides Web forums, or the ongoing convergence of Internet and mobile technologies. Further empirical research and ground-up theorisation is needed on these matters, particularly in new suburban settlements where Internet-related socialities can be studied as they emerge and compared with analogous processes unfolding in other suburbs. Other approaches besides field theory may prove fruitful as well (e.g. actor-network theory, structuration theory, material culture studies), especially if they are undertaken in the spirit of openness towards new forms of sociality that is the hallmark of all frontiers.

References

- Abbott, J.P. (2001) ‘Democracy@internet.asia? The Challenges to the Emancipatory Potential of the Net: Lessons from China and Malaysia’, *Third World Quarterly* 22(1): 99–114.
- Abbott, J.P. (2004) ‘The Internet, *Reformasi* and Democratisation in Malaysia’, in E.T. Gomez (ed.) *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform*, pp. 79-104. London and New York: Routledge.
- Amit, V. (2002) ‘Anthropology and Community: Some Opening Notes’, in V. Amit and N. Rapport *The Trouble with Community*, pp. 13-25. London: Pluto.
- Amit, V. (2007) ‘Globalization through “Weak Ties”’: A Study of Transnational Networks Among Mobile Professionals’, in V. Amit (ed.) *Going First Class? New*

Approaches to Privileged Travel and Movement, pp. 53-71. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.

Amit, V. and N. Rapport (2002) *The Trouble with Community*. London: Pluto.

Appadurai, A. (1996) 'The Production of Locality', in A. Appadurai *Modernity at Large*, pp. 178-199. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Benson, R. (2007) 'After Habermas: The Revival of a Macro-Sociology of Media', paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Conference, New York, 11 August, URL (consulted Dec. 2007):
http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/000/671/Benson_ASA.pdf

Benson, R. and E. Neveu (eds.) (2005) *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1991) 'The Peculiar History of Scientific Reason', *Sociological Forum* 6 (1): 3-26.

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical Reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Calhoun, C. (1992) 'Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere', in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 1-48. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Castells, M. (2001) *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Chadwick, A. (2006) *Internet Politics: States, Citizens, and New Communication Technologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Couldry, N. (2007) 'Bourdieu and the Media: the Promise and Limits of Field Theory (Review of Benson and Neveu, 2005)', *Theory and Society* 36: 209-213.

Dahlberg, L. (2001) 'Extending the Public Sphere through Cyberspace: The Case of Minnesota E-Democracy', *First Monday* 6 (3), URL (consulted Dec. 2007):
http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_3/dahlberg/

Epstein, A.L. (1958) *Politics in an Urban African Community*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Evens, T.M.S. and D. Handelman (eds.) (2006). *The Manchester School: Practice and Ethnographic Praxis in Anthropology*. Oxford: Berghahn.

Freeman, L. (2007) 'The Study of Social Networks', URL (consulted Dec. 2007):
http://www.insna.org/INSNA/na_inf.html

- Gan, S., J. Gomez and J. Uwe (eds.) (2004) *Asian Cyberactivism: Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship*. Bangkok: Friedrich Naumann Foundation.
- Gell, A. (1986) 'Newcomers to the Worlds of Goods: Consumption among the Muria Gonds', in A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- George, C. (2003) 'The Internet and the Narrow Tailoring Dilemma for 'Asian' Democracies', *Communication Review* 6 (3): 247-268.
- Granovetter, M. (1973) 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6): 1360-1380.
- Gurstein, M. (2004) 'Editorial: Welcome to the Journal of Community Informatics', *Journal of Community Informatics* 1(1), URL (consulted Dec. 2007): <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/193/148>
- Hachigian, N. (2002) 'The Internet and Power in One-Party East Asian States', *Washington Quarterly* 25(3): 41-58.
- Hampton, K.N. (2003) 'Grieving for a Lost Network: Collective Action in a Wired Suburb', *The Information Society* 19: 417-428.
- Hampton, K. N. and B. Wellman (2003) 'Neighboring in Netville: How the Internet Supports Community and Social Capital in a Wired Suburb', *City and Community* 2(3): 277-311.
- Hannerz, U. (1980) *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology*. New York: Columbia University
- Haythornthwaite, C. (1998) 'A Social Network Study of the Growth of Community Among Distance Learners', *Information Research*, 4(1), URL (consulted Dec. 2007): <http://informationr.net/ir/4-1/paper49.html>
- Hesmondhalgh, D. (2006) 'Bourdieu, the Media and Cultural Production', *Media, Culture and Society* 28 (2): 211-231.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. and J. Toynbee (2006) 'A Successful Conference on Media Change and Social Theory', *CRESC News* 4, December 2006, URL (consulted Dec. 2007): <http://www.cresc.ac.uk/publications/documents/CRESCNewsIV.pdf>
- Hill, D and K. Sen (2000) 'The Internet in Indonesia's New Democracy', in P. Ferdinand (ed.) *The Internet, Democracy and Democratization*, pp. 119-136. London: Frank Cass.
- Hine, C. (2000) *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Holmes, L. and M. Grieco (2001) 'The Internet, Email, and the Malaysian Political Crisis: the Power of Transparency', *Asia Pacific Business Review* 8(2): 59-72.

- Hutchins, E. (1995) *Cognition in the Wild*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jean-Klein, I. (2003) 'Into Committees, Out of the House? Familiar Forms in the Organization of Palestinian Committee Activism during the First Intifada', *American Ethnologist* 30 (4): 556-577.
- Klinenberg, E. (2005) 'Channeling into the Journalistic Field: Youth Activism and the Media Justice Movement', in R. Benson and E. Neveu (eds.) *Pierre Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, pp. 174-192. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Knox, H., M. Savage and P. Harvey (2006), 'Social Networks and Spatial Relations: Networks as Method, Metaphor and Form', *Economy and Society* 35(1): 113-140.
- Loader, B.D. and L. Keeble (2004) *Challenging the Digital Divide? A Literature Review of Community Informatics Initiatives*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation/YPS.
- Loo, E. (2003) 'Opening Windows to 'E-democracy' in Malaysia', paper presented at Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, Honolulu, 12-15 January, URL (consulted Dec. 2007): <http://www.hichumanities.org/AHproceedings/Eric%20Loo.pdf>
- Martin, J. L. (2003) 'What Is Field Theory?', *American Journal of Sociology* 109: 1-49.
- Melucci, A. (1996) *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- Mesch, G. S. and Y. Levanon (2003) 'Community Networking and Locally based Social Ties in Two Suburban Locations', *City and Community* 2: 335-352.
- Miller, L. (1995) 'Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal', *Sociological Forum* 10 (3): 393-418.
- Miller, D. and D. Slater (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.
- Mitchell, J.C. (ed.) (1969) *Social Networks in Urban Situations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mulkay, M. (1985) *The Word and the World*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Nain, Z. (2004) 'New Technologies and the Future of the Media in Malaysia', in *Communicating the Future: Proceedings from the National Conference on the Future of Media in a Knowledge Society: Rights, Responsibilities and Risks*, pp. 101-116. Kuala Lumpur: Kinibooks.
- Nair-Venugopal, S. (2001) *Language Choice and Communication in Malaysian Business*. Bangi: Penerbit UKM.

- Nooy, W. de (2003) 'Fields and Networks: Correspondence Analysis and Social Network Analysis in the Framework of Field Theory', *Poetics* 31: 305-327.
- Pahl, R. (2005) 'Are all Communities Communities in the Mind?', *The Sociological Review* 53 (4): 621-640.
- Peters, B. (2002) 'On Public Deliberation and Public Culture: Reflections on the Public Sphere', Working Paper 7/97, Institut für Interkulturelle und Internationale Studien (InIIS), Universität Bremen, Germany.
- Peterson, M.A. (2003) *Anthropology and Mass Communication: Myth and Media in the New Millennium*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Pigg, K.E. and L.D. Crank (2004) 'Building Community Social Capital: The Potential and Promise of Information and Communications Technologies', *Journal of Community Informatics* 1 (1), URL (consulted Dec. 2007): <http://ci-journal.net/misc/JoCI%20Vol1%20Issue1.pdf>
- Pink, S. (n.d.) 'It Brought us Together': from Communities to Activist Socialities', unpublished paper.
- Putnam, D. R. (1995) 'Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America', *Political Science and Politics* 28 (4): 664-671.
- Putnam, D. R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rafael, V. (2003) 'The Cell Phone and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Philippines', *Public Culture* 15 (3): 399-425.
- Rapport, N. and V. Amit (2002) 'Prologue: The Book's Questions', in V. Amit and N. Rapport *The Trouble with Community*, pp. 1-12. London: Pluto.
- Sanjek, R., (1996) 'Network Analysis', in A. Barnard and J. Spencer (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, pp. 396-397. London: Routledge.
- Street, B. (2000) 'Literacy Events and Literacy Practices', in M. Martin-Jones and K. Jones (eds.) *Multilingual Literacies: Comparative Perspectives on Research and Practice*, pp.17-29. Amsterdam: John Benjamin.
- Taylor, W. (2004) *Community Informatics In Perspective*. Hershey, PA: Idea Group.
- Thompson, J.B. (1995) *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Turner, V.W. (1974) *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Uimonen, P. (2003) 'Mediated Management of Meaning: On-line Nation Building in Malaysia', *Global Networks* 3 (3): 299-314.

Venkatesh, M. (2003) 'The Community Network Lifecycle: A Framework for Research and Action', *The Information Society* 19: 339- 347.

Warde, A. (2005) 'Consumption and Theories of Practice', *Journal of Consumer Practice* 5(2): 131-153.

Webster, F. (1995) *Theories of the Information Society*. London: Routledge.

Wellman, B. and B. Leighton (1979) 'Networks, Neighborhoods and Communities', *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 14: 363-390.

Wellman, B., A. Quan-Hasse, J. Boase, W. Chen, K. Hampton, I.I. de Diaz, et al. (2003) 'The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 8 (3), URL (consulted Dec. 2007): <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol8/issue3/wellman.html>

Wittel, A. (2001) 'Toward a Network Sociality', *Theory, Culture & Society* 18 (6): 51-76.

Yeoh, P.C. (2005) 'The Jawatankuasa Penduduk (JKP) Covering Subang Jaya/USJ and Sunway', URL (consulted Dec. 2007): <http://nwatch.net.my/topicOpen.cfm?start=1&count=10&id=25960A05-1584-4BE5-875EF359762CD9D3&>

Zald, M.N. and J.D. McCarthy (1988) *The Dynamics of Social Movements: Resource Mobilization, Social Control and Tactics*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Notes

¹ For reviews of this literature see Loader and Keeble (2004), Pigg and Crank (2004), Taylor (2004).

² See <http://listserv.aoir.org/pipermail/air-l-aoir.org/2006-August/010366.html> (consulted Dec. 2007).

³ A variant of field theory is being used as the theoretical thrust by a media research group at Goldsmiths College, University of London, see <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-research-programme/>

⁴ Personal communication from Alexander T. Smith (22 May 2006) who independently coined the term 'banal activism' after anthropological fieldwork among Conservative Party activists in Scotland.

⁵ Arpah Bt. Abdul Razak, Subang Jaya Municipal Council (personal communication, May 2003).

⁶ I undertook this research while being a research fellow at the University of Bremen in 2005-2005. My project was part of Netcultures, an international comparative study funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

⁷ JKP is a Malay acronym that stands for Jawatankuasa Penduduk (Residents' Committee).

⁸ See <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/deliberate> (consulted Dec. 2007).

⁹ See <http://usj18.nwatch.net.my/article.cfm?id=68> (consulted Dec. 2007).