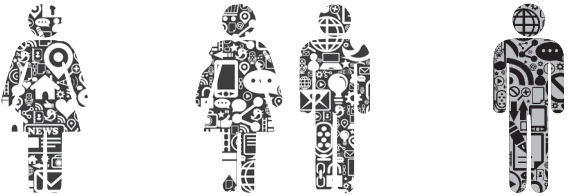


NETNOGRAPHY: REDEFINED



2nd Edition

Robert V Kozinets



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Boston



NETWORKED SOCIALITY

TECHNOCULTURE

Almost four decades before Facebook and Twitter, the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan predicted that the 'cool', participative and inclusive 'electric media' would 'retribalize' human society into a collectivist utopia (see, for example, McLuhan, 1970). McLuhan considered individualizing to be a negative societal trend, initiated by the rise of the phonetic alphabet, which we might consider an early social media invention. To McLuhan, privacy, nationalism and individualism were negative outcomes of various technologies that would eventually become things of the past. Electronic retribalization would rectify these problems, as lone and isolated human beings would become part of a vast collectivity that synchronized their minds and nervous systems through integrative interactive technologies.

Throughout history and into the present, many seers and theorists have predicted this technologically mediated 'coming together'. These predictions often have a mystical iridescence to them that connects them to thinkers such as Catholic philosopher-priest Teilhard de Chardin whose quote opens the former chapter. Predictions abound that intermingle utopia, apocalypse and the Godlike achievement of a world consciousness Supermind.¹ 'For Teilhard ... technologies are not simply human tools, but vessels of the expanding noosphere, the body and nervous system of a world consciousness striving to be' (Davis, 1998: 296). Kevin Kelly, Mark Pesce, Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg and Pierre Lévy are but a few of the influential contemporary scholars and writers adopting this notion that





technology will assist human evolution towards some sort of a positively utopian collective mind. Are the dense, in-the-moment interconnections of our mobile phones, Twitter and Facebook mutating our species into a de-individualized collective? Are social media inexorably transmuting us into a hivespecies?

Reading the work of these authors, we feel the leaden gravity of their technological determinism, the impression that technology is acting to shape our evolution as a species. However, this is certainly not the only framing we can place on the rise of Internet technology to its near-ubiquitous current status. Other scholars have assumed a technocultural view. At an early stage of the Internet's development, cultural theorists Constance Penley and Andrew Ross described a technocultural view as follows:

Technologies are not repressively foisted upon passive populations, any more than the power to realize their repressive potential is in the hands of a conspiring few. They are developed at any one time and place in accord with a complex set of existing rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, and, last, but not least, popular desires. (Penley and Ross, 1991: xiv)

The insight that technology does not determine human social behaviours, but that technologies and human beings are co-determining, co-constructive agents is a crucially important one to anthropologists who study science and technology. With our ideas and actions, we choose technologies, we adapt them, and we shape them, just as technologies alter our practices, behaviours, lifestyles and ways of being. As E. Gabriella Coleman (2010: 488) writes in her review of digital ethnographies in anthropology, wherever people communicate and deploy these technologies

there will be circulations, reimaginings, magnifications, deletions, translations, revisionings, and remakings of a range of cultural representations, experiences, and identities, but the precise ways that these dynamics unfold can never be fully anticipated in advance.

Our actions cannot ever entirely control the technologies that we use. There are always unintended side effects (such as global warming resulting from mass global industrialization). The way that technology and human cultures interact is a complex dance, an interweaving and intertwining of actants.

Technologies of every type constantly shape and reshape our bodies, our places, our institutions and our social identities. Simultaneously, technologies are endlessly shaped to our needs. Understanding this transformative interconnection makes us accountable for particular and general contexts – specific times and places, distinctive rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, practical and popular uses, as well as fears, hope, ambitions, ideologies and dreams. A thorough understanding of these concepts requires ethnography of both online and technology-enabled physical spaces, such as



homes and workplaces, and even human bodies in interaction and motion. Fields including anthropology, sociology, education, communications, health and addiction, food studies, media studies, management, geography and sexuality research have begun to use netnography to study and unpack the rich significance of new, technologically mediated social behaviours as they are presented through online communication.

For anthropologists, there is a growing corpus of 'ethnographic approaches to digital media' scholarship that Coleman (2010) divides into broad and overlapping categories. Considering ethnographies of 'digital media' to include ethnographies related to 'a wide range of nonanalog technologies, including cell phones, the Internet, and software applications ...', Coleman (2010: 488) surveys the following three areas:

1. Cultural Politics: ethnographies concerning 'how cultural identities, representations, and imaginaries' are 'remade, subverted, communicated and circulated through individual and collective engagement with digital technologies.' Included in this category are 'digital ontologies' that look at a cultural group's digital productions as a map of their 'overall structure of priorities and issues' (Srinivasan, 2006: 510); examinations of how online social experiences relate with topics of identity, ethnicity and race (e.g., Nakamura, 2007); studies of the digital divide (e.g., Ito et al., 2005); and studies about how technologies such as smartphones help to extend sociality and kin networks (Horst and Miller, 2006).
2. Vernacular Cultures: ethnographies examining different phenomena, genres, and groups 'whose logic is organized significantly around, although not necessarily determined by, selected properties of digital media'. Included in this category are ethnographies of software hackers and developers (e.g., Coleman, 2009), digital activism (e.g., Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010), government surveillance (e.g., Morozov, 2009), 'informational capitalism' involving technology workers (e.g., Biao, 2007) and technology's toxic after-effects (e.g., Maxwell and Miller, 2008), as well as linkages between digital media and language, ideologies, change, informality, virtuosity, revitalization, play and morality (e.g., Jones and Schieffelin, 2009).
3. Prosaics: ethnographies which look at 'how digital media feed into, reflect, and shape other kinds of social practices' and in so doing illuminate 'how the use and production of digital media have become integrated into everyday cultural, linguistic, and economic life'. This category uncovers people's lived experiences with digital media; the conditions under which they are made, altered and deployed; their genres; and their material and ideological functioning. For example, it includes studies of digital journalists (Boyer, 2010), digital piracy (e.g., Larkin, 2008), digital media influences on perception and awareness (e.g., Wesch, 2009), affect and addiction (e.g., Chan, 2008), how various places and spaces sustain virtual technologies and spaces (e.g., Fuller and Narasimhan, 2007), and how digital technologies magnify the speed, spread and exploitation potential of contemporary capitalism around the world (e.g., Schull, 2010).

Considered as a body of work, these studies cover a wide swath of contemporary human engagement with technology. Although some of this work is recognizably netnographic, such as Daniels' (2009) study of racism online, much of it expands the



scope of investigation to consider human experiences with technology as broadly as possible. Online and offline engagements with the gamut of digital media have become their focal point. Netnography, as we shall discuss in upcoming chapters, is different from digital anthropology in that it has as its core the analysis of data collected through participant-observation over the Internet, including the use of laptops, tablets, mobile communication devices and their various applications. However, netnographic investigations should engage with the relevant findings of digital anthropology in order to strengthen our comprehension of the larger networks in which all online social experiences are embedded. This chapter seeks to open and broaden netnography's focus, while also overviewing and providing essential theoretical background to serve as its base.

Media Have Never Not Been Social

Researchers have been curious and interested in the effect of technological mediation on communications since the radically disruptive introduction of the telegraph and, later, the telephone. So, almost from the beginning of the Internet in the early 1970s, scholars had been studying its effects on social relations in various ways. Alongside the important and insightful observational work of Hiltz and Turoff (1978), early work on online social interaction was based on social psychological theory and experimental tests. This was early media theory: it studied the medium and media of communication. Some of this work hypothesized that, considered as media, online media were too 'thin', or socialcue impoverished, to serve as a foundation for meaningful social activity (e.g., Daft and Lengel, 1986). Because textual online social experiences originally missed the immediacy of voice inflection, accents, facial expressions, directions of gaze, gaze-meeting, posture, body language and movement, and touching, they were theorized to be less meaningful than face-to-face social experiences, and their relationships to be shallower and less satisfying (e.g., Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Short et al., 1976; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1992, 1995).

The early Internet environment was viewed as a social environment with leery suspicion and cynicism. It was not a social place, but a context that created task-oriented, 'impersonal', 'inflammatory', 'cold' and 'unsociable' interactions (Kiesler et al., 1984, 1985; Rice and Rogers, 1984; Rice and Love, 1987; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986; Walther, 1992: 58–9). When these suppositions were tested in laboratories or in workplaces under highly controlled scientific conditions – contexts that also may have helped spawn a task-oriented and coldly unsociable environment for social interactions – they were borne out to levels of statistical significance.

Related to this was another set of theories that posited a 'status equalization effect'. Hierarchy was the name of this game. How, they asked, could authority be maintained in the anonymous and chaotic social space of online communication? It was hypothesized that if you could not tell your boss or your boss's boss



from your underling then this, added to technologically induced anonymity, would result in a reduction of social differences. Across the barriers of class, gender and age, people would simply communicate in an uninhibited way without the need to dominate. People would also be more individualistic, more self-absorbed and narcissistic – favouring a culture of me, myself and I (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Sproull and Kiesler, 1986). Many of these behaviours were already observable in online interactions, such as ‘flaming’, or insults, petty discursive wars with rude, crude, hostile, aggressive and outright cruel language as well as the use of profanities. WTF? Scientists came to the world of online social interaction with ideas that technology-based interactions undermined, even subverted, the existing social structure.

And this may be where Victor Turner’s notion of *communitas* comes in. For Turner believed, in common with many of the other anthropologists we have already discussed in these pages, that there was something to be gained by distancing his terminology from the more popular term ‘community’; he expressly rejected its connotation as a geographical proximity ‘area of common living’ (Turner, 1969: 96). Instead *communitas* is a deeply human connection. *Communitas* is ‘an essential and generic human bond, without which there would be no society’ (Turner, 1969: 97). *Communitas* is a sense of being equal with your comrades, having kin, being a member of a group, and also an internalized sense of membership as connection, a way to fulfil needs for belonging, affiliation, acceptance and love. Turner saw *communitas* as linked with liminality, with the grey nether regions that lay inbetween social positions in a rite of passage, as a force of anti-structure, disorder, disruption and chaos. These transformative forces become absorbed by, or at least alternate with, forces of social order, of structure, of the ‘hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions’ (Turner, 1969: 96), worlds of authority, elders, rules, laws, traditions, values, shamings, feeling inferior, status, feeling superior, punishments, conditioning, enforcement and sometimes brutal acts of ‘religious’ ‘education’. This is *communitas* and hierarchy, structure and anti-structure, chaos and order, played out on a human cultural scale.

Keep Turner’s ideas in mind. For as soon as work emerged which empirically examined how people were actually using technologies, these early but no less social media (and is there ever a time when media had not been social?), we found that people were able to ‘develop an ability to express missing nonverbal cues in written form’ (Rice and Love, 1987: 89). Symbols, emoticons, avatars, moving gif files, intentional misspellings, corrections and capitalization – all are examples of the successful human struggle to overcome the limitations of allegedly ‘thin’ media (Danet, 2001; Sherblom, 1988: 44; Walther, 1992, 1995). So the lived world of people, when we peered into it using data from early Internet users, rather than simulated users in a lab, began to demonstrate the emergence of personally enriching social worlds well before the clever avatars of Second Life, the photo albums of Facebook, and the detailed professional



profile pages of LinkedIn. 'The characterizations of CMC [computer-mediated communications] born from experiments on groups seem contradictory to the findings of CMC in field studies' concluded Walther (1992: 53). For the most part, social cues and thin media did not hold up outside of one-off experiments in the lab. The reality of online social experience was not thin, but thick. It was social, long-term, long tail, complex, processual and evolving. It showed human beings adopting to technological limitations in their social experience, and developing adaptations that enhanced it, sometimes in novel ways.

Initial concerns that Internet use might corrode groups, families and community life are asserted and contradicted in pendulum fashion, with significant minorities holding, in surveys, that this is true for them (Fox and Rainie, 2014). On the other hand, surveys as early as the year 2000 – the Dark Ages before blogging and social media as we know it – revealed that people believed the Internet enabled them to keep in touch more effectively with their friends and family, and even to extend their social networks. The fact that people positively viewed email, bulletin boards, and the few other affordances of the age validates the immense value simply of the power to connect with others and share communications with them, even if it was primarily written text. *Communitas*. We hunger for it. We strive for it. We flock to it.²

We value social capital as well. As a result of their study of the impact of online communities on social capital and involvement in local communities, Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001: 507) suggested that 'the longer people are on the Internet, the more likely they are to use the Internet to engage in social-capital-building activities'. We can see some of these larger social capital building processes highlighted in more focused studies of smaller communities. Valenzuela and colleagues (2009) surveyed over 2600 Texan students and found significant, positive, but relatively small relationships between their Facebook use and their life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement and political participation. Mathwick and colleagues (2008) studied a software forum's peer-to-peer problem-solving community and found norms of voluntarism, reciprocity and social trust underlying the community's employment of social capital. Working in a German venture capital context, Vasileiadou and Missler-Behr (2011) find different forms of social and relational capital being effectively deployed in a variety of virtual social interactions. Although their findings suggest small positive correlations between social capital and social media use, Valenzuela et al. (2009) warn us that social networks are not panaceas for the generational disengagement from civic duty decried by Robert Putnam (2000) among others. Yet, somehow, viewed over time and combined with survey results, the weight of evidence seems to tip us towards the notion that people's social lives are enhanced by online contact more than they are diminished.

Ethnographic and naturalistic observations of people's interweaving of Internet communications with their social behaviours have been critically important to our accurate understanding. Examining how people actually deploy communications technologies in their own social worlds over the long term, as they increasingly



use them to spin webs that meaningfully interconnect, turns out to be quite different from what people were doing in short-term situations with the technologies in laboratory situations. Like large stones dropped into lake water, when information and communications technology is cast into the world, it ripples outward, manifests in many ways, begetting different forms of sociality that continue to spread outwards in their influence. There are definite patternings in these forms. Effective netnography contains theory that is aware of these subtle and complex arrangements. We now continue to discuss additional arrangements and configurations in this world of online sociality.

SOCIAL MEDIA BETWEEN THE COMMUNAL AND THE COMMERCIAL

Burning Man is a countercultural grassroots happening that grew out of the Cacophany Society in San Francisco, California, becoming first a happening and then an internationally recognized super-event. In the early days of the Burning Man Project, as it is often called by its organizers, event co-founder Larry Harvey used to compare the event to the Internet. The comparison evokes the social media and pre-corporate colonization-like aspects of the early Internet. Like the Internet, Burning Man consists of many individual, decentralized parties. Like the Internet, Burning Man is uncensored and authentic. Like the Internet, Burning Man is hypertextual and intertextual – it connects to many other things: art, design, science, high technology, spirituality, dance, primitivism, utopianism, polytheism, polyamory, Marxism, the survivalist movement, and almost any other social group or gathering containing a whiff of social movement about it. Like Burning Man, the motivation for social media participation can often include interest in social change enacted through involvement in major collective projects. And through this involvement, participants in both worlds hope to learn from and commune with an interesting diverse group of other people who are currently unknown to them, but who come in a similar spirit of giving. *Communitas*. We hunger for it, online and deep down in our bodies. We go out in the desert looking for it.

A great sacred quality somehow seems to descend in the miraculously commonplace selfless acts occurring during Burning Man, such as the first moment someone you have never seen before, someone costumed up like a weird clown just for fun to make you smile, runs up to you while you are parched and dry in the 107 degree Black Rock desert heat and hands you a cool blue popsicle. The process channels ancient and sacred *communitas*, almost as a palpable force. Yet we might wonder if acts of *communitas* may be the hardest to transfer over to Internet exchanges.

‘Abstractions appear as hostile to live contact’ wrote Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (Turner, 1969: 141). The person who would try to do good to another person ‘must do it in Minute Particulars; General Good is the plea of the Hypocrite and the



Scoundrel' said William Blake (Maclagan and Russell, 1907). It may be that some physical quality inheres in direct, embodied, human contact that we do not want to surrender, for to abdicate this 'immediatism', as Sufi philosopher Hakim Bey (1994) calls it, this embodiment of human being as contact between co-located human bodies, is to abandon something vital and essential about our humanness. Perhaps, also, there is some quality immanent in the gift itself. It may be that *communitas* inheres in the generous and selfless act of sharing, whether online or in person. Perhaps it is the gift which breaks us out of the confining and isolating bonds of individuality and selfishness that we tend to associate with modern society and its capitalist marketplaces. Perhaps the gift frees us to emerge into the wider world of creativity and contribution that we still link with communal and social ideals.

The futurist Marina Gorbis sees exactly the same sort of tension between the social and the commercial enacted in the world of social media. She envisions a future that she calls the 'socialstructured' world 'as a way to build a better future by de-institutionalizing production, infusing social ties and human connectedness into our economic life, [and] in the process redefining established paradigms of work, productivity, and value' (Gorbis, 2013: 208). She draws upon a long tradition of theorists, from Ferdinand Tönnies to Lewis Hyde, who have separated the social logics of belonging, togetherness and sharing from those of marketplaces and transactions.

Although most scholars recognize communities as extremely diverse, a certain type of community has often been held up as an ideal. This communal ideal can be characterized as a group of people living in close proximity with mutual social relations characterized by caring and sharing. Tönnies ([1887] 1957) evoked this ideal in his notion of 'Gemeinschaft,' ... The origin of this caring, sharing communal ideal is in the deep trust and interdependence of family relations. Markets are different. The ideal market is seen as more of what Tönnies (1957) termed a 'Gesellschaft' type of phenomenon; it provides more formal, contractual, socially distanced relations. These relations are transactions-based and occur for the purpose of exchange (Weber [1922] 1978; Williamson 1975). In market transactions, the object is to increase one's advantage, to get more than one gives. To simplify the contrast, ideal communities are about caring about and sharing with insiders while ideal markets are about transacting with outsiders. Although both involve power relations and although they are interrelated or embedded in one another (see, e.g., Biggart 1989; Frenzen and Davis 1990; Granovetter 1985), marketplace exchanges focus more than communal exchanges on monetizing the exchange value of goods and services, and extracting excess value, or profits, from transactions. Throughout human history, markets have generally been constrained to particular places, times, and roles, and largely kept conceptually distinct from other important social institutions, such as home and family. With the rise of industrialization and postindustrialization, however, the influence of the market has increasingly encroached upon times, spaces, and roles previously reserved for communal relations. As the self-interested logics of the market have filtered into communal relations, they have been accused of increasingly undermining the realization of the caring, sharing, communal ideal. (Kozinets, 2002b: 21-22)



Along with a number of other scholars, Gorbis (2013: 3–6) believes that social media are creating a new kind of network or relationship-driven economy, where individuals join forces in order to create and share knowledge, services and even products that existing institutions such as corporations, governments and educational establishments are unable or unwilling to provide. According to Gorbis, these technologies are helping individuals create groupings around interests, identities and shared personal challenges. Social structuring is a process of moving away from the depersonalized world of ‘institutional production’ – Big Business, Big Government, and Big Education – into a new economy of social connection and social rewards (ibid.: 3). She sees the new social media technologies as enabling people to coexist simultaneously in both market and social economies and links this idea to philosopher Lewis Hyde’s notion of ‘the Commerce of the Creative Spirit’ (ibid.: 202–203).

In *The Gift*, Hyde (1979) recounts how the inspiration of the artist is widely perceived to be a gift. For inspiration to be maintained, the artist feels the desire, the need, and even the compulsion to make the work and then offer it to an audience at little or no profit: ‘The gift must stay in motion ... So long as the gift is not withheld, the creative spirit will remain a stranger to the economics of scarcity ... [whether it is] salmon, forest birds, poetry, symphonies, or Kula shells ... to bestow one of our creations is the surest way to invoke the next’ (ibid.: 146). Hyde counsels us to give our gifts away, and perpetuate the magic circle of community. Yet, although all cultures and all artists have felt the tension between the moral economy of gift exchange and the transactional pressures of the marketplace, there have been some unique aspects to modern capitalism. Hyde finds, for instance, the exploitation of the arts in modern capitalism to be ‘without precedent’ and their ‘high finance’ approach to create a commodification that diminishes creativity and turns arts into industry (ibid.: 158).

Drawing on Hyde’s work, media scholars and theorists Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Josh Green also link their ideas about media creation to British historian E.P. Thompson’s (1971) notion of the ‘moral economy’. Their book, *Spreadable Media* (Jenkins et al., 2013), sensitively and adroitly traces the many complications arising from corporate, group, and individual negotiation of the hybrid gift-commercial space of social media. They chastise those who rhetorically embrace an ‘architecture of participation’ online. This stance can naively gloss over the conflict, choices and compromises that are often required of participants. Zwick et al. (2008), as well as Cova and Dalli (2009) provide critical views of the social media economy of free and exploited labour, casting them as a political form of Foucauldian govern-mentality, a self-disciplinarily fueled pathway to creating docile, duped and compliantly creative consumers (see also Andrew Keen’s 2007 *The Cult of the Amateur*). Wise from their long engagement with media fan communities, Jenkins et al. (2013: 55) certainly do not go this far. They do, however, caution that ‘it’s crucial not to diminish the many noncommercial logics governing the engaged participation of audiences online’ (Jenkins et al., 2013: 55).



Their advice is more about how not to kill, and how to resist theorizing the premature death of, the collective geese that keep laying social media's golden eggs.

In netnographic research my co-authors and I conducted on how word of mouth marketing was spread by bloggers in a mobile phone giveaway campaign, we identified in the patterns of blogger narratives the clear presence of a similar type of communal-commercial tension (Kozinets et al., 2010). In such social media-based marketing 'the consumer is required to be a type of consumer–marketer hybrid [and thus] the traditional social contract that maintains marketplace relationships at a distance from communities is violated, creating great tension' (2010: 83). This tension remains dormant in some contexts, but blooms into explicitness in other. A process of translation occurs as a result of the tension. Marketing messages are altered to become more believable, relevant and palatable to the particular group. As the marketplace interrupted the social experiences of social media users, participants felt compelled to translate and transform 'persuasion oriented, market-generated, sales objective-oriented "hype" [into] relevant, useful, communally desirable social information that builds individual reputations and group relationships' (ibid.).

A precautionary note is sounded by Campbell (2005) in his examination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) online communities. He depicts gay Internet portals openly courting the gay community online with promises of inclusion and an authentic communal experience. However, they also simultaneously reposition gays and lesbians in a commercial panopticon that places them under corporate surveillance. He wonders if 'all commercial portals purporting to serve politically marginalized groups beg the question of whether there can be a harmonious balance between the interests of community and the drives of commerce' (2005: 678; see also Campbell, 2004; Campbell and Carlson, 2002). These are central themes, of import to our understanding as corporate actors like the publicly traded Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter corporations' attempts to further their own interests by increasingly influencing and monetizing people's online social experiences.

On the other hand, Jenkins et al. (2013) describe the many ways that DIY and fan labour is self aware, taking pleasure, gaining capital and esteem and finding many sources of value from the economic outputs that they are contributing towards in social media. Seeing such labour as 'engaged' and even gift-like rather than exploited recognizes that participants 'are pursuing their own interests, connected to and informed by those decisions made by others within their social networks' (Jenkins et al., 2013: 60). Scholars who continue to see the media participant, including the 'engaged' and creative social media participant, as a passive or exploited dupe must confront the evidence that, at least for some people and in some circumstances, such participation provides a panoply of benefits, although these benefits may not include the strictly economic exchanges of the market economy.

Gorbis sees social media as the antidote, the bridge between the two worlds of the social and the commercial. Indeed, Gorbis' ideas are very closely related to



those of Yochai Benkler, Henry Jenkins and Manuel Castells, although she fails to cite any of them. Harvard University law professor Benkler (2006: 117) for instance finds that 'sharing is everywhere in the advanced economies' and that studies on social capital, trust and the social provisioning of public goods 'point to an emerging understanding of social production and exchange as an alternative to markets and firms'. As examples, he gives SETI and Slashdot. Benkler's conclusion is optimistic, arguing that the new network economy of social media provides us with an opportunity to alter the way that 'we create and exchange information, knowledge, a culture. By doing so, we can make the twenty-first century one that offers individuals greater autonomy, political communities greater democracy, and societies greater opportunities for cultural self-reflection and human connection ... [possibly resulting in] a true transformation toward more liberal and egalitarian societies' (Benkler, 2006: 473).

We can postulate a world where the Maker Movement, The Internet of Things and the proliferation of Artificial Intelligence, robots and bots take over much of industrial production and traditional work, and enormous economies of scope and scale enable massive amounts of things and services to be produced and provisioned by only a few people. The economics of the gathering, the Wikinomics that Don Tapscott and colleagues research and write about (e.g., Moffitt and Dover, 2011; Tapscott and Williams, 2007), also lead to greater and greater efficiencies of scale, and the scope of Chris Anderson's (2008) 'long tail' economies provides more diversity in the marketplace than ever before. Thus, as Gorbis, Hyde, Benkler and these other authors advance, we may increasingly need to turn our collective attention to questions of how the commerce of the Creative Spirit will play out for us in science, government, media, education, arts, health, tourism, consumption, or any other social domain.

VARIETIES OF ONLINE SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

We can conceptualize different types of online social experience partially by relating them to the type of site in which we find them. For instance, we might expect a social networking site such as Facebook to provide a different type of online social experience than that of a forum like 4Chan, a blog like Mashable, a tagging service like Reddit, or a fan wiki like *The Big Bang Theory*. In the last edition of this book, and based upon earlier work (Kozinets, 1998, 1999), I theorized a more functional 'ideal type' typology of different forms of online sociality, which I now revise and update as represented in Figure 2.1.

This updated typology presumes that the nature of online social relations varies from the intensely personal and deeply meaningful – i.e., *Gemeinschaft*-like caring and sharing communal forms – to those that are quite superficial, short-lasting and relatively insignificant – and more *Gessellschaft*, market-and-transaction oriented exchange. They can also vary from those that are oriented strictly around a

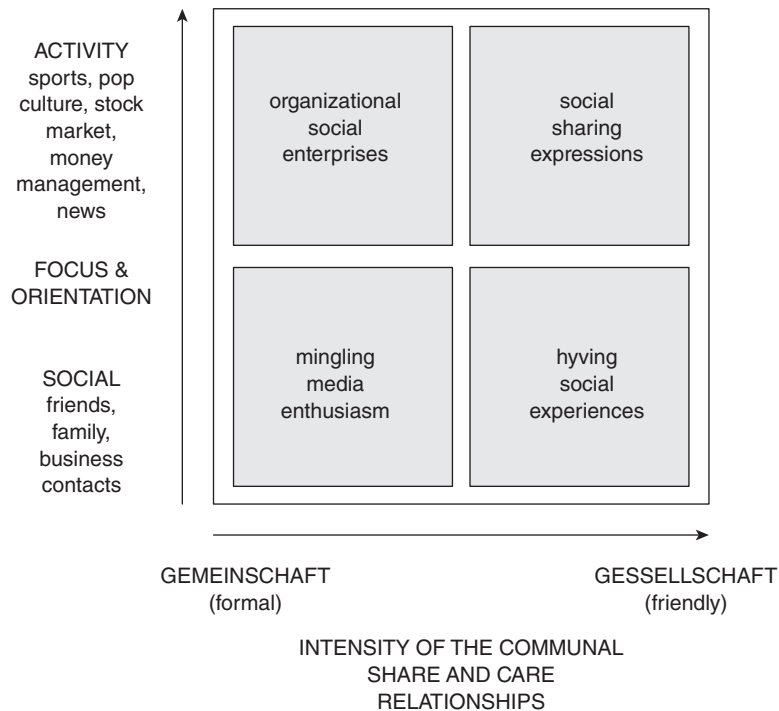


Figure 2.1 Four ideal types of online social experience in sites

particular activity, such as hydroponic tomato cultivation or discussing *America's Got Talent*, or a location or destination, such as TripAdvisor, to those in which a unifying activity or interest is often completely irrelevant, such as on Facebook.

Although there seems to be a correlation between the type of online site and the type of online social experience (for example, Facebook providing predominantly interpersonal rather than activity-based experiences), there is by no means a perfect correlation. Any site, or type of site, can be used for any purpose. These purposes and exchanges may vary over time even with the same individuals on the same online site. Rather than to suggest any sort of simplistic determinism, when we have found so much evidence to the contrary of such principles, the intention of the classification is to draw the netnographer's attention to the type of social experience rather than to propose any technologically overdetermining structural effects of a site, app, or software form on social actors' agency. The four proposed ideal types of online social experience are mingling, bonding, sharing and organizing. I explain each type of experience in turn.

An experience that one has online in interaction, information reception, or exchange that are socially weaker or only for business or necessity, such as the proverbial person-clerk interaction at a retail checkout counter, might be known as a *mingling media enthusiasm*. Twitter experiences can often be like this, and



Facebook or LinkedIn is like this when we meet new people or have the opportunity to find or otherwise electronically experience other people. Particular virtual worlds, chat-rooms, and certain gamespaces provide this mingling social experience. They tend to satisfy people's relatively superficial, short-lived and weak tie 'relational' and 'recreational' need; they are consocial more than communal experiences.

Online social experiences that can create strong social ties between members, resulting in more meaningful or longer-lasting relationships, but where the participants are not firmly or lastingly focused on a shared or unifying focal activity, purpose, project or interest, might be termed *hyving social experiences*. Social networking sites such as Facebook, dating sites like OKCupid, communications apps like WhatsApp or Tinder, and virtual worlds like Second Life can often provide this type of online social experience and fulfil their members' relational needs.

A third type of online social experience is online interaction for the express purpose of sharing targeted information, news, stories, images, photos, jokes, expertise, information and techniques about some particular activity or interest which is the *raison d'être* of the interaction. These are *sharing social expressions*. Many blogs like TMZ or the Huffington Post, wikis such as Wikia or Wiktionary, newsgroups such as alt.coffee, website forums, social content rating and tagging services like Digg or Reddit, photo and video-sharing communities like Instagram, Vine or YouTube would all be loci of such sharings. They offer participants and readers a bank of shared content, but not necessarily the promise of a deep engagement in social relationships. The modes of interaction on these communities are predominantly consocial and friendly, consisting of broadcast-to-person, shared, rebroadcast or peer-to-peer based exchanges of content and information.

Finally, we have online social experiences that offer a chance to create social ties between people as well as focusing on sharing information and intelligence about some central, unifying interest, project, theme or activity. These experiences I term *organizational social enterprises*. Although blogs, wikis, Social networking sites (SNS) interest groups and other forms of online gatherings certainly can and often are used as *organizational social enterprises*, I have seen many more of these experiences grow from microblogs such as Twitter, meeting sites such as Meetup.com or the group function of sites such as LinkedIn, website forums, evolved zines such as Boing Boing, user-based creative communities such as devoted websites and projects such as *Star Trek Phase II* (see Kozinets, 2007). A good example is provided by open source software experience in all of its various manifestations, such as slashdot (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt, 2006). The mode of interaction in these gatherings is supportive, informational, content-based and also can be relational. Our understanding of these different social types can now be enhanced by a deeper understanding of the types of social structures that pervade the Internet.



Analysing Social Network Structures

An interesting and useful technique to incorporate into netnography for understanding these types of social relations is social network analysis. It is neither necessary nor would it be desirable for all netnographers to adopt social network analysis techniques in their studies. However, netnographers would be wise to familiarize themselves, at least on a basic level, with social network analysis techniques, procedures and general research findings. This is especially important for the many scholars who are conducting what I will, in later chapters, refer to as Digital Netnographies. Although we will overview the technique in more detail in the next chapter, a fundamental understanding of the technique is useful for understanding some of the concepts and theory that this chapter will proceed to present.³

Social network analysis is an analytical method that focuses on the structures and patterns of relationships between and among social actors in a network (Berkowitz, 1982; Wellman, 1988). In social network analysis, there are two main units of analysis. The social actors we are interested in are called the 'nodes' and the relation between them is called the 'tie'. A network is composed of a set of actors connected by a set of relational ties. The actors can be persons, teams, organizations, technologies, non-human actors like bots, ideas, messages, products, cities or other concepts. Examples of ties would include sharing information, an economic transaction, transfer of resources, shared associations or affiliations, sexual relations, physical connections, sharing ideas or values, and so on (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). A group of people who are connected by particular social relationships, such as family kinship, friendship, working together, a shared hobby or common interest, or exchanging any sort of information, can be considered to be a social network.

Social network analysis has its foundations in sociology, sociometrics and graph theory, and in the structural-functional line of 'Manchester anthropologists, who built on both of these strands to investigate the structure of "community" relations in tribal and village societies' (Scott, 1991: 7). Social network analysis thus deals in relational data and, although it is possible to quantify and statistically analyse these relations, network analysis also 'consists of a body of qualitative measures of network structure' (Scott, 1991: 3). There is, thus, a very natural relationship between a structural approach to ethnography, or netnography, and the approach of social network analysis.

Over the last 35 years, the social network analysis approach to research has grown rapidly in sociology and communication studies, and has spread to a range of other fields.

Social networking analysts seek to describe networks of relations as fully as possible, tease out the prominent patterns in such networks, trace the flow of information (and other resources) through them, and discover what effects these relations and networks have on people and organizations. (Garton et al., 1999: 75)



Social network analysis is structural. Its unit of analysis is the relationship, and what it finds interesting in relationships are their patterns. There is, therefore, considerable overlap with certain kinds of netnography, which can be focused upon relationships and the structured patterns of exchanges of things like language, symbols, discourse, values, power, and other symbolic and material resources. Social network analysts consider the various resources that are exchanged in communications between people online, and these can include communications which are textual, graphical, animated, audio, photographic or audiovisual, and can comprise sharing information, discussing work-related rumours, sharing advice, giving emotional support or providing companionship (Haythornthwaite et al., 1995). Netnographers also consider those resources, viewing them in and from various and overlapping contexts, which might include as multiple and shared sources of significance and also as bearers of interpersonal connection.

There are many opportunities for synergies between the structural analysis of social networks and the more identity-, story-, discourse- and meaning-centred analyses of netnography. Consider as a nuancing adjunct to the mingling, bonding, sharing and organizing functional types of online social experience, the following ways to think about the social structures present within the social media forms that netnographers aim to understand and explain. We consider several important and influential ideal types of online social experiences in the following section.

SOCIAL UNIVERSES AND NETWORK ARCHETYPES

There are many ways to conceptualize the universe of social media forms in order to gain a basic view of the variegated types of connection that people have with one another online. Two essential and interrelated ways that people connect with one another are socially and through topics. In social network-based research that analysed the maps of thousands of different Twitter conversations and their related social exchange patterns, a 2014 Pew Internet report identifies six archetypal forms of network structure that emerged from the way people shared topics and messages with one another: polarized crowds, tight crowds, brand clusters, community clusters, broadcast networks and support networks (Smith et al., 2014). These six distinctive structures are not intended to be exhaustive. However, they inform us about some of the various forms that online sociality can take, depending upon the topic of the conversation, the type of the connections between individual actors in the network, the information sources and other resources (for communication also leads to access) that are used, the precise kinds of computer, corporate, transactional and social networks that are involved, the leaders of the conversation, and the structure of the conversation.

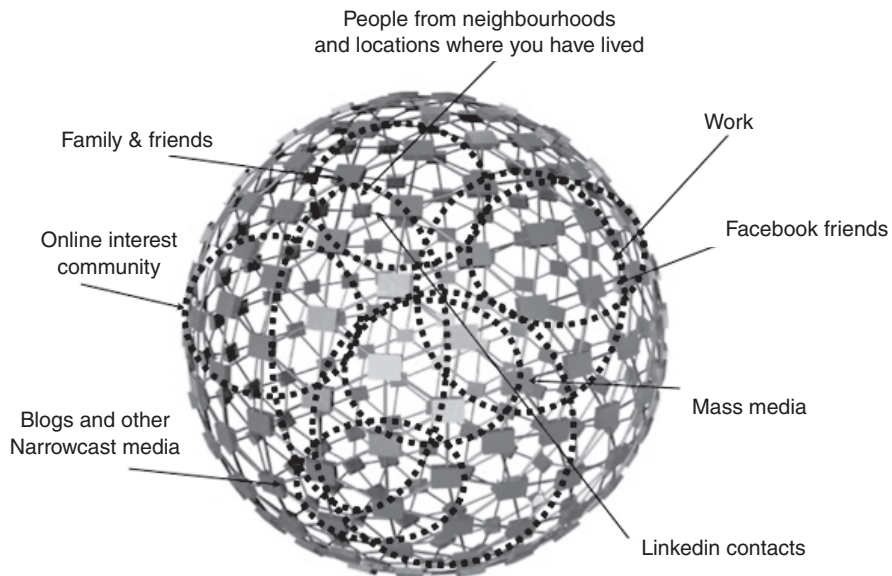


Figure 2.2 Your personal social network core

In Figure 2.2, I use these structures to think about the way that individuals can connect with one other. The centre of Figure 2.2 is a particular individual's online social network, which links them socially to friends, family and co-workers, many of whom they already know personally, but also more distantly to organizations and interest groups who they may not know in person.

Relationships in these communities can assume different structures and shapes depending upon the nature of these conversations and their different social experiences. These experiences vary in their social and consocial characteristics. They can be unified, fragmented, divided, polarized or clustered in their dispersion and arrangement, as we visualize them. The network becomes its visualization, and the visualization of networks can quickly be acted out on the human social stage, when that stage is online.

Two are highly centralized, appearing with hub and spoke lines. In the first, the lines go inwards, towards the broadcaster, for this is an audience model. It is the structure that people assume when they are audiencing something. They do it in groups, in couples and individually. Each is qualitatively different, of course, and requires a human interpretation, but they are also all an audience. They are all sharing information they see on the screen, treated with the voyeur's gaze, the screen gaze that my co authors and I (Kozinets et al., 2004) saw in ESPN Zone in retail themed Mag Mile Chicago circa 2002. Online, think of a powerful broadcast network like BBC World News. It has influence because it is being linked to by many individuals and groups, and then shared among them. They comment on



it in Twitter. Some have a lot of person-to-person interaction, and others do not. People can have many types of social connections as well as topical connections, and at many times the two will interact. Twitter tends to simplify so that we can see the basic structures. In reality, with other media like Facebook, we will likely see more complex hybrid forms of audience and network structure.

Figure 2.3 is a riff upon Smith et al. (2014), a reconceptualization that alters names, labels and even definitions while seeking to portray some dimensionalization and classification. This Figure offers a typologization on the theoretical ideal level of the complexity and diversity of interaction in the online universe of social experience. We can look to connect to resources like information, service, material connections, cultural resources, styles and identities for our identity projects, props for our life roles, brands to show where we belong. When we look for resources we can either become an audience, or we can ask for help. These two are collectively expressed, for they are common between individuals; they are the Audience and Customer Support Network forms. The following points describe these six forms trapped in two dimensions in Figure 2.3.

Resource Connections: Audience and Customer Support Networks

Audience networks possess a distinctive structure based upon the re-broadcasting of major news and media organizational information. The Twitter network forms into an audience shape when it re-tweets breaking news stories and the output of well-known media outlets and pundits. Most members of the Broadcast Network audience are not really conducting conversations between one another, which is why their level of intercommunication is low. But some are gathering through their audiencing, there is no doubt of this either.

So they are more than a network, acting, instead, as conduits. They themselves become like information distributors, intermediaries who bring the fresh news from on high, and then distribute it to their immediate network, socially. Instead of everyone buying a newspaper, or a specialty newsletter, or the various information sources people used to use, or everyone watching television, these people act as conduits and value-adding media re-broadcast channels. They transfer, and probably sometimes translate, news and information from major media outlets to their own more immediate and localized ones. The cynosure of all ears and eyes is the retweeting re-broadcaster. Smaller subgroups of densely connected people – which Pew's people termed 'subject groupies' – hang out repeatedly holding conversations with one another about the news.

Audiences can be very disconnected from one another. They link only to the hub news source. Yet there are others, some who form discussion groups based on the news, some who do this regularly. So there is no true ideal form, there are only tendencies.

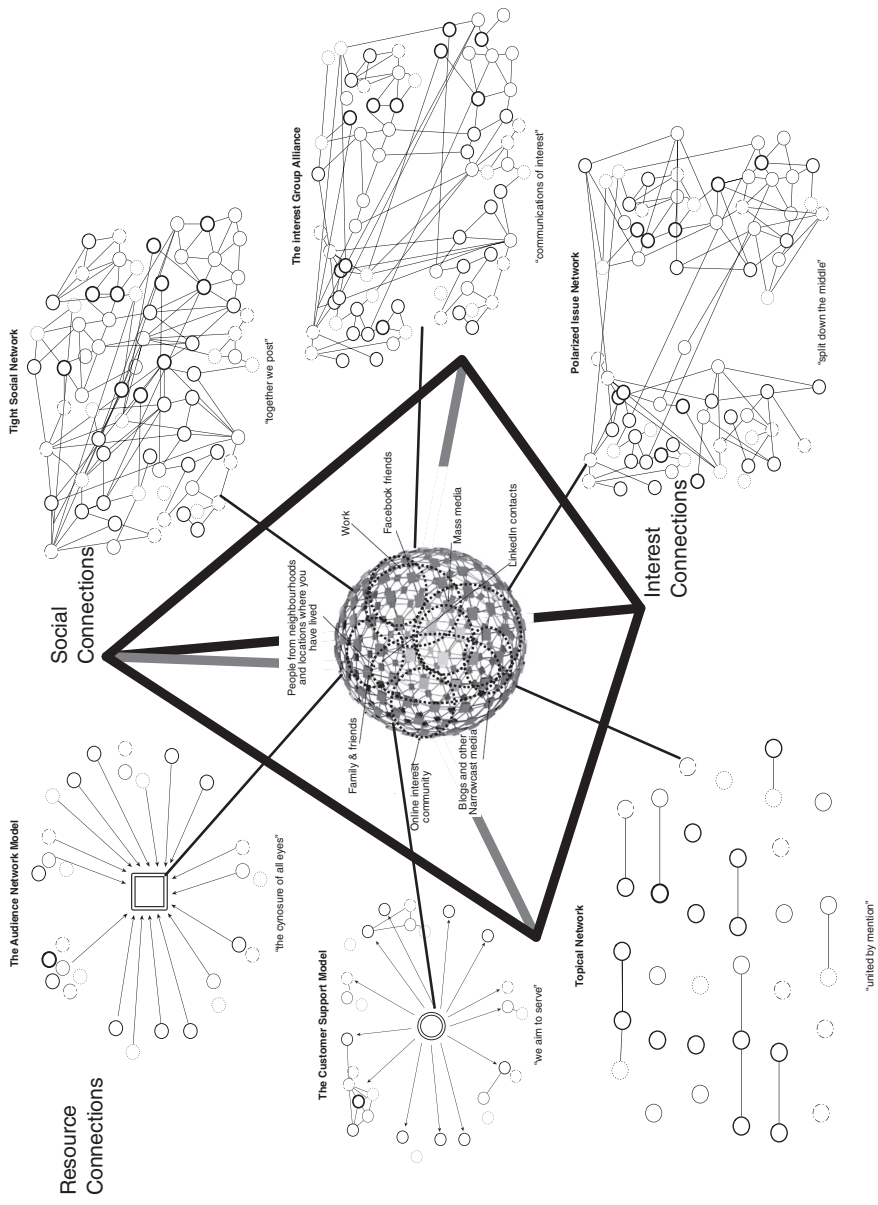


Figure 2.3 Social types of networks



And in this underdetermined tendency, the network assumes the shape we see in Figure 2.4. The one central account, the one information resource distributor, which is the agency like a popular YouTube blogger like Nardwuar, the BBC or CNN.com, becomes the hub, and the many spokes are audiences and individual audience members. They are all reaching in to contact Nardwuar, Bethany Mota, or whoever the resource is, and to then share it with their networks.

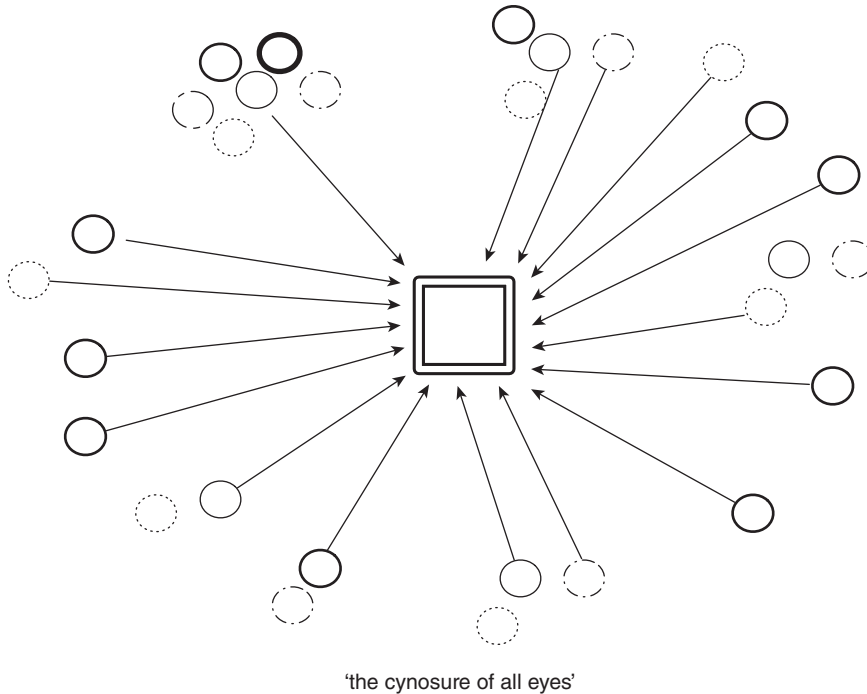


Figure 2.4 The audience network model

Customer support networks are also surveillance networks, where one central agent monitors and responds to the transmissions of network members. Customer support networks are the product of so-called 'social care' customer service and support exchanges. In this case, it is the company calling the person. Hello, I overheard you complaining about my company. Is there something bothering you about my company that I can help you with? The shape that is assumed as customer complaints lodged against major businesses become handled by corporate customer service representatives is the one we see in Figure 2.5.

The contacts are outbound. The one hub connects outward to the individuals it is monitoring. This form becomes increasingly important as government, businesses, and other groups such as non-profits and NGOs try to provide centralized services and support through social media and also to reach out very close and

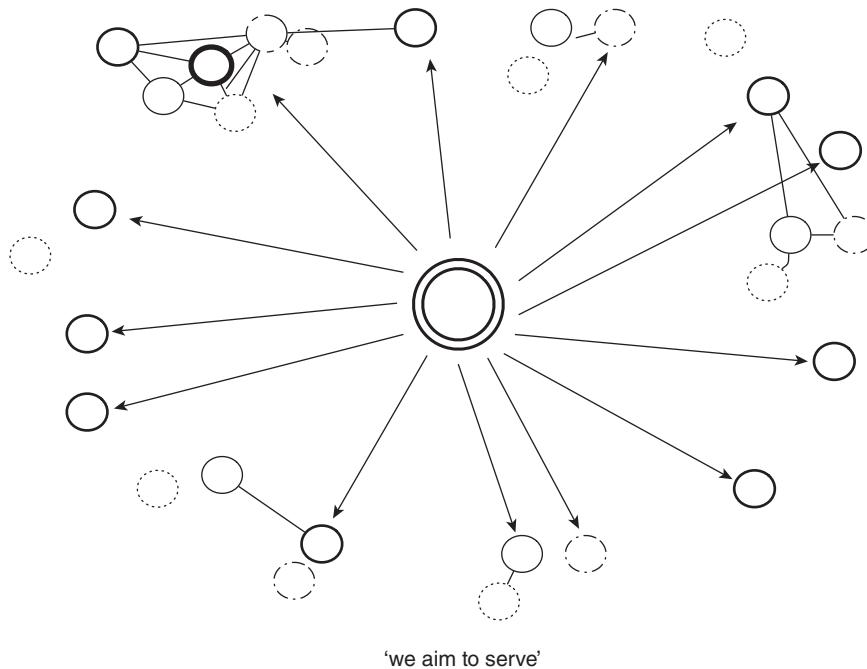


Figure 2.5 The customer support (and consumer surveillance) network

learn as much as possible about people, since data is inexpensive and easy to sort, and acting on it for fundraising, sales and volunteer networks is important and fairly easy to do now with social media.

Connections of Interest: Topical and Polarized Issue Networks

Another important source of connection is the sharing of particular interests. If I do not know you, and you do not know me, but we both use the same hashtag #JohnOliverForPresident, then we share something. If we know each other only through some topic, and that topic is very polarized, a type of us-versus-them arrangement exists where your beliefs determine very quickly whether you will feel comfortable on one side of this issue rather than the other. These connections are both full of mutual interest, as we will explore in the following sections.

Topical network cluster is the shape assumed by a social network when a non-interactive type of conversation occurs about the same topic, conducted by many disconnected participants (see Figure 2.6). This is the form assumed when established products and services, such as Apple technology products, and media and sports celebrities are discussed on Twitter. Examples would include Tweets about things such as a goal in World Cup soccer, or the introduction of a new iPad by Apple. The larger was the population discussing such a topic, the less likely that

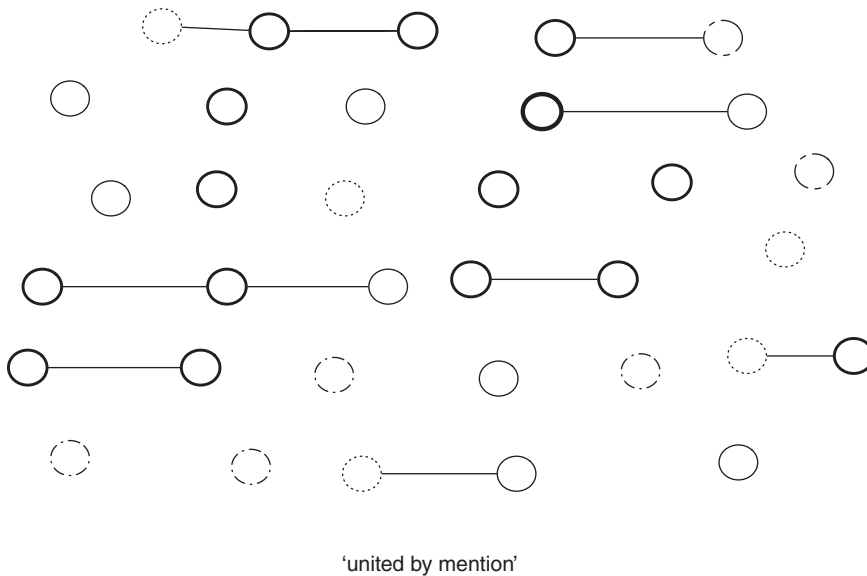


Figure 2.6 Topical cluster network

the participants were connecting to one another. This form stands in stark contrast to Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) theorized notion of the ‘brand community’ that brings people together through shared conversations about a brand. Instead, the participants in brand clusters broadcast information about a topic without really connecting in a communal way with one another. Often, this information is a simple re-broadcast (in this case a retweet) of corporate or institutional information, advertising or publicity. Unlike the participants in the tight or polarized crowd social form, they do not have much in the way of a continuing conversation with one another.

Polarized issue networks are connected, tight, and unified together; however, they are divided and partisan with one other large group (see Figure 2.7). They feature two large and densely interconnected groups that have little connection flowing between them. When topics were divisive and related to heated political subjects, such as European EU-led immigration policies, the social network assumed this form. As indicated by the slight interconnection between the groups, these groups do not argue directly with one another. Even though they are talking about the same topic, they ignore each other, like two large and independent continents, or they reference them mockingly, or mock their hashtags. Generally, they point to different web resources and use different hashtags. They build their own separate sets of resources. In the Pew study, liberal groups in the United States tended to link to mainstream media sources, while conservatives linked to a different set of resources. We could think about parallels among Facebook groups, blogs or websites.

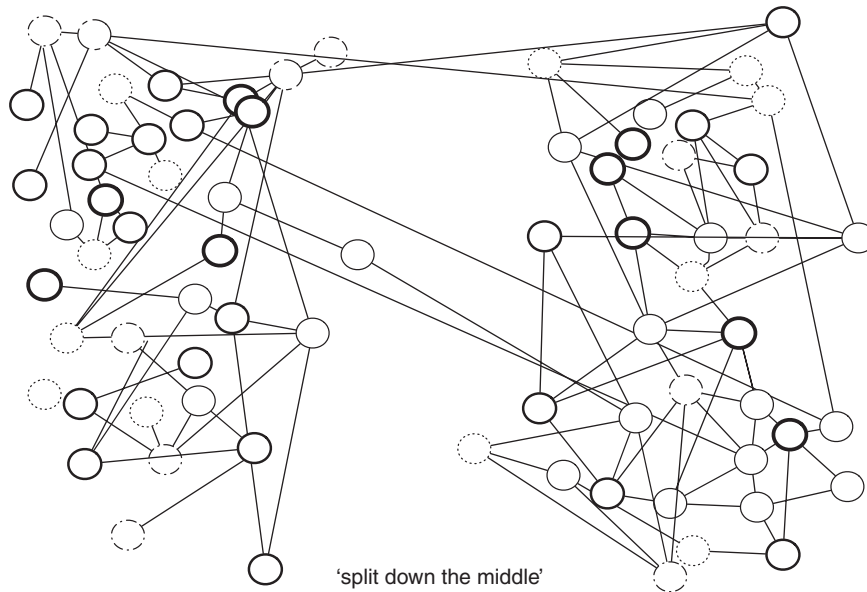


Figure 2.7 Polarized issue network

For example, conversations on the two-climate change websites ucsusa.com (the Union of Concerned Scientists) and skepticalscience.com also are likely to contain polarized crowds. The form is almost built into the Internet in some cases.

Social Connections: Tight Social Networks and Interest Group Alliances

Finally, we catch two of the most social of the social forms of online connection. When people want to interact with one another about something they all feel strongly about, then we can say that this is a tight network, with lots of interconnections, close and interlinked. Another way that this can happen, certainly not different or exclusive from tight social networks, but even possibly like a broadening out of that field, is that the group you are in is composed of people you know well, and that group is joined by others you don't know as well, and your group is linked to many other similar groups in many different locations which you do not even know. But you all share resources and you have opportunities to connect. We should be, in such cases, far more interested in the hierarchies and power-interest-resource access related structures of these arrangements. Rarely are they far from political and corporate interests and projects. Yet their emancipatory power, and enablement of activism and alternative ideologies is almost now without its sceptics.

Tight social networks are composed of the most highly interconnected people with very few isolated participants (see Figure 2.8). Tight crowds look much more like the

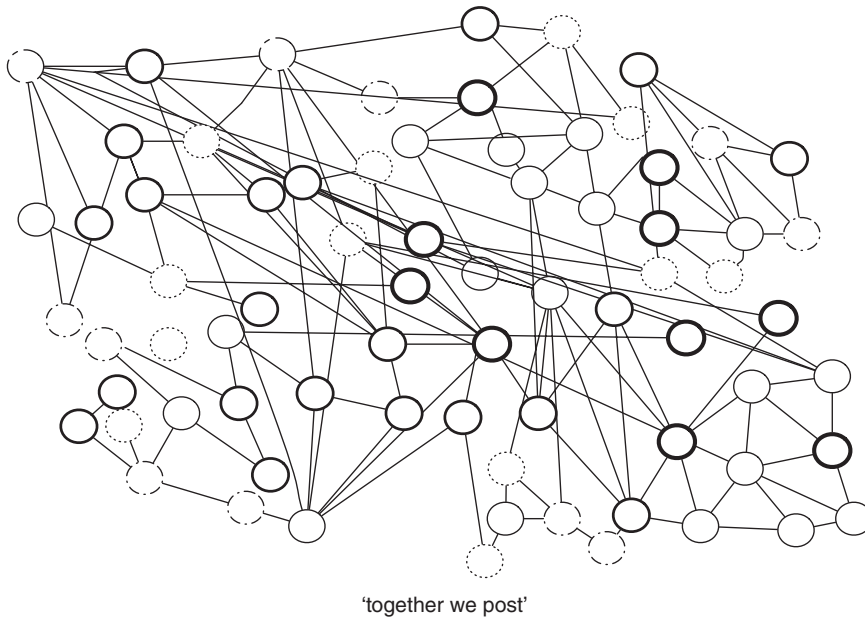


Figure 2.8 Tight social networks

traditional definition of 'online communities' than many of the other forms. They conduct large and open conversations about similar topics, responding to one another in a form that resembles the coherent threads of a newsgroup or forum. The ties between people indicate mass and widespread practices of sharing and mutual support provision. Online versions of conferences, professional topics, hobbies, interests, media and sports fan groups, and other subjects that attract large amounts of common interest assume the form of the tight social network. It mimics in many ways family, kinship and friend structures. A tight social network could also happen in particular workplaces. It may be that different networks have begun substituting for one another: work for religion, friends for family, hobbies for neighbourhoods, and so on.

Interest group alliance networks are more complex forms in which popular and widely shared topics unite multiple smaller groups. Each of these groups forms around a few social hubs (see Figure 2.9). Each of these hubs has its own largely separate audience, set of influencers and sources of information. They generally form for a little while when people have an interest in something, then they dissipate. Interest group alliance networks have multiple centres of activity. They are not as unified as the tight social network. However, a relatively small number of people are in those multiple centres, responsible for an inordinately disproportionate amount of social media activity. The conversations surrounding major global news stories, such as the recent coverage of the missing Air Malaysia flight 370 are the sort of interest groups that arise, bubbling up from the underground, to last for a while,

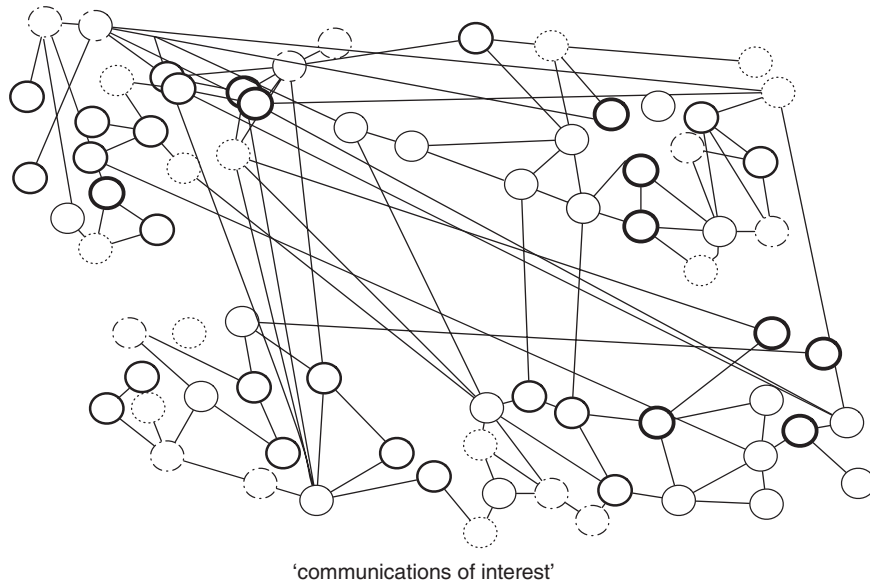


Figure 2.9 Interest group alliance network

their stories stoked by mainstream news and information outlets, national, local, global and different interested communities, such as travellers, Chinese expatriates, engineers, conspiracy theorists, and so on. Each of these groups has its own following, which is long lasting but shifts from topic to topic. This network is a portrait of that topic. Thus, revealing the multiplicity of conversations and viewpoints on a single topic shared through social media, a collection of medium-sized groups will manifest along with a fair number of isolates.

Several relevant patterns and ideas are present in this research to help us understand our topics. For example, studying a single large online site dedicated to climate change denial, such as Skeptical Science, may be sufficient in order to illuminate the topic of climate change denial sites, their functions, processes, structures and roles. Such a site would likely have much in common with interest groups or tight social networks.

However, to understand the ideological ecosystem in which such a site operates, you would likely need to broaden out to other sites or locations of information. You then might find the site partaking in the polarized issue form. It could be that the audience network model is being formed. Netnographers may need to shift their discernment of online experiences from notions of communities to those of particular network structures which govern repeat interactions that are topically, temporally and locally based. Whether we should be studying one single site, several interconnected sites, one person as the centre for many site-lines, or a set of many sites is another important research question. We will consider this question of research questions much further in Chapter 5.



Studying the findings of social network analyses such as this one tells us something about the structures we are dealing with. Knowing structures is very helpful to seeing the bigger picture. We, through these shapes and structures, see the continued, perhaps amplified, influence of major broadcast media. The continuing social media significance of corporate actors such as advertisers, public relations people, celebrity endorsers and customer service personnel is an indication about where the true power centres of the network reside.

The findings underscore hierarchy. Online ‘influentials’ are a powerful force given superpowers by the Internet. Everett Rogers identified the importance of the offline variety of the influential market agent years ago. But in the age of YouTube and Twitter it is virtually unlimited how many people one person can reach out towards.

Caroline Haythornthwaite (2005: 140) notes how technological change is merging with what she calls ‘social mechanisms’. Ongoing online social interactions conducted through forms such as interest group clusters and polarized issue networks can help turn strangers into friends. Trusting relationships, linked to strong social ties, are relevant to understanding and planning the online provision of many types of public information. Other uses include facilitating: peer exchanges such as couchsurfing’s hospitality exchange service; economic exchanges such as eBay’s trust-dependent online marketplace; social activism such as Greenpeace’s campaign against Nestlé; and political campaign management, such as the 2008 social media campaign for American President Barack Obama. Materializing within all of these forms, and all of the structures we have just examined, is a predominant tendency that our next section treats in some detail.

THE THEORY OF NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

As we continue considering theory about the Internet’s impact on social groupings, we must consider the research findings of University of Toronto Professor Barry Wellman. Wellman (2001: 2031) convincingly argues that ‘computer networks are inherently social networks’ and that, as computer networks proliferated, we find ourselves in a network society that is ‘loosely bounded and sparsely knit’. Wellman’s influential notions are based in his social network analyses of Internet and computer network data. They parallel, detail, enrich and inform the understanding of core concepts of culture, community, individuals and participation articulated above. Wellman, along with a range of colleagues, has been developing the idea of ‘networked individualism’ since before most scholars had heard about the Internet. His ideas have been adopted by other major Internet scholars such as the influential Internet philosopher, Manuel Castells (1996). Castells articulated further the potential for social media to enable and enhance people’s individualistic tendencies in the new society of technologically mediated networks that he viewed as the new basic unit of human society (Castells, 1996).

According to Wellman’s co-authored book with noted Internet scholar and researcher Lee Rainie (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 11), networked individualism is



a shift in people's social lives 'away from densely knit family, neighbourhood, and group relationships toward more far-flung, less-tight, more diverse personal networks'. Coming as a result of the social network, Internet and mobile 'revolutions', networked individualism means that 'people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members'. Members of a family may now act more like participants of multiple networks – only one of which is the family – than solely or primarily as members of that family. Their home may no longer be mainly a place where they congregate together as a family and pursue common family activities. Instead it becomes more of a base for their individual networking with the outside world, with each family member maintaining their own separate personal computer, mobile phone, set of contacts, and so on. Wellman's results and examples illustrate a shift to the sort of more fluid, open and individual-centred conceptions of culture and community espoused by anthropologists Amit and Rapport (2002) and reviewed in Chapter 1 of this book.

From Rainie and Wellman (2012: 12–18) we can reiterate the following 12 principles regarding networked individualism:

1. Networked individuals increasingly meet social, emotional and economic needs by tapping into dispersed networks of diverse associates instead of relying on more intimate connections with a relatively small number of core associates.
2. Networked individuals maintain partial membership in many networks or social groups and rely less on permanent membership in established groups.
3. Technology is accelerating the trend toward networked individualism by accelerating the growth, accessibility and diversification of these kinds of arrangements.
4. The Internet is the new neighbourhood, increasingly containing some of the networked individual's most important social contacts.
5. Networked individuals are empowered by the Internet to project their vision and voice to extended audiences, and invite them to become a part of their social world.
6. The lines between communication, information and action have become increasingly blurred as networked individuals use the Internet, mobile phones and social networks to instantly get information and act upon it.
7. Networked individuals move easily between relationships and social settings to construct their own complex identities, depending on their passion, beliefs, lifestyles, professional associations, work interests, hobbies, media habits, subcultural inclinations and other personal characteristics.
8. Less formal, more fluctuating and more specialized peer-to-peer relationships are more easily sustained at work, and the benefits of hierarchical boss-subordinate relationships are less obvious.
9. Home and work are far more intertwined than in the past.
10. The public and private spheres of life are far more intertwined than in the past.
11. New expectations and realities are emerging regarding the transparency, availability, and privacy of people.
12. In this new era of less hierarchy, more information and looser relationships, there is greater uncertainty than ever before about which information sources to believe and who to trust.



And yet, as with all matters human and social, there is balance. Although extremely helpful to recognize that the rise of the network society is enabling a form of networked individualism, we also must attend to the many ways that people are also using that technology to build new social forms. Our concluding section to this chapter provides a brief overview that reorients us in this connective direction.

TECHNOGENESIS

Technogenesis is the idea that human beings and our technologies coevolve together. Paleoanthropologists have long accepted that human beings coevolve with their tools, for example, bipedalism and more flexible opposable digitry coevolved along with tool manufacture and transportation (Hayles, 2012: 10). As we change our human, social and physical environment through technology, our technological environment also changes us, selecting people who are more capable of succeeding within it. Netnography is intellectually emplaced within this study of coevolving human-technology transformation and adaptation.

As more researchers conduct ethnographies of online social experiences, we learn just how much – and how little – these phenomena are changing society. Coleman's (2010: 489) comments are pertinent in this regard: 'The presumption that digital technologies are the basis of planetary transformations is widespread, but unfounded'. There is no question that these technologies and their online social experiences have massive scale and global reach, and that global financial capital, national intelligence agencies, and transnational corporations are deeply involved in their production, maintenance and inner workings. Yet it is also easy to overstate technology's impact in, say, 'producing a shared subjectivity or a wholly new sensorium, still less a life world that might characterize a vast population', such as with the use of the term 'digital native' (Coleman, 2010: 490).

Online sociality and consociality reveal both the 'modern' and the 'postmodern' condition: the constant appearance of flux, movement, speed, change and progress. We see this progress as technological change – a constant dynamic in our human world. New hardware, new software, new abilities to communicate, entertain, inform, broadcast, listen and learn. Our world has become one of never-ending adaptation, ever-increasing rates of change. Our netnographic investigations, although clearly cognizant of the reality that digital technologies 'have cultivated new modes of communication and selfhood; reorganized social perceptions and forms of self-awareness; and established collective interests, institutions, and life project' (ibid.), must also be sceptical of claims of widespread change and the autonomous and overdetermining power of technology and digital media. In some cases, as Miller and Slater (2000) discovered, digital technologies facilitate social reproduction, reinforcing a tendency to favour old and comfortable views of self and culture over novel ones. Sometimes, it may be that the forms of living change, but the ways of life remain the same.

Studies of online social experience reveal how our existing worlds of human relationships, work relationships and structures of power are reinforced, extended,



developed and changed. As technological systems change, human systems adapt, and institutional arrangements shift. Netnography has helped reveal how rating services, such as those of TripAdvisor, create a new accounting system online. Social media networks are assemblages that become plugged into extant social norms and systems that inspire trust and interpersonal connection; they can thus rapidly assume a role in decision-making that was previously accorded to institutional actors (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). Netnographies of social experiences online inform us about alterations in our core notions of self – the heart of the psychological atom. Lysloff (2003) is cautiously optimistic about the online social experience's expressionistic, exhibitionistic and existential impacts on our individual lives as human beings. She relates online experience to the postmodern notion of the fragmented, multiple self as well as to a Situationist sense of voice:

When we go online, the computer extends our identity into a virtual world of disembodied presence, and at the same time, it also incites us to take on other identities. We lurk in, or engage with, on-line lists and usenet groups that enable different versions of ourselves to emerge dialogically. The computer, in this way, allows for a new kind of performativity, an actualization of multiple and perhaps idealized selves through text and image. (Lysloff, 2003: 255)

Online social experiences possess a paradoxical quality that simultaneously liberates and constrains. They reveal tensions between powerful commercial structures and the communal forms that they promote. They tell us about the promotion of cultural transformation and the creation of change agents. Investigations expand into activism, as social media for social change become a matter increasingly on the transnational agenda. In their study of YouTube videos about the Israeli navy interception of a Gaza-bound flotilla, Sumiala and Tikka (2013) find that:

YouTube served as a platform where various operators had the opportunity to construct their meanings of reality and where the emphasis shifted from journalism-centered to user-centered, from monological to plural, from media houses to grassroots-level citizen journalists and/or activist groups, and from journalism of facts to journalism of attachment and events (see also Boczkowski, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2010) ... YouTube also gave ordinary people the opportunity to tell their own story, to raise their own individual voices, and to share their accounts of that reality on the same platform (p. 330).

As the following chapters will explore through multiple examples, the truth of many netnographies lies in this notion of maintaining, even amplifying, the power of the story. The way that stories intertwine with other stories in the process of people interconnecting with one another through online social experiences is a thread that runs through word of mouth to oral history and tradition to the study of folklore. Folklorist Anders Gustavsson (2013) studied memorial sites on the Internet for the deceased in Sweden and in Norway. He performs a culturally comparative netnography that uses a collection of individuals' online social expressions about



life-after-death and any supernatural beliefs surrounding death to comparatively analyse the two national cultures.

The messages posted on the websites are both shorter and less emotional in Norway than in the case of their counterparts in Sweden, who observe more a diffuse, general religiosity that reminds us of New Age modes of thought, in which individuals and the brightness of a coming existence have a prominent position. In Sweden people tend to regard what is new as being positive, to focus on cheerful events. Life's darkest moments can be given a brighter shape. In this respect, Norway can be seen as being more realistic in its preservation of older traditions and in not merely rejecting life's darker sides without further discussion. (Gustavsson, 2013: 113-114)

Because of the interactions of social media and the Internet, so many aspects of our life change – even the social experience of death. Manuel Castells (1996: 31) wrote that the novel form of the technologically mediated network society is 'fundamentally altering the way we are born, we live, we sleep, we produce, we consume, we dream, we fight, or we die'. It is as if the force of evolution itself has turned its full attention to the digital realm, more than happy to use technology to run human social lives in fast forward and thereby reveal to us an endlessly shifting new wardrobe of diverse social experiences. And whether those costumes are comfortable or awkward, the changes to our way of being strong or weak, easily outnumbered by embodied experiences or at times absolutely overpowering and intimidating, they require our careful study and critical attention.

In 1997, Grant McCracken wrote, in a creatively masterful gem called *Plenitude* (1997: 17–18), that 'Our diversity is the plenitude of society. What Plato found astounding was the sheer number of plants and animals in the world. This book is concerned with the sheer number and variety of social species'. McCracken (1997: 18) could have been predicting the future of social media companies, types of social experience, types of online experience, or types of interactions with people mediated by technology, when he wrote:

It overflows even the most agile of our classificatory schemes. We may enjoy a moment's illusion that the world has been restored to order. And then we look around us. Everywhere there is diversity, variety, heterogeneity. And we wonder: what set of categories can comprehend so many species of social life? What typology will embrace them all?

The Internet has increased social diversity, for it makes individualism, particularly patterned individualism, incredibly easy to share, especially in the current market-driven milieu's bottomless hunger for new styles, trends and change. These changes and styles, and the structures and sites that form them, cry out for taxonomizing. Historical thinking and analysis, the comparison of taxonomic forms of human practice and their evolution so vital to ethnography, have also thus far been largely absent from netnographies (including my own), perhaps because the field and what it deals with are still so very new. I would hope that upcoming studies, informed by this book, would rectify this sin of omission.



SUMMARY

Our discursive dive into extant theory on online sociality has taken us from cultural conceptions to archetypes of network structure. On the cultural side, we have moved from technoculture to technogenesis, through ethnographic approaches, sociality and cultural-communal hybridizations and divides. We conceptualize four ideal types of online social experience and relate them to a variety of extant social media sites, which are also contexts for our research. After this we move into structural types of understandings of online interaction. We outline and overview social network analysis in order to provide the six archetypes of network structure. Finally, we close with a full discussion and incorporation of networked individualism, which plays into our development of more introspective elements to netnography, and even auto-, netnography through this book. Networked individualism's 12 principles follow to introduce the end to a chapter that offers a cultural network theory backbone to the social interactions and structures of online experience.

KEY READINGS

- Coleman, E. Gabriella (2010) 'Ethnographic approaches to digital media', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 39: 487–505.
- Rainie, Lee and Barry Wellman (2012) *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press.
- Smith, Marc A., Lee Rainie, Ben Shneiderman and Itai Himelboim (2014) 'Mapping Twitter topic networks: From polarized crowds to community clusters', *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, 20 February. Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/20/mapping-twitter-topic-networks-from-polarized-crowds-to-community-clusters/> (accessed 15 October 2014).

NOTES

1. For detail on these many mystically founded technology predictions and the relation between technology and mysticism more generally, I highly recommended Erik Davis' excellent 1998 book *Technosis*.
2. And this might be why we are so quick to call things 'community' that are often little more than a set of temporary, obligatory, opportunistic social practices.
3. Relatedly, we have computationally assisted visualization being used within the field of Digital Humanities, and most certainly just as much within the visual arts. This is the idea of 'digital forensics' from work such as Matthew Kirschenbaum's physical book called *Mechanisms: New Media and Digital Forensics* (2008). As Hayles (2012: 32) notes, 'The idea is to bring to digital methods the same materialist emphasis of bibliographic study, using microscopic (and occasionally even nanoscale) examination of digital objects and codes to understand their histories, contexts, and transmission pathways.'