

Fostering Friendship Through Video Production:
How Youth use YouTube to Enrich Local Interaction

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Abstract: Many scholars and parents are concerned that Internet participation often privileges remote over co-located interaction and encourages transitory rather than meaningful relationships among youth (Wellman et al. 2002; Belden 2006). Yet, the present research reveals that in some cases young people are creatively using online sites such as YouTube to foster local relationships. Based on an ethnographic study that focuses on video production, sharing, and reception, this paper explores how young people use video to enrich interactions with co-located acquaintances. The study explores how youth use new media to enhance weak social ties as well as activate what Haythornthwaite (2002) calls “latent” ties that exist in a technical sense but are socially dormant. Scholars have argued that mediated interaction often lacks affective cues, thus making it inappropriate for emotionally-laden exchanges. In contrast, this paper asserts that forms of video exchange practices and surrounding discourse may help create local networks by enabling affective exchanges. The paper argues that models which generalize the possibilities of mediated interaction on the basis of technical affordances ignore key social particulars that are important for understanding how mediated interaction functions in specific, local contexts.

Debates about how mediated interaction has impacted community typically assert one of three positions. These are that the Internet: 1) weakens community; 2) enhances community; or 3) transforms the nature of community from the local to the dispersed (Wellman, Boase & Chen, 2002). The first line of thinking asserts that Internet immersion causes people to ignore friends and neighbors. The second position asserts that Internet interaction enhances local communities that are in place. The third position sees the Internet as enabling geographically dispersed people to form a community. Yet, none of these positions account for how mediated interaction may help *create* certain forms of *local* community that did not exist as such prior to mediated interaction. Within each of these three positions, a “community” is often assumed to exist among a group of people who happen to live in relative geographic proximity. Internet interaction is assumed to encourage people to either neglect or enhance this existing, local form of community. An examination of video sharing practices on YouTube shows that new media can function as a catalyst that helps facilitate social interaction at the local level. Specifically, it can strengthen weak ties and activate what Haythornthwaite (2002) calls “latent” social network ties that have the technical ability to interact but lie dormant prior to the introduction of new media into the

social group. This paper analyzes how forms of video collaboration and sharing can function as media catalysts that strengthen weak ties and activate latent ties among co-located youth. It proposes a fourth position on Internet interaction's influence on community; namely, that mediated interaction can help create new community-based, social networks at the local level.

One way to understand community interaction is to examine the social networks that form larger communities, and to examine the social ties that are the building blocks of social networks. For some scholars certain types of social networks may be considered as communities themselves. However, the presence of social ties does not guarantee that a social network or community will emerge from them. In addition, what defines social networks or communities is often not straightforward. Indeed many folk terms that have been unreflectively used in computer-mediated communication (CMC) research are undergoing scholarly re-examination (Lange, Forthcoming). For example, many scholars' definition of community privileges local social arrangements in ways that assume that a physically proximate community comes closest to an ideal form of community. Cherny quotes Hillery's comparison of 94 definitions of community that have appeared and found that 69 of these 94 definitions agree that "social interaction *area*, and a common tie or ties are commonly found in community life" (emphasis mine; Cherny 1999; Hillery 1955). Social ties are also cited in scholarly research as important building blocks of community. Cherny quotes Hillery's observation that, "If area is omitted from consideration, 73 of the 94 agree that a community 'is considered a group of people in social interaction having some ties or bonds in common.'" (Cherny 1999; Hillery 1955). Yet, as Wellman and others have pointed out, such bonds can occur across distances and are no less communities for the distance (Wellman 1996; Wellman and Gulia 1998). Since community is often assumed to have a geographic base, scholars and parents have expressed concern that Internet use, which can

facilitate dispersed communication and community-building, threatens what they see as close-knit communities that originate from unmediated, proximate interaction.

The term “social network,” for which social ties are the building blocks, also has its uses and limitations. Wellman (1996) has pointed out that social networks do not exist as such but are a useful analytic construct for understanding certain social dynamics. He argues that depending upon how one measures them (such as by counting the number of interactions versus counting the number of relationships), social networks may look quite different. A social network may be defined as relations between socially close people (called “intimates” or “active ties”) who deem other network members to be important to them (Wellman 1996). Yet Wellman also states that in post-industrial societies, “more intimate and other active ties are not with neighbors” (p. 348). Despite the Utopian fantasy that community is inherent in geographic locals, post-industrial forces have long ago changed the composition and location of many people’s closest ties in countries such as the United States. Wellman rightly argues that despite the folk assumption that it is the Internet that is threatening community, in fact decades of social and economic trends have changed the geographical composition of communities and the social networks that form them. In this sense, some people find may find themselves working hard at forming *local* non-family ties, against the dispersive tendencies of socio-economic forces (Coontz 1992: 15).

The flawed common sense notion that community and intimate social relations are easily achieved in person but are inherently impaired when mediated has become encoded in CMC research (Tannen 1998). Surveying the literature on computer-mediated communication, Haythornthwaite (2002) notes that a number of scholars subscribing to the “media richness” view argue that CMC is “less appropriate or useful for emotionally laden exchanges, for the delivery of complex information, and for creating a sense of being there” (p. 388). This position

is based on the faulty assumption that written CMCs presumably lack an ability to transmit the cues necessary for facilitating affective interaction and information exchange. Yet such a position has been disproved by years of ethnographic research and linguistic analyses which have demonstrated how particular groups use text to interact in intimate ways (Rheingold 1993; Baym 1999; Bury 2005; Nardi 2005).

With the advent of video on sharing sites such as YouTube, those who espouse the media richness view may be tempted to assume that because video can communicate additional visual and aural cues, such technologies will likely facilitate affective interaction not possible with text (Choi 2003). However, this position is problematic in certain ways. Providing additional cues that are supposedly not available in text (such as visual views of an activity) in and of itself does not necessarily promote affective relationships between the people who create and the people who ultimately view online videos. As discussed below, an analysis of production and reception of youth-made videos reveals that not everyone interprets material in a video in the same way nor do all producers and viewers use the same criteria to evaluate and consume it.

The assumptions that text cannot provide sufficient media richness to promote affective interaction and the assumption that local interaction or video-based interaction are much more likely (in comparison to text) to provide such richness share certain commonalities. First, both positions underestimate what level of affective information is possible to transmit via text. Second, they tend to over estimate what social information is available and mutually interpretable in visual forms of interaction. Finally, they all begin their analysis by examining technical affordances in a particular CMC and then concluding whether and what type of CMC can facilitate emotional exchanges and social interaction. The emphasis on this approach and its skepticism for how CMC can maintain strong social ties between individuals tenaciously

continues to influence the design of computer media (Haythornthwaite 2002: 388).

Haythornthwaite (2002) instead proposes a different model, one which begins its inquiry by examining the type of social ties in place and then examining media use in relation to those ties. According to Haythornthwaite, “A tie is said to exist between communicators wherever they exchange or share resources such as goods, services, social support or information” (p. 386). In this model, “it is the tie that drives the number and types of exchanges, not whether the tie is maintained on or offline, or via any combination of the two” (p. 388). Of particular interest for her research is examining how types of ties influence patterns of new media use and adoption. What happens when a new medium is introduced into a social network? Do the dynamics of adoption and use differ according to the types of users’ social ties? For example, Haythornthwaite asserts that weakly tied pairs tend to use only a few media to communicate. Further, she suggests that new media can provide the technical affordance to increase contact between weak ties and perhaps energize latent ties, which she defines as ties “for which a connection is available technically but that has not yet been activated by social interaction” (p. 389). When assessing the impact of a new communication medium on a social network, it is important to understand the type of social network in place as well as the range of potential interaction affordances that the group has available, including both online and offline forms of communication. Haythornthwaite rightly includes not only different kinds of online media but also in-person forms of communication when she discusses the possible range of technical affordances that may be available to stimulate interaction.

Applying Haythornthwaite’s approach, the data below suggest that weak or latent ties may become stronger through the introduction of new media. An important point to understand is that no technical affordance, whether in person or mediated will guarantee interaction or creation of

social ties or larger social networks. Seeing in-person communication as one particular affordance (rather than as automatically delivering a particular type of relationship) is useful because it prompts a close examine of the structure of the social relationship rather than assuming what a particular medium or communicative arrangement will yield across all interactions, despite the contextual, social particulars. Haythornthwaite's lens helps to illustrate the processes whereby technical affordances catalyze and may help change the character of specific instantiations of social networks which are by definition, constantly in flux.

A Word About the Domain

The analysis is based on an ethnographic study of video production, sharing, and reception on YouTube. The study was funded by the MacArthur Foundation and is part of a larger effort to understand how young people from the United States learn from and use numerous types of digital media technologies in every day life.¹ A goal of the MacArthur study is to use this research to inform the design of useful educational software, systems, and online environments. Ethnographic data on YouTube were collected using a multi-method approach involving interviews, analysis of artifacts, observations of interactions on the site, analysis of videos and related discourse, and attendance at video themed and social events—such as the *Ask a Ninja* DVD release party—in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas. Observations were conducted several times a week for 11 months. I also analyzed over 150 videos and used discourse analytic methods to examine comments and conversations posted to videos. To date, I have conducted formal interviews with 46 YouTube participants who vary in terms of their intensity of participation. The interviewees range from being casual users to YouTube

¹ For more information, see <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/>

celebrities.² Interviewees completed a demographic and media use survey and participated in interviews containing both research-driven and open-ended questions about their video production, sharing, and reception practices on YouTube and offline. As part of the study's focus, most of the people interviewed were children and youth from the United States although a few were from Europe and Canada. In addition, I also interviewed a few parents and educators.

During ethnographic interviews I asked participants to describe their technical background, provide examples of typical uses of YouTube, and reflect on their YouTube participation. I asked interviewees whether they considered YouTube to be a community and to talk about who they interacted with over YouTube (such as friends, family, and acquaintances whom they had never met in person). In part because the project was interested in collecting information about online and media-driven learning, I also asked each participant to describe how they got started making videos. I was surprised to learn that several interviewees did not really know the people with whom they began making videos particularly well. For these individuals, I strove to interview other members of their video-based social network, many of whom confirmed a similar perception that it was the video creation and sharing that helped the group coalesce in ways it previously had not, even though the youth were physically co-located and had the opportunity to meet and regularly interact with one another in their university dorms or at local, community events.

The paper will focus on two case studies that draw on ethnographic description and analysis to understand social ties and media use. The first involves a group of older youth in northern California, many of whom were home schooled. This case study discusses the activities of Fred

² Additional description about different levels of YouTube participation is found in Lange 2007.

(18) and his brother Stuart (16), who are the core members.³ The study discusses how they and their close friends Jack (17), Jones (17), Qwerty (19), and James (18) made movies to have fun and to show how they have matured emotionally and achieved technical expertise in making videos. The second case study discusses a group of youth living in a dormitory at a University in the southern United States. This case study involves three youth, Jouster (sophomore, 19), Brian M. (junior, 20), and Brian R. (sophomore, 20) who first met through a video-recorded encounter in their dorm. The case studies will discuss how new media facilitated increased social interaction and played a role in changing the social composition of the two groups.

New Media's Use for Enhancing Weak Ties

One of the problems with much of CMC research is that it assumes that so-called face-to-face affordances of communication will automatically stimulate strong ties whereas mediated interaction is typically less satisfying and morally detrimental. Yet, as Wellman (1996) points out, in many cases, a person's strongest ties are not co-located. Further, mere co-presence does not guarantee strong social ties. Nor does the presence of social ties guarantee the formation of a social network. Haythornthwaite's analysis (2002) is extremely useful in this domain because it does not privilege one type of technical affordance—whether it stems from in-person or mediated interaction—over another in terms of actual use. Haythornthwaite argues that understanding media's affects should not start with the question, “What media *should* be used,” but rather, “What niches exist that a medium can fill?” (p. 392). The two case studies that follow describe how the introduction of new media served as a catalyst that facilitated new forms of interaction between the youth in ways that altered the character of their social ties.

³ All names of people and videos in the paper are pseudonyms or are the preferred names that interviewees requested that we use.

The first case study involves a group of youth who lived in northern California at the time of the research. Some of the youth are now entering college and are becoming geographically dispersed, a pattern which confirms how strong ties may not remain co-located over the life of the social network. They considered themselves to have a core membership of about five or six people, two of whom were brothers. Many, though not all, of the group were home schooled and knew of each other through social events targeted at home schooled children and their families. Despite the frequency of these in-person events, several of the youth had not yet become close friends. A few of the youth mentioned that after they had been asked to help make a video with the others, they became more acquainted and bonded through their video making experiences.

Jones:

We were all home schooled, and we went to a little park every single week as part of a home schooling group, and that was pretty big. It was about 100 people, probably. Maybe 30 families. And we met there; we never really became friends, although we saw each other at activities and everything. And the thing with Jack, I've known him for a long while too. Anyway, we finally, about two years ago, I think, summer of 2005, I had started talking to Fred online a little bit, and spontaneously, he asked me if I would like to join him during a 48 hour competition, where you had to make a movie in 48 hours.

And I said yes, not knowing at all what I was getting into, and then we did it and we had fun, and we just started hanging out after that, and then we started making movies as well.

Jones characterizes what might be called weak ties between himself and other members of the group. He describes frequently going to a ritual event or "park day" sponsored by a group of home schooled children and their families. Despite the frequency of in-person contact which took place over a period of several years, he and the others who were co-present at these events did not immediately become close friends. Several of the youth recount either meeting there or interacting only intermittently, perhaps at some point talking online. But it was the invitation to

make a video in a short period of time that the youth perceived as a critical catalyst to interact in a more intensive way and facilitate future, mediated interactions which strengthened their social ties.

Haythornthwaite (2002) describes how weakly tied pairs: 1) have a low motivation to communicate; 2) typically rely on pre-existing or institutional forms of communication; and 3) generally communicate with each other over fewer types of media. Jones's description fits these criteria in that merely seeing other home schooled children did not guarantee common interests or intensive interaction. Further, a portion of their communication heavily relied on socially institutionalized park days meant to stimulate interaction among its members. Haythornthwaite notes that one way to increase the technical affordance or possibilities of communication is to place people together in ways that facilitate casual meetings. In this sense, the home school park days became one way of providing a technical affordance for youth in a network of home schooled families to meet. Their network arguably moved from consisting of latent ties of children of parents who supported home schooling, to sets of weak ties which were facilitated by in-person events. In this way, the youth met others whom they might ordinarily have met in a co-located school setting but had not because they were home schooled. However, mere physical co-presence at the park day events did not guarantee the establishment of a social network between the youth, if social networks are defined by the strength of its ties. Yet the introduction of new media within the group provided additional opportunities to interact.

Projecting Maturity

In interviews several of the youth in the northern California group mentioned that some of their fondest memories of their time spent together involved making and sharing videos on the

Internet. They noted that participation in video making strengthened their social bonds with the other members of their group in several ways. For example, many of the videos were challenging to make due to various filming conditions as well as differences in their work styles and goals with regard to future professionalization. The youth created a production company which I will call here Clubhouse Productions, and their YouTube participation varied according to how particular videos helped stimulate interest in their work. For instance, some videos were marketed with their Clubhouse Production logo while one video was not. Fred said that this strategy was intentional, since this film was a parody of certain YouTube genres and thus exhibited intentionally poor quality. By packaging videos in different ways, the group tried to maintain a high quality image and branding of work that was associated with their work and professionalizing image. Typically, the youth's videos dealt with themes such as favorite video games, parodies of online social network sites (such as YouTube and MySpace), parodies of other youth who also posted videos on YouTube, and improvisational skits in which the members of Clubhouse Productions often enacted caricatures of former versions of themselves as they matured over time. The youth say they often weaved in personal characteristics and flaws in their improvisational skits in a way that encoded their perception of their changing maturity levels and demonstrated social skills that they had learned.

The youth posted their videos and participated on YouTube, which one member of the group called their "headquarters of video distribution." YouTube provided not only a mechanism to distribute their videos, but also facilitated interaction with fans and provided material for Clubhouse Production members to view and react to. In some cases, the youth parodied videos they viewed on the site in a way that distanced themselves from other video makers while strengthening the ties within their immediate social network. For instance, in one video, called

Jackass Wannabes,⁴ the members of Clubhouse Productions parody videos in which other youth and kids try to imitate the actor Johnny Knoxville's stunts as depicted in his popular television show *Jackass* (which aired from 2000-2002) and the related film, *Jackass: The Movie*. In the *Jackass* television show and movies, Knoxville performs outrageous (and sometimes disgusting) stunts such as attempting wildly dangerous skateboarding maneuvers.

Fred said he enjoyed the *Jackass* program because he liked the slapstick and brutal nature of the show, which he characterized as funny, ridiculous, and crude. Nevertheless, he and the other Clubhouse Production members were not fans of what they call "Jackass wannabe" movies which are "plaguing the Internet." They view these wannabe films as not particularly funny and as harmful for the kids who imitate dangerous stunts and film them. In response, *Jackass Wannabes* is filled with parodic elements that attend closely to *Jackass* imitation videos on YouTube. By parodying other films, the youth from Clubhouse Productions accomplish several social goals. First, they distinguish themselves from other people whom they disdain for their unoriginal and poorly executed imitations of dangerous stunts. Second, they set themselves apart from youth whom they perceive as making technically low-quality videos and thereby project and negotiate an identity of technical expertise to viewers on YouTube. Lastly, they simultaneously strengthen ties with each other and bond by making videos that allow them to socially experience shared humor that is different from humor they see in the straightforward *Jackass* imitation videos.

Jackass Wannabes is an amusing parody that is filled with grainy, jittery camera work that focuses on oddly-dressed kids who are obviously awkward on camera and who execute a series of stunts such as jumping off dumpsters, knocking one another off of moving skateboards, and

⁴ A pseudonym.

beating each other with brooms handles. In one shot, a boy falls off of a wheel chair while another moves to hit him. A third boy struggles to attempt skateboarding tricks. The youth are constantly laughing throughout the film, finding everything—no matter how excruciatingly trivial—completely hysterical. The film sports odd stylistic effects, such as clichéd wipes and transitions, and intermittent, sudden appearances of over-saturated colors and sepia tones.

Fred noted that although he enjoys the humor of the original *Jackass* shows, he believes that most *Jackass* imitation videos on YouTube are not clever and they are dangerous for the kids who attempt these stunts. Although Fred posted *Jackass Wannabe* on a video sharing site, he did not identify the video as being from Clubhouse Productions because he did not want the group's high quality image to be diminished by association with *Jackass* imitation videos. To his surprise, the video garnered a very large number of views in a short time.⁵ Fred was unsure whether the humor and parody was actually appreciated, or if the video was taken as yet another poorly executed *Jackass* imitation film. That the film garnered so many views made Fred suspicious that it was being interpreted as the latter and he reported feeling *insulted* that the video might actually be popular with the people that Fred and his friends were parodying and distancing themselves from socially. Understanding young people's reception and interpretations of media is important for analyzing how they may share or do not share views about specific kinds of youth experiences (Niesyto et al. 2003).

Fred: ...we wanted to satirize a lot of the videos that imitate *Jackass*, which we also really dislike. We like the original but we don't like kids trying to imitate it 'cause it's not nearly as funny nor is it very wise. So we made a parody of that and we just made *Jackass Wannabe* 'cause that kind of fits with what is found funny with that group of people.

⁵ Fred says that the video garnered some 10,000 views in the course of a day.

Patricia: Yeah, so you like the original MTV stuff with Johnny Knoxville?

Fred: Yeah, I mean, that stuff's entertaining, but we don't care much for kids who try doing that, at least I speak for my brother and me but maybe my friends don't care much for the original *Jackass*, I don't know. But anyway, it was very funny how I, sort of – as a joke, sort of, just so that it was online so I could show it to people who I wanted to have see it, I put *Jackass Wannabe* on Yahoo! Video specifically not putting a watermark on it with our website because I didn't want to have any association with it if anybody accidentally saw it.

So the next day, I went to Yahoo! Video and on the front page is *Jackass Wannabe* and it had 10,000 views which was hilarious to see that people – I don't know if it went past them that it was a joke or if they all really agreed with what we were saying or what. But it was popular which was kind of a punch in our face 'cause we hate how videos like that are popular.

Video-mediated Internet participation on YouTube in this example does not automatically strengthen affective ties between the members of Clubhouse Productions and certain “fans” even though the fans may view and potentially enjoy the *Jackass Wannabe* video. In fact, those who enjoyed the video not as a parody of the *Jackass* imitation genre, but rather as a straightforward attempt at *Jackass* stunts, would not likely find immediate warm reception in the social network of youth who made the *Jackass Wannabe* video. Instead, making and posting the video on the Internet strengthened the local ties between the members of Clubhouse Productions as they attempted to distinguish themselves from other youth on YouTube whom they saw as not particularly creative and as eager to attempt unsupervised, dangerous stunts. Internet participation played a greater role in helping the group coalesce with each other more than with certain *Jackass Wannabe* fans.

The youth's narratives of their video making often included not only formal video making projects but also spontaneous mediated interaction which they portrayed as an important part of their social lives. They described how they took informal footage of each other in everyday and

eventful celebrations. Their reports indicate that video mediation is becoming quite prominent in the social lives of many youth. A number of youth that I spoke to reported bringing cameras to social events and interacting with each other by taking footage and watching the footage at social gatherings. For instance, the members of Clubhouse Productions typically make a movie featuring their immediate and some extended friends at their annual New Year's party. Fred noted that it would be possible for this spontaneous footage to appear in the more professionally-positioned material in the youth's video collection, which blurs what some scholars may see as a traditional division between formal video making and informal video-mediated, personal, interaction. As Haythornthwaite's model predicts, as the youth became closer, they interacted over a larger number of different media channels.

Fred: Yeah, I often carry a camera around to most birthday parties I go to or any sort of social event with my friends. There's always something funny happening and so I get good footage just for my own personal use or just something to document what's happening. Or, you know sometimes we spontaneously make shorts at parties or whatever. We can make movies pretty quickly. Then later in editing, I can kind of polish it up and make it look like it was all something planned. [laughs] Yeah, so we really just spent maybe half an hour on it. So I have the camera with me a lot of the time.

The members of Clubhouse Productions saw their social ties strengthened considerably through creating, sharing, and viewing their own and other youth's videos posted on video sharing sites such as YouTube. At the most, it might be claimed on the basis of their narratives that the youth potentially had briefly interacted in a social configuration that included a series of unconnected, weak dyadic ties. The in-person, home-school based social gatherings provided an affordance for changing the character of the ties but did not guarantee it. With the introduction of new media to the group, the ties were strengthened as the boys chose to make, post, and react to

other videos on YouTube. Again, the introduction of new media does not guarantee, but rather provides another opportunity for increasing social interaction. Their choice of content and their decision to parody content on YouTube further deepened the social bond between the youth in an attempt to differentiate themselves from other youth whom they characterized as not sharing the same maturity or humor as did the increasingly close members of Clubhouse Productions. As video making became more important as a form of bonding, so too did the presence of cameras not only in their goal-oriented videos but also in spontaneous everyday and ritual celebrations in the boys' lives. That video mediation is becoming an increasingly important part of social interaction is a common experience that is also shared by the young men in the second case study, to which we now turn.

Activating Latent Ties

In both case studies, the young men in question lived in relatively close proximity, although this did not guarantee the existence of strong ties, social networks, nor intensive participation in a delineated local community. In the second case study, a group of male youth lived in even closer proximity than the home schooled group, but report never having met until one infamous night in which two young students donned combat gear and battled each other in their dorm's hallway. As the youth tell the story, the encounter started when Brian M. and Brian R. shot pellets at each other from air guns. At one point, Brian M. donned SWAT⁶ gear against which the pellets were ineffective. In retaliation, Brian R. donned a full set of medieval armor which, as a history major, he happened to have on hand. The noise from their scuffle, including the clinking of the armor and pellets, drew out a number of onlookers from their rooms. Several of

⁶ SWAT stands for Special Weapons and Tactics and refers to groups of highly armed, specially trained police task forces.

the onlookers began filming the incident, some with the idea that such footage would be appropriate for YouTube. As the youth explain below, they did not know the people who observed and filmed them before that incident took place.

Brian M: Yeah. We made new friends with the people who filmed us because we'd never met them before. They just came out of their rooms like, "Hey, let's film this." So one – two of the guys that were filming became new friends.

Although one of the youth characterized the video recording as spontaneous, another noted that at the time of the filming, he thought the encounter would be especially ideal to film and post on YouTube. The first meeting between the combatants and their camera-wielding observers was therefore a mediated one that was motivated by the intent to record the encounter for personal amusement and for circulating over the Internet. YouTube in particular is known for supporting a genre of video that involves personal, spontaneous, and raw footage of amusing or interesting people and events. The introduction of the new media into the mock battle encounter facilitated a change in ties among the youth. Using Haythornthwaite's terminology, the youth's description of their relationship indicates their ties were latent, in that they had never met but had the technical affordance to do so since they lived in the same dorm. The ties became activated as the youth met and bonded over what became a mediated interaction. The youth took the footage, edited it and posted it to YouTube. In combination with other experiences, the youth eventually became friends, having initially found common humor over an event that they experienced and enjoyed partially by recording and publicly sharing it.

Circulating video online involves a number of practices including posting and reading discourse related to specific videos. Specifically, YouTube allows viewers with accounts to rate

and post comments to videos. During interviews, I often asked interviewees to identify people who had commented on their videos and to react to their comments. In the excerpt below, I asked Brian M. to identify a commenter who had asked a question about who filmed the video. Questions are a common way for viewers to begin to engage in a dialogue with people who post videos. In some cases this dialogue eventually blossoms into an online acquaintanceship or even friendship. In other cases, hostile or harshly critical comments create tensions between the video maker and the commenter (Lange 2007). In the excerpt below, Brian M. explains that one of the commenters was someone they knew from the dorm, but did not know well. However, the addition of the new media in the form of YouTube into the group enabled another communicative affordance between the commenter and the youth who participated in making and sharing the video.

Patricia: ...you had some comments here to the video. [Commenter1] said, "Who filmed this?" Do you know who that person is?

Brian M.: Yeah. She lives in the dorm. She's one of the girls that live in the dorm that knows me and Brian R. and several guys on the floor.

Patricia: Hmm hmm. That's interesting.

Brian M.: So we know her.

Patricia: That's interesting she posted a comment even though she's right near you, she could have just asked you.

Brian M.: We don't get to see her much because she's been working the UPS third shift. It's the ultra graveyard shift. It's the most horrible shift you could do. So she works from about, I think, maybe 2:00 to 7:00 in the mornings or more than that. And we haven't really seen her this semester, but apparently she's here. But we just don't – we don't see her.

Patricia: And um, so then you said – you answered, "Random people with cameras," filmed this. So was there more than one? Do you remember?

Brian M: Well, at that time when I started editing the film I didn't know the names of those people who started to film. Like I didn't know who they were at all. I'd never met them. They just came out with their cameras. So I was like, "Okay." So I – so I just – I didn't know their names. And I forgot to ask. And they were all asleep and I just, they were random people.

Haythornthwaite (2002) correctly notes that in-person interaction is but one type of affordance that may stimulate ties. She argues that no affordance, whether in person in a particular place, or a mediated affordance should be privileged over another in terms of social appropriateness. As Wellman (1996) points out, post-industrial changes in work rhythms and community composition mean that co-habitation does not guarantee strong ties, social networks, or the formation of larger communities. Combining Haythornthwaite's and Wellman's frameworks, we see that living in the same dorm did not guarantee that Commenter1 would participate in the youth's social network in a meaningful way. Her work rhythms in fact required her to be absent in the dorm at times when intensive socialization would ordinarily take place. Yet, through the introduction of new media to the group, she was able to comment and participate in the youth's mediated encounter. Note that her question about who filmed the event is answered with the response "random people with cameras." At that time, the people who helped create the event were "random" in that they were not known to the main protagonists. These co-located but random participants had not yet played a meaningful role in the youth's social networks. Introducing new media in the form of YouTube provided an additional affordance or mechanism for local youth to participate in the youth's social network. By adding her public comments on YouTube over the Internet she was able to reinforce her social presence, which had not been particularly visible in an in-person context although she lived in the same building.

Comments posted to videos are not always positive or supportive in a social network sense to video creators. Negative comments and criticisms posted to many videos on YouTube belie the notion that because of its wider number of affectively available cues, *video* sharing will necessarily stimulate more affective exchanges, an acknowledgment of actual humans behind a video, and a sense of “being there” to video viewers (Lange 2007). In addition, as indicated by Commenter2’s posting, the assumption that text is not sufficiently capable of communicating affective information is also challenged.⁷ Commenter2 posted the comment, “can I please have my five minutes and seven seconds back?” Such a comment arguably displays negative affective feelings toward the video. Brian R. had not yet noticed the comment at the time of the interview, which illustrates the idea that the communicative affordance of any media, including YouTube does not guarantee that such communication will take place.

Patricia: And then Commenter2, did you know that person?

Brian R: No, in fact, I didn’t even know this one was up here. I just now read it. I was like, “No, you can’t have your five minutes back.”

Patricia: What kind of a comment is that to say, “Can I have my five minutes back?”

Brian R: Apparently, they didn’t like it, but you know what, they can stick it.

Patricia: Yeah.

Brian R.’s reaction indicates that Brian R. and Commenter2 had different interpretations of the video’s meaning. Whereas Commenter2 perceived it as a waste of time and displayed regret in spending moments of his life in viewing it, Brian R. saw the video as “entertaining” and

⁷ Such an assumption is an odd artifact of certain interpretations of CMC research (see for instance, Tannen 1998), and would not likely be supported by many CMC scholars or by researchers in the fields of literary criticism and rhetoric.

“unique” and as part of an enjoyable memory with other youth in his dorm. Interviewees report that after the incident others asked to be included in any future videos that the youth made, showing an interest in socializing through mediated participation. In a sense, Commenter2 writes himself out of the social network by posting a comment that quite effectively and affectively indicates his lack of interest in the video and presumably the people and events within it. His negative comment does not display achieving feelings of “being there” despite the fact that the event was encoded in video, which provides a range of visual and aural cues. Brian R. said he did not know Commenter2, whose comments did not prompt Brian R. to try and meet him or draw Commenter2 into the emerging social network. The exchange illustrates how video in and of itself with its supposed richness of cues does not guarantee more successful, warm exchanges. Instead, as Haythornthwaite suggests, a more productive approach is to examine the social relationships and accompanying use of media to understand how it facilitates or prompts changes in the intensity of interactions within an existing or latent social network.

Conclusion

Lines of research that discuss how Internet interaction threatens or enhances local community, or transforms the nature of community from the local to the dispersed tend to presume that local groups inherently form communities. Yet as Haythornthwaite (2002) points out, simple affordance of any type of communication, whether written or visual, mediated or co-located, does not guarantee the existence of even weak social ties, much less larger social networks or communities. Further, as Wellman (1996) argues, post-industrial forces have changed the distribution of the strongest sets of ties from being local to being dispersed. Such changes have occurred over a long period, rather than emerging only with the advent of

popularized Internet communication. Instead of analyzing the effects of new media in ways that presume existence of community on the basis of mere co-locality, a more fruitful approach is to understand the nature of particular social relationships and study how new media is used and how it may prompt changes in the dynamics of those relationships. As this research suggests, in some cases, the addition of media does not serve to weaken or enhance pre-existing local community but may create building blocks of new community by serving as an additional affordance that strengthens weak ties or awakens latent ties that may lie dormant in face-to-face contexts.

Assuming that a medium with particular associated characteristics is better or worse for supporting social interaction in general is not a useful approach and ignores important contextual particulars that exhibit varied uses of media. As the case studies suggest, no particular affordance should be privileged over another in terms of its potential role in supporting interaction, depending upon affective context. For instance, assuming that video sharing prompts a greater sense of “being there” and affective interaction merely because video offers more cues than text overdetermines a video’s effects among different viewers who exist in different types of social groups. Similarly, presuming that text is insufficient for affective display ignores how comments posted to a video can provide mechanisms for sharing affective information, both positive and negative. On video sharing sites such as YouTube, it is the combination of video and text that helps negotiate affective exchanges, identities, and social relationships. Such affective information may influence how a commenter may be perceived and included—or excluded—in a particular social group.

Video cameras and video-capable cell phones are becoming important in mediating the social encounters of certain youth in the United States. Of particular interest for future research will be

determining how media use plays a role in influencing participation in social networks in every day youth experiences. The data indicate that observation through mediated recording counts as an important form of participation among many youth. In these interactions, observation of a social encounter is not perceived as the passive binary opposite of active participation. Rather, observing and recording experiences are legitimate and even desirable ways of increasing sociality among certain youth. Such trends are worthy of further investigation and may well change common scholarly assumptions about the relationship between what counts as meaningful participation across a range of social encounters both in person and mediated.

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