BUILDING A SENSE OF ONLINE RURAL COMMUNITY:
Exploring the complex interactions between technological characteristics and social influences

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Abstract

This paper reports preliminary findings from a larger ethnographic study of two discussion lists which have been formed as part of the rural women's groups, Australian Women in Agriculture and the Queensland Rural Women's Network. The central purpose is to use Baym's (1998) computer mediated communication (CMC) framework to examine how a sense of community is constructed in these online groups. Data from four months of messages are examined in terms of the five dimensions which Baym (1998) argues shapes virtual communication in discussion lists. These are the external contexts in which the use of CMC is set, the temporal structure of the group, the infrastructure of the computer system, the purposes for which CMC is used, and the characteristics of the group and its members. The way in which these pre-existing factors influence emergent forms of expression, identity, relationships and behavioural norms in the lists is also explored.

Introduction

Over the past decade, globalisation, agricultural restructuring, the rationalisation of government services and a downturn in farm commodity prices have had a pervasive impact on Australian rural communities. One of the most critical of these impacts has been described as the "shriveling of a sense of community" (Haslam-McKenzie 2000, p. 81). While this loss of, or decline in, community for rural and regional Australians provides the broad context for this paper, it is not the material or physical community with which we are concerned. It is, in contrast, the online or virtual community. Our purpose is to explore aspects of community in two discussion lists, for rural and regional women, established as extensions of the rural women's groups, Australian Women in Agriculture (AWiA) and the Queensland Rural Women's Network (QRWN). To do so, we analyse messages posted on the lists over a four month period in the context of the computer mediated communication (CMC) framework developed by Baym (1998).

Online communities

With Fernback (1999), we argue that community can be defined in both functional and symbolic terms. For example, the women involved in our research can be functionally grouped into an aggregated physical location such as rural or urban. They can also be grouped symbolically in terms of the concept of 'community of practice'

(*see* Johnson, 2001). Women in AWiA and QRWN are a 'community of practice' in that their relations are maintained through a set of collective activities across time (Jankowski 2002). As a 'community of practice', AWiA and QRWN membership is representative of both stakeholder interests (agrarian private and public sector) and individual rural women working collaboratively to sustain rural life. The women involved in this research can thus be defined as belonging to multiple communities which are both functional and symbolic, the essence of which is a sense of commonality based, not only on spatial relations, but also quality of interpersonal and social relationships (Fernback, 1999). Prior to the dynamic adoption of the Internet and subsequent research undertaken by sociologist and communication theorists, community studies generally used a definition of community which was primarily essentialist without regard for the *process* of community. In this paper, we embrace the symbolic understanding of community, which encompasses offline, online and virtual lives and look at the process of community building online. Detractors of online community adhere to a nostalgic view of community, which defines community as a local phenomenon, unmediated by technology, and bound by place (Jones 1995).

In this paper, we are not arguing that all online gatherings are communities, because some chat rooms and online discussion groups are simply a means of communication among Internet users with common interests. Rather, this research is about investigating personal investment, intimacy, and commitment, which characterise our ideal sense of community. Further to this is the issue of the extent to which the linking by computers and virtuality influences community. As Jones (1995, p. 32) states, the computer and the Internet "inherently affect the ways we think of linking up to each other, and thus they fit squarely into our concerns about community." Thus, while the community under investigation by Baym (1998) was for soap opera fans, her model is particularly relevant to our purposes in that it is based on the assumption that "online groups are often woven into the fabric of offline life rather than in opposition to it (p.63)." As such it provides a means of understanding the way in which the virtual and online coexist and overlap in the lives of rural women.

Methodology

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger research project examining the use of technology by AWiA and QRWN members. A major part of the project is an ethnographic study of the groups' discussion lists which will include interviews with members, an examination of postings to the lists over a year long period, and a survey of list and non-list members (Hine, 2000).

At this beginning stage of the research, four months of messages from both lists have been downloaded and analysed using the qualitative software program NUD*IST VIVO (Qualitative Data and Solutions, 1999). In total, 495 messages were posted over this period. A range of these messages are utilised in the paper to illustrate the process of building online community as we look at each of the five dimensions which Baym (1998) says interact to influence and create online communities. In the following, section we examine each of these influences in detail. They are: external context, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and participant characteristics.

Examining Online Community
External context

Baym (1998, p. 40) explains that, like all communication, talk in cyberspace is "situated in multiple external contexts" which ground and shape the interaction. Perhaps the most critical of external influences on participants of the AWiA and QRWN discussion lists is the fact that they are members of these lists because of their existing involvement in the networks. While AWiA was formed in 1992 and QRWN in 1993, their discussion lists were only established in 1998 and 1999 respectively. There was, therefore, an existing shared community of values and language amongst list members before they met online. The connection between the lists and the networks of AWiA and QRWN is constantly maintained and reinforced by the use of the lists to conduct organisational business as well as to meet the networking goals intrinsic to both groups.

As members of the discussion lists and the networks, AWiA and QRWN, participants are all women who live in rural areas and/or women who share an interest in rural life. This is an aspect of the external environment which is critical to communication on the lists. Most obviously, this determines what is discussed on the lists (e.g. health services in rural areas, home schooling, child labour on farms). Because "the weather" is inextricably linked to many lives of farm women, it is not surprising that it is the most common subject discussed on the list. Even when an email deals with an unrelated subject, participants often make mention of the weather in opening or closing.

The external context does not just determine what is said online. It also determines what is not said. Across both of the rural women's lists there is a marked absence of discussion about issues which could be viewed as controversial or contentious. This is a phenomenon that has been noted by Lennie (2002, p. 303) in another study of an Australian rural women's online discussion list called 'welink'. Lennie (2002) suggests this is because of the culture of 'care and connection' that has come to dominate the list as a result of its feminist history and the friendship formed amongst a diverse women's group. It is also possible, we would argue, that the sense of "care and connection" which leads to particular silences may be connected to the women participants notion of the rural idyll. The 'rural idyll' refers to a set of beliefs and assumptions about the superiority of rural over urban life – as more harmonious, caring and community oriented (Little and Austin, 1996). This 'idyll' may not, of course, exist in reality, but this does not negate the fact that it still may influence people's behaviours and actions (Bell 1992; Hughes 1997). List members may thus avoid raising contentious topics to maintain their sense of themselves as friendly and responsive rural women.

While highlighting the shared external environment of participants, we do not wish to suggest that there is a singular identity "rural women". The multiple identities of farm women has not just been well reported in the literature (Grace and Lennie, 1998), it is also evident online. One graphic example is the signatory file used by a farm women on the QRWN list. Like others on the list, she makes reference to her occupational identity, but unlike those who name themselves as, for example, "lecturer" or "policy adviser", this participant signs:

> *Mum, Aunty, Cousin, Niece, Daughter, Sister, Wife, Widow, Partner, Lover, Chef, Farmer, Bookkeeper, Secretary, Personal Assistant, Lobbyist, Naturalist, Botanical Field Hand, Environmental Management Advisor, Journalist, Coordinator, Researcher, If it has got a motor and can break Apprentice Mechanic, Fencer, Concreter, Tiler, Painter, Carpenter, Cubby House Engineer, Bicycle Instructor, Psychologist, Social Worker, Volunteer, QRWN Member (Email 104: 25/04/2002).*

The list participants' multiple identities are also evident in their participation across different networks. They post messages on the AWiA and QRWN discussion lists as members of these groups *and* as members of other groups, such as Women's Electoral Lobby, Women's Action Alliance, the Foundation of Australian Agricultural Women, and the Arts and Culture Network.

Group purposes
Network interactions of AWiA and QRWN online cannot be divorced from the offline social and political contexts of the groups. Baym (1998) explains that this influences the topics discussed in CMC, as well as the level of involvement in what is said in CMC.

AWiA and QRWN share common goals around which women's online interaction are constructed. For example, the networks aspire to raise the profile and status of rural women or women in agriculture, and both networks implicitly focus on mobilizing women to work together to create sustainable futures for rural communities. However, there are also notable differences between the networks' goals which influence the online communication patterns and sharing of values and interests in list discussions. In particular, AWiA, is an agri-political group which has an agenda to be recognized both nationally and internationally as a political and economic force (AWiA, 2002). While QRWN also seeks to "raise the status of all rural women," it aims to do so through a more localized process of networking women across the state of Queensland (QRWN 2002). Its goals rest at the level of the individual rather than the nation state in that it seeks to provide "personal development", a "support system" and a "stimulating and interesting forum for discussion" (QRWN, 2002).

The way in which these differing goals and foci influence the communication processes and tasks embedded in the groups' online interaction can be illustrated by the way in which the topic of 'food' has been discussed on lists. During the four month data collection period, food was a topic on both lists. However, the discussion of food between the groups was notably divergent. Group interaction on AWiA constructed the topic of food as a political issue, with recent discussions and sharing of information focusing on the GMO debate, gene technology and biotech research agendas. As one woman wrote:

> *Happy New Year to AWiA members, I am confident it has to be a far better year than the last. The GM debate is hotting up with the proposed commercial release expected in April this year. I would like to recommend our Network of Concerned Farmers website on www.non-gm-farmers.com for updates on the GM debates. (Email 495: 10/01/2003).*

The above message is illustrative of functional communication, focused on distributing information related to the network's offline organisational goals. By comparison, QRWN's list could be categorised as much more "chatty" in style, which is reflective of the network's aims which articulate aspirations of supporting and enhancing rural families and communities, and providing a forum for discussion and debate. Women on QRWN would be aware of the GMO debate, however is an issue which has not generated significant discussion. However, the broader subject of food has been the focus of an extended list discussion, as women have shared diet and cooking tips and exchanged recipes.

Further analysis of the communicative practices of both lists reveals that accepted talk is not only constrained to transmission of relevant information amongst the group, but can also include the transmission of values and negotiation of private issues which could be difficult to discuss publicly. One AWiA member wrote:

> *I married a farmer, now how do I survive? Can I share with you a little of how I'm feeling ... I've only been farming for 12 years, and I have no idea how others have done it all their lives. I'm not looking forward to dairying in 2003 and farming for another 12 years. (Email 487, 26/12/2002)*

Whilst some group purposes of the AWiA and QRWN lists are predetermined, others have emerged within the groups' interaction. Baym (1998, p. 47) highlights, "personal talk over extended periods of time, maintaining friendships and acquaintances become another purpose of the interaction." As a QRWN member wrote:

> *Thankyou, thankyou for all your support ... I am in awe of the support you ladies have given, I can't thankyou enough and I am not sure how I am going to tackle this so all the advice is appreciated. (Email 491: 22/04/2002).*

Participant characteristics
A third factor identified by Baym (1998) as influencing CMC is group and/or member characteristics. AWiA and QRWN share a similar historical legacy. The urban women's movement, the continued dominance by men of decision-making positions in producer groups, and the declining fortunes of rural communities are all factors which contributed to their emergence (Teather, 1995). While both are voluntary organisations and have a political agenda, AWiA differs from QRWN in that its scope is national and specifically focused on agricultural women.

Foundation members of QRWN and AWiA sought to establish organisations which were different from existing rural groups such as the Country Women's Association (CWA) and the National Farmers' Federation, as these were perceived as being overly hierarchical and too highly formalized (Alston 2000). Thus, while both groups have executive committees, there is an ongoing emphasis on flexibility and participation. Any member of AWiA, for example, can make representations to industry or government on particular issues. This role is not reserved for those in positional leadership. QRWN also aims for a flatter structure by making extensive use of working parties and sub-committees. The lists have been seen as important to more inclusive decision-making in that they are engaged by the leadership to consult with members, as well as to provide feedback on the activities of the Executives.

In 1998, QRWN was successful in obtaining national funding to conduct Internet and email training in rural and regional Queensland (Simpson, Pini and Daws, 2001). This project, entitled BridgIT, and a successor project BridgIT II, funded in 2002, have had a significant influence on list communication in two respects. Firstly, the membership has had a high level of awareness of technology training opportunities, as well as the capacity to take up these opportunities in their own homes. Project developments, including the most recent establishment of a 'BridgIT Help Desk,' are regularly posted on the QRWN list. The projects have also facilitated a sense, within the group membership, that the organisation is at the forefront of new technologies as the following demonstrates:

> *It is that time of year again for the Women in Information Technology Awards…I encourage you to apply for this award, which provides substantial prizes for the winners. Last year two of our members were finalists for the Rural Woman Award, and it was won by the daughter of one of our QRWN members. (Email 250: 08/04/2002).*

Detailed demographic data on the participants of QRWN and AWiA lists is not available at this stage,[1] but we do know that all involved are women. While some would argue that it is possible to draw conclusions about communication patterns on the lists based on their gendered nature (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000; Reeder, 1996), we would argue that this is limited in ignoring differences between women. Already, at this exploratory stage of the research, we have found that AWiA and QRWN members utilise their lists and engage their lists quite differently from each other. This is a reminder that to understand the construction of these online communities we will need to examine other variables besides a singular focus on the members' gendered identities as 'women'.

Temporal structure
AWiA and QRWN are both asynchronistic meetings for women online, and thus participants do not have to be online at the same time to read and respond to messages. Email messages are simply stored in participants' mailboxes until individual owners remove them at their convenience. This is important when viewed in the context of farm women's lives, and particularly their increasingly high levels of participation in off-farm work (Alston, 1995). This busyness is commented on by the AWiA and QRWN list members as the following demonstrates:

> *Have just accessed my e-mails for the last fortnight and found that a lot have had rain. After the flu and then the rain we have been off the air for a few days. Our telephone lines aren't used to all this rain. (Email172: 30/08/2002)*

Different temporal structures of online communication also influence the group's communication patterns (Baym, 1998). For example, asynchronistic communication impacts on the availability of immediate feedback, but gives participants the opportunity to compose and rewrite messages before sending them. A familiar expression on this, illustrated by one QRWN woman:

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[1] This will be sought in the next stage of the research which will be a survey of online members.

> *... I wrote this email last weekend and didn't get to send it until now. The orange cake recipe Georgie sent in is a Sephardic (from around the Mediterranean). (Email 200: 18/12/2002)*

The temporal structure of QRWN and AWiA is also influenced by where different members are situated and where their computers are located. For example, messages posted by bureaucrats are limited on weekends, as they typically access the list from their office. In contrast, messages from women on the land, for example, are generally written later in the day and evenings throughout the week, from their domestic space. What is interesting about this domestic space is its pervasiveness in list conversations. That is, even though analysis of the email messages reveals that list participants construct the technology to meet the business needs of the women's networks and to serve organisation goals and objectives as outlined in the above group, the domestic space regularly interrupts AWiA and QRWN business. As one QRWN women wrote:

> *Must get moving. I have supper almost ready ...a turkey pot pie with leftovers from Easter dinner. Then tomorrow we have to head off to a "Celebration of Life" in an art gallery for a friend that died a week ago. They hope it will be upbeat all the way. (Email 3: 02/04/2002)*

The blurring of the spaces between 'business' and 'leisure', 'work and home' and 'public and private' which occur in list discussions reveal the binary categorizations offered in some discussions of technology to be somewhat limited. For example, Cockburn and Ormond (1993) differentiate between 'brown good' and 'white good', where the former are those goods associated with leisure and entertainment while the later are the less technical domestic goods which are primarily functional. AWiA and QRWN members, however, construct the technology as a blend of both. They combine work and family and initiate business activity from home, yet the business activity of posting information occurs alongside the sharing of deeply personal information and support.

System infrastructure
At this stage in the study, we have not collected information that describes the various system configurations of AWiA and QRWN members' computers or details about computer and Internet access speeds. However, the inadequacy of rural telecommunications and requisite Internet connection speeds has been well document by other research (*see* The Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999). It is clearly evident that limitations in system infrastructure influences online interactions in both AWiA and QRWN lists. Compensation for these limitations has given rise to specific online behavioural norms (such as "Keep chat listings to email text messages only - no attachments"). An AWiA woman explained:

> *For many, our email is principally used for business, it shares our main phone line and our connection speeds can be extremely slow ... The following are some suggestions which may help us all to enjoy and benefit from the wonderful networking opportunities of chat lists. (Email 252: 03/04/2002)*

The above quotation is also illustrative of the connection between the system adaptability and group interaction. In a number of rural communities, system infrastructure is poor. In response to this problem, and demonstrated by the above

AWiA member, members attempt to formalize systems to better meet the networking needs of the group.

Another variable which describes system adaptability is the capacity of anonymous entries (Baym, 1998). Neither AWiA nor QRWN support anonymity in so far as the online group membership is a condition of the broader organisational networks. In addition, the use of email programs facilitates the identification of subject and sender, which allows users to seek and select topics of importance easily, or alternatively to avoid topics or messages from particular individuals. Further evidence of the influence of system infrastructure on emergent social patterns in AWiA and QRWN is how the "paucity of face-to-face cues has resulted in innovative alternatives rather than a lack of expressivity" (Baym 1998, p.44). For example, an established practice across both lists is the use of parenthesis as a means of contributing either qualifying statements or providing further elaboration on an issue. The following email demonstrates this communication strategy:

> *Maybe someone could talk to other culturally minded QRWN's and see what sort of writing grants are around. (Not me at present through) (Email 179: 30/12/2002)*

Another type of communication practice prevalent on the list is the use of expressive exclamation marks to communicate emotion. One member wrote simply – but evocatively:

> *Re: Rain!!!!!!!!! (Email 172: 01/12/2002).*

Nonverbal cues are also evident in the communication pattern:

> *Hope you don't mind me "butting in" but I have been keeping an eye on the celiac/recipe conversation … (Email 187: 02/12/2002)*

Emergent community within QRWN and AWiA discussion lists

In the previous section of the paper we have explained what Baym (1998, p. 51) refers to as the five 'pre-existing' structures which impact on communication and influence the process by which an online community emerges. To understand the way in which these influences may shape a particular community, Baym (1998, p.50) uses the concept of "appropriation", whereby "participants pick and choose from what is available at times using things in unexpected ways, at times not using some of the possibilities". Through this process, emerge new forms of expression, identity, relationships and behavioural norms. In the following section of the paper, we illustrate this process of appropriation in emergent community online, by tracing a QRWN discussion on skin cancer. The discussion began with a posting from a woman in Longreach in Central Queensland seeking assistance for a Perth woman. Her message read:

> *Date: Sat, 13 Apr 2002 08:37:58*
> *Subject: [qrwn-l] 4 months accommodation in Brisbane for melanoma patient*
>
> *Hello all*

I am seeking your help with the following. A good friend of my sisters – a lady named Julie lives in Perth (as does my sister). She has been diagnosed for some time with an advanced melanoma. Basically there is not a lot they can do through normal medical channels however she has signed up for a trial in Brisbane ... The catch is she has to have the treatment as an outpatient ... Does anyone have any ideas re affordable accommodation that would suit Jan? I wondered if the CWA or an organisation like that might have something suitable? Any ideas please email me back with contacts etc please.

The request reveals a degree of self-disclosure as well as the existence of online relationships imbued with reciprocity. The message is also illustrative of QRWN's group purpose to provide "a support system through networking in all areas of our state". This aim is extended, however, by the borderless online QRWN community. In addition, this messages is typical of a number of postings which demonstrate how online community of QRWN's temporal structure and system infrastructure facilitates the action of support and a sense of "care and connection" within the group (Lennie, 2002). One woman responded directly to the list the next day with the following suggestion:

Date: Sun, 14 Apr 2002 16:58:28
Subject: Re: [qrwn-l] 4 months accommodation in Brisbane for melanoma patient

... the Cancer Unit at the Mater Hospital would have recommendations of accom. as they often have country folk on extended stays ... I think the hospital has special units for folk to stay in while having treatment. Good luck with this.

The following rejoinder from the message initiator provides an even more explicit example of the relational forum into which QRWN has evolved. A few days later, she posted the following message:

I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who responded to my message ... . The response was magnificent. Thanks also to those who forwarded this message through to appropriate sources. The cancer help line people have been absolutely fantastic ... I am also thrilled that Jean ... (old time buddy of Barbara ...) rang this morning to say Myra ... (CWA state president) is ringing Julie herself to offer support ... You can't ask more than that. So thank you all. I will keep you posted when Julie arrives in Brisbane. ... Thanks also to Vickie ... and Julie ... for offers of personal support when she arrives. ... Really the response was overwhelming. People are good.

The above postings demonstrate the process of online community and highlight how the preexisting structures of QRWN, and its group purpose, have been extended through online community. Members of QRWN are able to exploit the Internet's features in order to develop and sustain relationships, beyond the boundary of their physical community. In fact, the above story illustrates where online relationships have facilitated the needs of a woman's offline life. In the following table, we summarise the five sources of CMC influences and illustrate how these shape emergent online community in both AWiA and QRWN.

EMERGENT COMMUNITY WITHIN QRWN AND AWIA DISCUSSION LISTS				
Pre-existing sources of Influence on QRWN and AWiA discussion lists	**Emergent Social Meaning**			
	Forms of Expression	*Identity*	*Relationship*	*Behavioural Norms*
External Context	Use of elaborate signature files including contact details – connecting members to their physical spaces. Determines what is discussed – interpretative practice of using the weather as a form of expression. Determines what is not discussed.	Not anonymous. Interact as themselves.	Some pre-existing face to face relationships or face to face relationships developed after first meeting online.	A shared significance of life in rural areas.
Temporal Structure	Tolerance of people coming and going from list discussion. Empathy for interruptions in discussion because of other commitments.	Identities built over time. Multiple roles able to be accommodated by the asynchronistic nature of list.	Can receive supportive responses to messages immediately. Can respond to postings on an individual basis – build a personal relationship with a particular list member.	Has provided time to develop norms. Acceptable to post a message in response to one that was originally posted some days before. Manifest in the language of members e.g. commenting on the busyness of lives and lacking time to be online.
System Infrastructure	Smiley faces, use of parenthesis, new forms of speech, expressivity	The technology creates the capacity to link women from different occupational groups, in different geographical sites etc Facilitates breath of network membership.	Coordination of network activities facilitate the building of relationships between Executive members. Emphasis on transactional rather than interpersonal communication may impede relationship building.	Acceptance of not sending elaborate emails e.g. html/colour because of problems with infrastructure.
Group Purposes	Sense of shared meaning of what it is to be a member of AWiA or QRWN.	Anonymity out of the question as members of the broader networks AWiA and QRWN. Creates further intimacy.	Goals of groups give emphasis to support, networking etc.	National and agri-political focus of AWiA means emphasis given to the technology as a business tool. This is in contrast to a broader conceptualization of technology within QRWN.
Participant Characteristics	As members of communities of practice they have shared meanings of what is rural, farming, members of groups etc.	Members of AWiA and QRWN. Multiplicity of networks.	Impact of the notion of the rural idyll. Shared background of participants creates commonality of experience.	Subjects discussed typically focus on commonalities rather than differences.

Conclusion

A significant proportion of Australian research on the use of technology by rural people has focused on measuring a range of quantitative variables such as the farm management impacts of internet use, the types of online content for Australian farmers, and demand for online services in rural areas (see Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, http://www.rirdc.gov.au). While such work has been valuable in a range of respects, it has done little to further our understanding of the way in which rural people are engaging new communication technologies to build online communities and the gendered nature of online communities. Nor has it been able to assist us in understanding the relationship between the virtual and real communities of rural people.

In this paper, we have explored how rural women's lives are influenced through networking and linking via computers and the Internet. Our starting point was to examine the communication patterns and relational exchanges of women involved in AWiA and QRWN for emergent community. The preliminary analysis provides evidence of an online community which has evolved between list members of AWiA and QRWN. The analysis has also highlighted how online relationships are woven into the fabric of women's offline lives. Future research will explore the complexities of online and offline community which sustain women in rural settings.

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