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Book Reviews

Evans, K. F. (2004). *Maintaining community in the Information Age. The importance of trust, place and situated knowledge.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan. ISBN 1-4039-1245-9 (hardcover) (202 pp.)

The title and subtitle of this book include both the central question and its answer. That is not to say that the answer to the central question is delivered easily. On the contrary, between the central question and the final answer, the reader is presented with 200 pages of well-written and well-documented analysis and discourse on the expectations, the potential, as well as the limitations of ICT in developing and enhancing communities in modern society. The book is based on the author's PhD thesis from 2002 about the introduction of ICT in marginalized neighborhoods in Salford UK, and enriched with additional material and analysis regarding the Boulder Community Network, collected during a stay in Boulder USA, at the University of Colorado. The author has used this opportunity well in an effort to look back and reflect on her previous research. This reflection becomes apparent through the design of the book, the composition of the chapters, and the development of the main argument throughout the book.

In six chapters and a conclusion, the author presents the reader with an extensive overview of the past and current discussion about the relationship between community and ICT, starting with the relationship between globalization, technology and community, the social impact of ICT and the phenomenon of building virtual communities on the internet. In these chapters the author reviews relevant literature and critically examines the high expectations, claims of positive results and the generally optimistic nature of the debate about the way ICT can strengthen communities, enrich the 'information poor' and bridge the digital divide. By not limiting the scope to the social sciences, the author includes the way the economy and national politics have embraced ICT, thus strengthening the positive expectations about the potential of ICT to boost the economy through the development of information industries and to counter the decline of civic society by strengthening communities via the development of virtual communities.

The core of the book deals with the relationship between ICT and communities; the potential of ICT to create, develop or strengthen communities. Here the author confronts the rhetoric of the new Labour government policy "to strengthen and build new communities" with her own research about the introduction of ICT in two marginalized communities in Salford UK. This policy, which was taken up by local governments,

is based on the assumption that “disadvantaged communities are seen as in much need of the services which the Internet can offer, but as reluctant to engage with them and this is perceived as a deficiency on the part of these communities” (81). It is this implicit notion of a ‘digital underclass’ that the author tries to tackle in her research.

The research was carried out among groups of women in two areas, whom took part in an ICT project. The author qualifies her research as mainly ethnographic in combination with individual and group interviews. Her main objective was to identify the needs, as well as the motives of these women to become involved in training and use of computer equipment, email, and the internet. Although living in economically disadvantaged areas with little resources, it was established that most of the women participating in the project were aware of the discussions about the internet and ICT and did have their own reasons for wanting to participate. These reasons ranged from the use of computers to write stories about family and neighborhood, to catching up with technology because having a computer in the house is important for the children, to becoming better qualified for the job market. Instrumentality and satisfaction of various information needs were two essential factors: the importance of ‘situated knowledge’ and the importance of ‘thinking locally’. ‘Situated knowledge’ refers to the fact that not (internet) information per se, but information discussed and evaluated informally among women, was valued as relevant. This process of contextualization of information through informal discussion was essential for the information to fit these women’s needs. ‘Thinking locally’ refers very much to the same phenomenon; although email and the internet offer an opportunity for women’s groups to move ‘outside’ their community, the main body of activities on the internet was focused on the local community. These and other observations lead the author to conclude that three factors were important in the construction of the information and communication ‘needs’ and ‘wants’ of the groups involved in the research; these being community, physical proximity, and trust. The fact that these women’s groups were established locally, had their roots in the community, that these women would meet frequently and discuss and share their experiences within the context of the community, and at the same time creating a bond of trust, proved to be the main factors to motivate them to become involved in the use of computers and ICT.

With this main conclusion, the author underlines an old truth that was already established in research on (non ICT) local media: Technology cannot establish a community if there did not already exist a social community in the first place.

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Martin, S. E. and Copeland, D. A. (Ed.). (2003), *The function of newspapers in society. A global perspective*. Westport, CT: Praeger. ISBN 0-275-97398-0 (179 pp.)

Obviously, newspapers and their readers have to be categorized as endangered species. According to the National Newspaper Association, “the year 2078, at the latest, would see the end of daily newspaper reading in the United States”. Four years after its forecast, it seems a rather optimistic view. According to a recent documentary, *Epic 2014*, produced by the fictional Museum of Media History (in reality, the American journalists Matt Thompson and Robin Sloan) the press as we know will no longer exist within the next ten years. Traditional reporting will collapse. In the year 2014, news is churned out by the media giant Googlezon, and consists of blogs, attitudes, discoveries, preferences, claims, and random thoughts, gathered and shaped by computers and human editors, and fed back to ordinary people. The *New York Times* has become a newsletter read only by the elite and the elderly.

“It is no wonder that many inside and outside the newspaper industry speculate about the demise of newspapers”, Shannon E. Martin writes in her concluding chapter of *The function of newspapers in society*. Some practitioners believe that the loss of paper copies and the time required for newsprint publication infuse a shallowness in the news product when it is delivered only to a cyber reader clicking from link to link. There are concerns, too, about partnering with broadcast affiliates. Cross-over news bulletins from reporters who work at a print news desk but who also tell the story more immediately to broadcast viewers and online visitors will not value the same quality. Nonetheless, Martin, who is a member of the faculty at the University of Maine, concludes: “Newspapers have a longheld place in societies around the world. But how that history helps us prepare for, shape, or predict the future is still not clear”.

She brings to memory one of the earliest prophets of the newspaper industry’s downfall, James Gordon Bennett, founder and editor of the *New York Herald*. In 1850 he declared that newspapers would not survive the overwhelming success of the telegraph. They did. Afterwards, they survived radio and television – but will there be a paper life after internet? “The claim that daily newspapers are dead is a tired old story”, Gary F. Sherlock, then a Gannett publisher, believed in 1997.

“For newspapers the twentieth century was a story of missed opportunities and the slow erosion of a reading public”, Agnes Hooper Gottlieb, professor of communication at Seton Hall University, ascertains in her

contribution to this volume. However, the story of newspapers around the world does not end with the twentieth century, is her conclusion. "There is more to unfold and much more to be written". This sounds encouraging, but undoubtedly she is familiar with the expression 'stick with ink and sink!'

The function of newspapers in society offers a more or less global perspective on newspapers, historically as well as geographically. It gives the reader an opportunity to look across cultural uses of newspapers. All contributions are written by American authors who, not surprising, pay much attention to their domestic newspaper history. The editors give no clear justification why they preferred in their global perspective, for instance, Kuwait and Fiji to Eastern Europe and Russia.

Newspapers have played a crucial role in the development of many cultures. In Arab cultures, for example, newspapers were used by colonial powers to distribute the government agenda. But when local writers and publishers were in control of the newspapers, they became vehicles for national identity-building. In China, Japan, and Korea newspapers were so important to the development of these countries that their leaders felt it essential to exert full control over what was said and who was allowed to say it. Africa's newspapers have proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of an array of economic constraints and hostile regimes, W. Joseph Campbell concludes. Despite the many hazards facing journalists and their newspapers in many places, Africa now has more daily newspapers than ever.

In Western countries, the loss of newspaper functions is beyond dispute. As there has been a decline in the public acceptance of institutions and authority, there has been a decline in the power of journalists to shape the public agenda, in the words of Donald L. Shaw and Charles McKenzie (professor, respectively fellow, at the University of North Carolina). They pay attention to the function of newspapers as intermediates between audiences and their local communities. Audiences who are committed to newspapers, even use them as a surrogate for the community. According to Shaw and McKenzie this is likely to remain so in the twenty-first century. "If newspapers do not survive, it will be because some other medium serves that vital community agenda function".

This touches the sore spot. Virtual and transitory communities seem to take over local communities. Booming commuter towns in The Netherlands such as Almere and Zoetermeer can hardly be regarded as local communities, due to a lack of community activities and local orientation among their residents. Local newspapers are no longer able to take a deep root in these and other suburbs.

It's the other side of a symbiotic relationship. Not only, no newspaper, no community, but also, no longer a community – goodbye newspaper. Or is this just another tired old story?

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Hine, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Virtual methods; Issues in social research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. ISBN: 1-84520-085-3. (242 pp.)

A new and important anthology on Internet research has just been released (May 2005). This book, *Virtual methods; Issues in social research on the Internet*, can rightfully be considered a successor to the now classic *Doing Internet research*, compiled by Steve Jones some six years ago. *Virtual methods* conveys the intimacy and excitement only possible when the researchers who conducted the studies are also the authors of the methodological reflection. With this basis, the book represents a contribution to the genre of scholarly writing sometimes referred to as 'tales from the field'.

Virtual methods emerged from a series of six seminars held over a three-year period, 2001–2003. Twelve of the chapters in the book are revisions of presentations at those seminars, and these constitute the main body of *Virtual methods*. This material is divided into two sections – 'Research Relationships and Online Relationships', and 'Research Sites and Strategies' – each of which has a short integrative introduction. The first chapter, prepared by the editor of the volume, Christine Hine, provides an overarching methodological framework, discussed below. A concluding epilogue continues some of the themes presented in that framework and makes suggestions for an ongoing methodology-oriented research agenda.

Hine's introductory chapter places the chapter themes within a framework termed the 'Sociology of cyber-social-scientific knowledge' (SDSSK), which is a complicated way of indicating the importance of reflexivity in Internet research. An important aspect of such reflexivity, which Hine elaborates, is the historical dimension of the enterprise. The first wave of Internet research, through the 1980s and early 1990s, is dominated by psychological concerns (e. g., social context cues, aggression, and addiction) and reliance on experimental methods. The second wave is characterized by the importance of cultural context and employment of naturalistic methods including participant observation. These are, of course, rough indicators of methodological emphasis at different

periods of time. Hine does not explicitly consider what might be the 'third wave' of empirical Internet research or what might be expected in the upcoming period. She does, however, stress the value of reflexivity and its tempering quality for those among us committed to single methods and concepts: "SCSSK offers the opportunity to seize upon the power of reflexivity to examine methods afresh" (10). If such reflexivity were (to become) the general result from this second wave of Internet research, as reflected in *Virtual methods*, then this would be a substantial methodological accomplishment.

The best illustrations of such reflexivity are, in fact, the chapters constituting Parts I and II of the book. Each addresses one or more empirical research projects and the methods employed. One chapter, 'Online interviewing and the research relationship', discusses how the researchers conducted interviews by email for an extended period of time. In addition to relatively obvious problems with this method (e. g., gaining access and maintaining momentum), this author convincingly argues for the distinct advantages: extended interactions, opportunity for closer reflection on respondents' reactions, repeated attention to the same issues, and value in asynchronous exchange. Another chapter in this section of the book stresses the importance of fusing online study with that in the related offline environment. Several contributions in both parts of the book consider ethical issues involved in studying behavior online, like in the chapter where a study of the online sex industry is described.

Contributions to Part II address the value of visual illustrations, particularly maps, in conducting Internet research; the importance of contextualizing Internet use within, for example, home media use; and applications of social network methodology, including analysis of hyperlinks. Interestingly, the authors of this last topic warn about assuming a relationship between sites just because a link is found and, conversely, assuming there is no relationship when no link is present. They argue, quite correctly, for supplementing findings from social network analysis with data from other sources (e. g., interviews) before drawing conclusions based on such assumptions.

A question some readers of this review may have is whether *Virtual methods* is suitable for use as a university-level textbook. Speaking personally, I just completed teaching a graduate seminar on Internet research methods and would have welcomed the chance to use this book as the main course text, possibly supplemented by journal articles. The clear strength of the book is its emphasis on reflection provided by the researchers who conducted the studies presented; this material lends itself to engaged classroom discussion and provides useful material for students to design their own research projects.

The book is equally relevant for practicing researchers who are new to the field of Internet studies. The case studies in *Virtual methods* address both 'nuts and bolts' detail in designing and conducting research as well as provide more generalized reflection. And, for the methodologists among us, this book represents an important contribution in determining the particular nature of Internet research. That nature, judging by the contributions to this collection, seems to emphasize reflexivity and plurality in methodological approach.

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