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A Field-Study of Online Community Participation: Preliminary Findings

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Abstract
This research-in-progress paper reports preliminary findings from a field study exploring the behaviours of a group of first-time parents when they participate in communities online and face-to-face. Members of the study report that having access to technology doesn’t necessarily mean they will participate in an online community; some who choose not to participate report experiencing feelings of exclusion from events in the lives of their friends and families. This finding challenges the dominant explanatory perspective which assumes individuals, given equality of access, will participate online. Findings also reveal that the value of online community membership is realised to differing extents, in different contexts; not necessarily the social capital-building tool literature and policy herald it to be. Findings uncover the entangled nature of online and face-to-face communities in our everyday lives, revealing limitations in explaining participation from a singular social or technological perspective.

Keywords
Participation, Online Community, Social Inclusion, Sociomateriality, Hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION
I feel like I am confessing a guilty secret when I reveal I do not use social-networking sites, but it got me thinking about the implications of not participating online. Although I am technologically equipped and skilled enough to participate in online communities, I choose not to. For me, this often results in missing key moments in the lives of my friends and family – primarily news, gossip and photos posted on their profiles. I have also missed participating in offline events because I do not belong to the online social network through which they are organized. My feelings are not unique... Statistics from 2010 report some 7.6 million active Australian household Internet subscribers (ABS 2010). 80-90% of these Internet users were not participating in online community activities (ACMA 2009); the category “used Internet group / community” ranking only 9th of the top 10 online activities for 14-17 year olds and not featuring in the top 10 Internet activities for 17-65 year olds. Many simply feel online communities are “not relevant to my lifestyle” (ACMA 2009). My situation reflects a broader theme evident in literature, which is a contradiction to the widespread assumption that if you have access to the Internet then participation in community life online will follow. Participation, defined as the “collective activities that individuals may be involved in as part of their everyday lives” (Brodie et al. 2009) is a key focus of online community literature. However, the focus of literature has almost exclusively been on the typical demographic of Internet users (Eastin et al. 2006; Katz et al. 2002; Li et al. 2008; Lundy et al. 2010; Selwyn 2003). There is much debate about how to define an online community user (Li 2004; Nielson 2006), with little explanation about how or why individuals participate online. Literature tells us that Internet connectivity can help create a more socially inclusive society. Thus supporting policy aims to reduce inequalities between the least advantaged groups (The Scottish Government 2008), and giving people the opportunity to participate fully in society (The Australian Social Inclusion Board 2013). However the potential exclusionary impacts on those who do not participate online are not well understood. Social exclusion, broadly defined as an individual’s lack of participation in society (Murie et al. 2004) can create reduced access to participate in the social and political life of a community (Kenyon et al. 2002), preventing an individual from “full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live” (Silver 2007). Examining IS and sociological literature locates this as an empirical problem requiring investigation to better inform the development of Information & Communications Technology (ICT) enabled social policy initiatives. Analysis reveals a theoretical focus on non-adoption (Eastin et al. 2006; Katz et al. 2002; Selwyn 2003). Little explanation exists for anomalous patterns of behavior in online community participation or understanding of the influences other than digital equality in “access to the Internet, extent of use, knowledge of search strategies, quality of technical connections and social support, ability to evaluate quality of information, and diversity of uses” (DiMaggio et al. 2001) that affect how individuals participate in the ways policymakers hope will contribute positively to society.
National social inclusion initiatives to provide affordable Internet access to all citizens assume that people will participate if given the opportunity and that social media is the platform of choice for conducting business, socializing and engaging in society. In May 2012 it was reported that some 8.67 million Australians aged 18 years and over owned a Smartphone, and of these 71% surveyed said they used a social networking site on their phone (ACMA 2012). The social, economic and political effects of non-participation have not, however, been substantively examined. The overall aim of my research is to develop a deeper understanding of both the human and technological as entangled dimensions influencing participation. My objective is to better understand, through the experiences of members, how and why they participate in online communities, where their decisions are not impeded by a lack of access or skills, and what the impacts are on those who do not participate.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Analysis of current IS literature reveals what is known about the value of participating in online communities and what this means for wider debate on social inclusion. Adopting a hermeneutic circle approach (Boell et al. 2010), literature review iterated from analysis of individual recognized texts to the whole of relevant literature within the problem space, and back to particular texts. Initial searches (using EBSCO, ScienceDirect, Scopus and Google Scholar) on the terms community, participation and virtual community were sorted by citations and relevance. Relevant frequently-cited publications were reviewed, extrapolating central terms, main authors and core journals. Multiple redefinitions of the database search included supplementary publications and added the terms online community, social inclusion, social exclusion, social capital, and digital divide. This process was repeated until the main literature had been covered, as gauged by confidence that the well-cited publications and key authors within the problem space had been examined. Concentrated within the IS and social science disciplines, searches initially targeted high-ranking journals, however literature of direct relevance to the problem area was limited in these sources, therefore extending the search to lower tier journals and practitioner papers and including proceedings from top-tier conferences yielded relevant papers on the Digital Divide, digital inclusion/exclusion and online community participation.

Findings reveal that ICT changes the nature of interpersonal relationships, creating individual networks unrestricted by time and facilitating asynchronous communication (Hampton et al. 2003; O’Reilly 2007; Trauth et al. 2006). A deterministic perspective posits that the deployment of ICT changes the environment for social contact, directly observable in rising participation in virtual communities which operate with different social rules (Bargh et al. 2004; DCITA 2005; Rheingold 2000). Literature synthesis shows how the concept of community is redefined in the sense that participants are motivated by different needs than in face-to-face interaction (Brodie et al. 2009). ICT provides an opportunity to extend social networks and connects communities previously isolated by geography or circumstance (Bargh et al. 2004; DCITA 2005).

Social capital (Putnam 1993) provides a different, socially-centric perspective on participation. Social capital theorizes that at an individual level the value of participating in community life online is in the opportunities to create and maintain social capital, both online and offline (Lin 1999) (Blanchard et al. 2000). Viewed as a measure of the value from group membership (Bargh et al. 2004), social capital accrues online in increased access to resources, the creation of new community assets and the strength of ‘weak-ties’ (Ginsburg et al. 2002; Notley et al. 2008). Practitioner literature reveals that ICT becomes a tool of social policy, focussed on providing affordable Internet access (ACMA 2009; DCITA 2005). This illuminates an assumption that participation in community, civic, political and economic life through online communities will naturally follow. Overcoming the “Digital Divide” (ABS 2004; Rice et al. 2003) is a technology-centric perspective which only explains participation in online communities for those who were once denied participation due to lack of access or skills.

The level of Internet use is held as one measure of social inclusion (ACMA 2009). Analysis reveals that in policy terms, the term inclusion is synonymous with the concept of participation. ICT has become a powerful tool of social policy, with an increasing focus of policy on reducing digital disparities by encouraging and facilitating access to the Internet (DiMaggio et al. 2001; Livingstone et al. 2007; Warschauer 2004). Policy endeavours to dissipate the Digital Divide demonstrate a belief that ICT is responsible for determining social outcomes. Extant knowledge of digital inequality and its effect of denying access to technology does not explain why individuals opt out of participating in online communities. This view challenges the assumption that participation will follow if access to technology is in place and becomes problematic in that it has the potential to poorly inform social policy-development. There are calls for greater theoretical attention and a shift in policy away from overcoming accessibility issues to consider the social and cultural factors that influence use (Hill et al. 2004; Livingstone et al. 2007). There is also a social-centric view that participation in online communities is determined by the opportunity to derive some value from doing so. Social capital theory fails to explain, however, the social resource implications of not participating online.
**Conceptual Framework**

Overall, theory on participation in online communities remains in its relative infancy, lacking substantive empirical evidence. Extant theory primarily focuses on the Digital Divide issues of access to technology, and the skills, finances and time to use it. The gaps in knowledge revealed through this literature review have been used to inform the development of a conceptual framework (Figure 1), within which the research problem is represented graphically as explained below.

Informed by literature, the model depicts a theoretical assumption that technology access will lead to participation in online communities. Literature reveals, however, that even where online participation occurs it is skewed. A majority of online community members lurk, accessing information but not contributing to the community. I have used an upwards arrow marked ‘value’ to show how literature claims that the greater the level of participation the more value it has at both an individual and collective level for the creation of social capital. What is not evident from extant literature, and is depicted in the conceptual framework as areas where questions can be asked is why some people opt out of participating online, or the impacts this may have. I have indicated the main areas where there are gaps in understanding. There may be some previously unidentified dimension of the digital divide explaining non-participation... (*) Or perhaps there are other reasons influencing participation, such as lack of perceived value, fears of de-individualization, lack of interest or restrictions imposed by the technologies underlying online communities... (**) Finally the concept of a ‘lurker’ as reported in literature is not clearly defined or delineated from that of a ‘non-participant’. Informed by literature and the gaps identified, the following general research questions have been designed to explore the problem further.

**Question 1:** What are the needs and motivations for participation in online communities, face-to-face communities, or both?

a) Why, and in what circumstances do we use online communities, and face-to-face communities, or both?

b) What are the experiences and explanations, as described by members of the field, for not participating in online communities?

**Question 2:** What are the impacts on those who do not participate in online activities/communities?

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**THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE**

The mobile devices that facilitate social media are increasingly extensions of self, reflecting personal image and identity. However, empirical investigation into participation in online communities fails to consider how the enabling technology is entangled in our everyday social lives (Orlikowski 2009). Research on participation requires a different theoretical perspective, which recognizes that technology and human agency cannot ontologically be studied separately since they are always in relation. Research should examine the mutual co-construction of participation to understand how meanings and materialities are enacted together in everyday social and technological practices and contexts (Barad 2007; Introna 2007; Suchman 2009). The research problem identified can be viewed in sociomaterial terms as inquiry into how the use of social media for day-to-day social life reconfigures the phenomenon of participation. Sociomateriality refers to the “constitutive entanglement of the social and the material in everyday life” (Orlikowski 2007). It is appropriate because:

- Established, competing perspectives on human-technology research are problematic since they privilege either the technological or the human/social factors.
- Sociomateriality allows for the contextualization of participation in a sociomaterial setting, perceiving both the technological and social contexts in a more integrated way (Orlikowski 2009).
- Participation is enacted in material-discursive practices where social media technologies have no inherent boundaries or meaning but are bound up with the specific material-discursive practices that constitute online community participation (Iedema 2007).

A sociomaterial approach will allow attention to the actions of people and of technology, dissolving social and material boundaries and recognizing that their interactions will change with different instances and accounts of participation in different contexts. Analyzing emerging meanings should not favour human or technological explanations, but instead seek to understand how the social world and enabling technology mutually co-construct one another in answering how and why we participate online. Sociomateriality is premised upon a number of distinctive practices within a relational ontology, which distinguish it as a research philosophy from traditional separatist worldviews. The core sociomaterial concepts I anticipate my research to demonstrate, in the context of online community participation, are defined in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice:</th>
<th>Definition:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entanglement</td>
<td>The material and the social emergently produce one another, as people, entangled with a variety of technologies, carry out their daily practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociomaterial Assemblage</td>
<td>An IS is a composite and shifting assemblage of the material and social which changes over time as those involved draw upon the IS to provide meaning, to exercise power, and to legitimate actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-constitution</td>
<td>The material and the social are mutually constituted and, therefore, inseparable. The structures and processes of an IS are enacted and emergent as users draw upon the software in their situated practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency and Intentionality</td>
<td>Agency is the power to act on others in a system of relationships. There is dispute over whether technology as a material actor can display intentionality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performativity</td>
<td>Relationships between humans and technology are never fixed. Instead, the sociomaterial assemblage emerges from practice and defines how to practice. It is in the act of practice that the relation (between the material and social) is defined; and each act produces (or performs) a different relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationality</td>
<td>Assemblages exist in relation to other assemblages. That is, within a field-of-practice common interest unites agents, while across fields differences in practices will create boundaries and potential conflict.</td>
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FIELD STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was designed as a field study conducted over a 1-year period from 2011 to 2012. The study comprised twenty-four men and women who are the parents of pre-school aged children and who are active members of a face-to-face parenting community. The group members predominantly reside in suburban-Sydney, with the exception of some who have moved away since the group was formed. Some members of the group also participate in online communities - child-related and non-child-related. These attributes satisfied the requirements from my research objective to study and explain instances and accounts of participation online and face-to-face. The group was formed following the births of our children. It is broader than just a ‘Mother’s Group’, since the fathers are also involved and contribute actively to group meet-ups. The group was selected because I had access to all the members given that I myself am a member, and the group members are all personal friends - their children born around the same time as my son, now aged 4, and my daughter aged 18 months. We meet regularly, on the 3rd Sunday of each month, for family play-dates either in someone’s house or at a public playground. Occasionally the adults get to spend time in each other’s company socially without the children. We are all feeling our way through the mine-field of having pre-school aged children - an intense period of childhood development when many parenting issues arise and therefore a time when we, as parents, seek to interact heavily with other parents, carers, support groups and professional services. I felt that the pressures a parent faces (such as conforming to socially accepted norms of feeding or disciplining) created a rich context in which to observe motivations to participate in communities both online and face-to-face. When I explained my research to the group, everyone was supportive and willing to get involved in the study.

Field research by its design is a broad, qualitative sociological research technique in which the researcher directly observes and participates in a social-setting (Emerson 1981; Kaler et al. 2010; Neuman 2006), where the study is not restricted by à priori boundaries. Instead, following both human and non-human actors will determine the
boundaries. As an empirical unit of analysis, a parenting community would allow me to discover insights and develop theory on the participation behaviour of members who share a similar profile; all consider themselves to be technologically savvy, professional couples and first-time parents, they represent a diverse cultural mix, some with little family support in Australia. The research setting exemplifies several aspects of the research problem; it allowed examination of a community with an online and face-to-face dimension whose members participate of their own free will, presumably because they perceive some value from doing so. Furthermore, selecting parenting as a research context provided a rich setting to observe and explore individual experiences with feelings of inclusion or exclusion based on pressure from peers. Observing instances of how parenting issues are discussed would allow me to discover insights into the value which parents perceive from membership of both communities and to understand the role of technology as an agent in constructing instances of participation at any point in time. Field research in this setting had the potential to add significant theoretical value in providing a deep understanding of how social and technological structures are intertwined, developing theoretical conclusions on the motivations for online versus face-to-face community participation and illuminating how technology shapes participation. Fieldwork was suitable for its highly descriptive nature and emphasis on studying people’s everyday lives (Emerson 1981) in a natural setting. Inquiry into participation in social media using a field study approach fits with the principles of field research prescribed by the Chicago School of Sociology (Babbie 2008; Bulmer 1986), in that it will support my aims to understand a world of sociomaterial assemblages created through relations, reporting the reality of people on their terms and taking accounts at face value as the social truth.

Data Gathering in a Field Study Setting

As prescribed by Neuman (2006), a field study approach requires the researcher to directly engage and spend time in a small-scale social setting in the present time. As previously indicated, I do not participate in communities online, therefore in terms of studying online community participation I am a cultural-outsider (Bartunek et al. 1996). However, as a parent of two young children myself, I am a cultural-insider in the context of studying participation in the parenting group, since I can relate personally to the experiences of other parents in the group. Having this insider-outsider perspective has brought balance to my fieldwork, and given me a unique insight into participation behaviour in both face-to-face and online community contexts. Immersion in the field required me to carry out the following activities:

- Observation of instances & accounts of online community participation in everyday settings;
- Direct involvement with (human) community members and (non-human) social media to personally experience the process of social life in the parenting field setting;
- Acquisition of insider’s point of view, maintaining analytic perspective of outsider;
- Use of a variety of techniques and social skills;
- Production of data as extensive written notes and descriptions;
- Understanding and empathy for field members, not only recording cold objective facts;
- Observation of both explicit and tacit aspects of community culture.

Data gathering was conducted firstly via a short phase of familiarisation with the research setting involving high-level interviewing and identification of online communities. Subsequently I was immersed in the field for a longer phase of in-depth field interviewing and participant-observations. Table 2 summarises the data gathering techniques used, how I applied them in the field study, and how much empirical data this has yielded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Description of how technique was applied:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field research Interviews with 24 participants (+30 hours)</td>
<td>Open-ended &amp; probing questions; Flexible, conducted face-to-face and via Skype at convenient times; Unstructured interviews yielded unexpected and useful insights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 hours of participant-observations</td>
<td>First hand observation of participation experiences; Opportunity to observe behaviour not seen through interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The dialogue from 5 online forums and blogs, and content of several emails</td>
<td>Uncover issues to explore through field interviews; Publicly available online content already written, transcription not needed; Electronic content easily captured in Nvivo for subsequent data analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive personal Field Notes</td>
<td>Researcher reflexivity in personal journal; Records context of observations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FINDINGS FROM PRELIMINARY DATA ANALYSIS

Hermeneutic Approach to Data Analysis

Sociomateriality as a research philosophy does not prescribe a methodological approach for how it should be operationalized. Amongst the IS research community there is growing recognition of the need for a fresh approach to theory building that will represent sociomaterial practices. As an IS researcher doing qualitative field research in a social setting I needed a way to analyse my data which would allow me to unfold levels of meaning in an iterative way, gradually revealing deeper hidden meanings to understand my research question. Adopting a Hermeneutic circle approach supported this objective, as it facilitates the extension of meaning in concentric circles, moving from parts of a whole to a global understanding of the whole and back to individual parts (Klein et al. 1999). In this way I have read and re-read my interview transcripts, participant-observation narratives, electronic dialogues and diary-based reflections in order to improve my understanding of participation behaviour, gradually unfolding levels of meaning and drawing some preliminary conclusions. Following a hermeneutic circle approach (Klein et al. 1999), analysis has uncovered widely varied accounts of participation told by field members, which help to explain key elements of my research questions. These stories allow me to test the ideas in my conceptual framework by looking for elements which the data supports or challenges, identifying stories or accounts which raise inconsistencies or seem to contradict, trying to find a clearer understanding of participation and theorize about the reasons for non-participation. In the following paragraphs I articulate accounts from actual field members of why they belong to communities and what value they perceive that membership to have, reporting several interconnected accounts of the entanglement of technology in our everyday lives. I report the main findings concerning freedom of choice over whether or not to participate in a community and how this creates feelings of inclusion in or exclusion.

An Account of the Value From Participating Online

One of my interviewees shared with me his experiences of feeling removed from the nurturing of his son in the very early years of his son’s life. He described how his wife took primary responsibility for the welfare of their young son, including all health-related matters. He himself felt quite isolated in a situation where according to cultural norms and expectations he wasn’t supposed to take a hands-on approach. When it came to discussing child-related topics with his peers (other fathers or male friends for example) this was regarded as improper. Enter social media. What if he could find a way around this situation and actually be free to discuss his son’s health (or any other issue) freely with other fathers? This is what he did. He set up a Facebook profile for his son (who was aged 2, and clearly not in a position to actively do this himself!) A male friend also did the same for his toddler. The Facebook pages looked like they represented the two children, using the children’s names, personal details and images. The two fathers began by posting photos and stories about their children, written as if it were the child writing it. Eventually dialogue began, where one child would respond to the other child’s comment – essentially the two fathers were chatting indirectly through their children’s Facebook page. My interviewee gave me an example of a time when his son had a high fever, he disagreed with the actions his wife was taking and wanted another opinion. So he wrote on his son’s Facebook page, “I don’t feel so well today, 40 degree fever...what should I do?” He described to me how the other child ‘replied’ with some advice, which was really the other child’s father answering to give his friend some advice! When they are in each other’s company, my interviewee tells me he and his male friends discuss “technology, sport, news...not our children”.

The Entanglement of Online Communities in our Everyday Lives

I found the following account interesting, as described to me by another interviewee... Her good friends - who she describes as “serial Facebookers” - were lucky enough to win an all-expenses-paid overnight hotel break. The couple have two young children, and like most other parents with young children hadn’t had much quality time with each other for a while. So, with the children sleeping at a friend’s house, the couple got dressed-up and settled into an exclusive city restaurant for a starry-eyed dinner date. Sounds perfect? Enter social media... ‘Hang on a second darling while I take a photo of my meal and post it on my Facebook wall to show everyone we really are out without children in a fancy restaurant’. ‘Great, no worries honey, I will respond to your post with a comment about how much I am enjoying my time with you on our romantic date’. My interviewee was paraphrasing what the couple may have been saying to each other of course, but the reality was, she was sitting at home receiving these Facebook updates about her friends’ night out and looking at photos of their meal incredulous that her friends could, in her opinion, waste their special date by spending time on their phones updating Facebook, not to mention wondering why the hell anyone even cared what they were doing!

In other accounts I found a similar phenomenon of people aiming to be in ‘multiple places at one time’. The central tenet here being a type of displacement; somehow, through the always-on connectivity of social media, members voiced to me their concerns that we are losing the ability to just be in the present moment. Stories from across members of the study share the same sentiment which is that of the mobile device constantly
beeping...seducing us into following what others are doing, carrying on multiple conversations at any one time, conditioning us to respond, to find out who wants us, or know what’s happening ALL THE TIME (these are experiences extrapolated from my data – not my own words!). One interviewee described this to me saying, “you only have to see how many people in a pub or restaurant have phones on the table...always checking”. Another account supporting this came from a girl who describes driving with her phone on her lap...“I’m very prone, I think this is a consequence of portable technology, to stopping at a red traffic light or being anywhere, and on my iPhone an email comes in and I look at it.”

I also heard how in order to stop herself from feeling compelled to check her phone when alerts come through, one of my interviewees has to “physically...put the phone in a drawer and lock it away!” Further adding to this were the poignant reflections from two of my interviewees, one who expressed that “taking a mobile phone away from a teenager would be like cutting their hand off at the wrist!” And another whose view on the inseparability of us from the technology we use was that “it’s like the phone has been surgically implanted in us, it’s just like having another body part!” This inseparability becomes an issue for some of my interviewees when it transgresses into a physical social setting, for example one account I heard was of a male interviewee’s abhorrence over how he could be with his friends sitting together in the pub, but could see that only half of the group were fully present in the room because they were also chatting with friends online, checking updates, responding to texts. He went on to say “You can’t just stop and be just a person, you need to have constant communication with technology, whether it’s a phone or an iPad or an iPod or whatever, you need to have stimulation, and if you don’t have technology stimulation you think you’re not normal”.

The Impacts of Not Participating

The key message I have heard from the field study members here is that people have a choice as to whether or not they participate in an online community. Some described being “serial Facebookers,” others dipped in and out of online communities infrequently, generally reading discussions on blogs to “see what other people have said about a topic”. Yet other interviewees explained that they “just don’t feel the need to chat online. These same interviewees saying that they already “have enough real friends”. I had still another camp of people who told me they had come to realise they were spending inordinate and unhealthy amounts of time chatting in online communities, at the expense of spending time with their families. One girl described to me how she has excluded herself from all social-media in a very purposeful way.

“I used to be a member of many online communities, I was always checking my laptop or iPhone for notifications. I realized that it was interfering with my life. Slouching behind my laptop affected my posture. Then I realized that the first thing that I did in the morning was not cooking breakfast for my son but reading everything new that was written overnight on one American forum (and due to the time difference there was usually a lot to read!). I felt guilty that I was spending too much time online rather than playing with my son so I decided to stop. I stopped checking mail on my iPhone. I also changed router’s settings so that websites that I was using were unavailable. For a month every evening I would still change router’s settings back, access all the websites I was dependent on, read everything, write everything I want and then change the settings back so that I couldn't be tempted during the day. After that month I just 'banned' myself from every website/community, organized a '10 minute email', changed my email at forum settings to that '10 minute email', then changed my forum password to a randomly generated password (which I destroyed later). And that was it. So now if I want to restore my account - an email will be sent to an email address that doesn't exist. It took me a while to "wean off" this type of communication, I felt like a drug addict (I guess). I felt emptiness that I tried hard to fill with live communication with my friends, moms in the playgrounds, old friends, my husband and of course, my son.”

So access doesn’t necessarily mean participation will follow? Well, all my interviewees confirmed they own devices which allow them to access the Internet and no-one said that they had any restrictions on data downloads. Some participate online; some do not. Further levelling the playing field for comparisons, members of the study share a similar profile, they consider themselves to be technologically savvy, reasonably educated, financially secure, are of a similar age, all have young dependent children. Therefore taking these factors out as influencing whether my interviewees participate in online communities, there must be other reasons. I found a difference personality-wise in those who just “want to know what everyone else is doing,” compared against others who told me in relation to social media they “just don’t care what other people are doing”. One interviewee simply declared, “I just prefer to see people face-to-face”.

Evidence clearly shows exclusion is being experienced, but by new groups, not just the digitally disadvantaged. The impacts of this are not yet fully clear, but data exposes that it makes people feel annoyed and guilty as in the case where my interviewee missed the news of a friend’s father’s death overseas because she hadn’t checked her Facebook account that week due to her children being sick. In contrast, another interviewee professed the indispensability of the Facebook community when she was trying to locate loved-ones in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, when all telephone communications shut down. I also heard dismissive comments from one interviewee about a post from a Facebook friend saying, “I’ve just made pancakes”. My interviewee
described thinking “who the hell cares if you’ve made pancakes?” and wondering, “why is she posting that rubbish?” When I asked the pancake-maker her reasons for that announcement, she openly described that she suffered from Post Natal Depression since her daughter was born, and, on that particular day she felt lonely and isolated. The posted comment was her cry for help, hoping some of her Facebook friends would be in the area and decide to drop in for a cuppa with her and share the pancakes. My interviewee would almost certainly have been first on her friend’s doorstep if she had received a call asking for her company, but the pancake comment completely missed its intended purpose resulting in both girls unable to be there for each other. So, even when we do have access and do choose to participate online, there are still experiences of isolation and exclusion.

DISCUSSION

At this point in my analysis I might answer my research questions in the following way. Firstly, the needs and motivations for participating in communities are widely varied, as described through the experiences of field study members. Online communities appear to be regarded more like a commodity than a face-to-face community. Evidence demonstrates that people dip in and out of online communities for different purposes at different times; sometimes participating actively, other times lurking on the outskirts to extract useful information from what other community members have said. I did not sense from my interviewees any sort of emotional commitment to the online communities they are members of, nor were they concerned about communication norms or social etiquette in how they behave online. The value this participation brings is more complex as it is unique to each instance of participating. It is not my intention to explain the cultural nuances of the situation where the two fathers communicated via their sons’ online profiles, for instance. However, what I can identify is how my interviewee had a very real need to find out information that could allow him help his sick child. Precluded by cultural norms from discussing such matters with his peers, he constructed a new identity for himself by creating his son as an avatar, which allowed him to interact in an online community without disclosing his own identity. For him this avenue has been valuable for support and advice, and has given him a freedom of speech he would not otherwise have had in his role as a parent.

More subtle than just identifying the drivers and benefits of participating, data points to the embeddedness of engaging in community life online as part of our everyday lives, as exemplified by the date-night couple’s story. Were the date-couple trying to make their other friends jealous? I didn’t get the impression they were doing anything calculated. Were they bored with each other’s company? Forgotten how to have a romantic night out? Maybe. Or has it just become second nature, part of our existence just like breathing or blinking, to check for updates of what our online friends are doing, or keep them informed of our every move? This is significant because it is in the words of my interviewees, redefining a social norm, making it somehow acceptable to chat with other people electronically whilst in face-to-face contact with an individual or group. New media are creating new and emerging social and communicative practices (Crystal 2001); the ‘always-on’, ‘always-available’ nature of social media-based communication redefining the boundaries on personal space, redefining how we exist – creating the ability to be in 2 or more places at the same time. Having this insight into how people are entangled with technology in their daily lives helps me to understand participation online as a shifting practice, which emerges as users draw upon the social media technologies in their own unique contexts. Furthermore, this evidence supports the difficulty in knowing where the human stops and the technology begins, in other words mobile devices are becoming extensions of ourselves as a means to communicate.

The reasons given for not participating in online activities are varied. Explanations include people being satisfied with their current friendships and feeling no need to use social media to maintain communications, voluntary avoidance of online communities as a point of principle, a simple preference for face-to-face interaction, and the deliberate self-exclusion from online activities due to the addictive nature of social media. So far, in the accounts articulated by non-participants, evidence points to experiences of being excluded from news of events in the lives of friends and family. Interviewees describe instances of being unable to access commercial promotions which require you to be a registered member of a particular social media site, accounts of feeling pressured by peers to join in the online communities through a fear of missing-out in general.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The key issues emerging from preliminary analysis can be summarised as (i) online communities constitute part of our daily lives and are entangled with our everyday worlds; (ii) participation is not a binary concept. Unlike a physical community where you traditionally participate or do not participate, when it comes to online communities there is a continuum of participation with different levels ranging from non-participation to the fully registered community member, actively contributing to online posts; (iii) online communities are as much an excluding factor as an including factor – it’s just a different cohort of people being excluded online. These findings are important because they reinforce perspectives on the needs and motivations of those who participate online where there was little existing empirical evidence. Furthermore they reinforce assertions based on anecdotal evidence about the embeddedness of technology in everyday life. This progresses a sociomaterial
understanding of participation in an original way. It challenges traditional ontological assumptions of social and material agencies acting independently with à priori definition of boundaries. Overall, initial findings open opportunities for further research particularly in the re-definition of participation in the context of increased social media usage and how to engage with the sub-groups who choose not to participate in online communities. This is in alignment with National policy plans, which state that “building on the early success of technology implementation it is now timely to develop our understanding...towards deepening public understanding and appraisal of what access to ICT entails and the potential social ends that may be achieved through its effective use” (DBCDE 2008). The next phase of the study will require me to extrapolate from data further findings to help answer my research questions more fully. I plan to carry out some follow-up interviews and conduct deeper analysis to expand my understanding of the impacts of not participating, at both individual and collective levels.
REFERENCES


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