

## Pernicious virtual communities: Identity, polarisation and the Web 2.0

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**Abstract.** The importance of online social spaces is growing. New Web 2.0 resources allow the creation of social networks by any netizen with minimal technical skills. These communities can be extremely narrowly focussed. In this paper, I identify two potential costs of membership in narrowly focussed virtual communities. First, that narrowly focussed communities can polarise attitudes and prejudices leading to increased social cleavage and division. Second, that they can lead sick individuals to revel in their illness, deliberately indulging in their disease and denying the edicts of the medical profession. I specifically examine illness communities centred on the now defunct Multiple Personality Disorder. I highlight these potential problems and point to some technologies that may help combat them.

**Key words:** community, identity, mental illness, openness, polarisation, social networking, Web 2.0

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful what we pretend to be.<sup>1</sup>

The Internet offers an unparalleled ability to create ourselves in our own image. It gives users an unprecedented capacity to determine their initial presentations to others. It permits us to find those with exactly the same interests as our own. It allows us to easily create communities that signal who we take ourselves to be. In short, it enables users to be masters of their identities. The Internet, especially the new improved Web 2.0, is a powerful new force in the manufacture of identity.

The Internet of the past few years is a very different beast to the web of just a decade ago. It is so different it has a new name: the Web 2.0. The exact nature of the Web 2.0 is contested, but everyone agrees it centrally involves social networking. Google's two most searched terms for 2006 were the social networking sites Bebo and MySpace.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> K. Vonnegut. *Mother Night*. Dell Publishing: New York, NY, 1999. Quote from p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> BBC News. *Social Networks Top Google Search*. Accessed from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6189809.stm> December 19, 2006. Google's most searched terms for 2006 were dominated by Web 2.0 services. Apart from Bebo and MySpace, searches for content on Metacafe, YouTube, music streaming provided by the likes of Radioblog and the information delivered by the Wikipedia all featured heavily. The most searched item on the Wikipedia was the term "Web 2.0" itself.

The social opportunities these spaces provide are extremely important to the modern netizen. A recent survey by the US-based Center for the Digital Future found that 43% of members of online communities claimed to feel 'as strong' about their virtual communities as their real world communities.<sup>3</sup>

But there are some serious potential troubles. Web 2.0 tools mean it is possible to create and participate in communities composed of those just like yourself, whatever your interests, opinion, personality or prejudices. And there are good reasons to fear such narrowly focussed (or narrowcast) communities. In this paper, I will explain why such narrowing can be problematic. First, I examine the polarising of attitudes and prejudices that are likely to be produced

<sup>3</sup> Center for the Digital Future. *Surveying the Digital Future*. Accessed from [www.digitalcenter.org/](http://www.digitalcenter.org/) March 10, 2007. The reasons why our virtual selves and our online communities have become so important are no doubt varied and complex. One possible reason is the loss of real world social spaces. D. Williams (Why Game Studies Now? *Games and Culture* 1(1): 13–16, 2005) notes that the increase in online social gaming correlates with a loss of physical social spaces. Williams argues that the need for social interaction does not decline with the loss of physical social spaces. Hence social spaces become virtual; people seek social interaction online to compensate for the lack of such interaction in the real world and, thereby, online communities for social interaction evolve.

within narrowcast virtual communities. Second, I investigate communities centred on illness arguing that if your identity is constructed around an illness, finding like-people may compound the illness, producing a range of unfortunate and troublesome outcomes. Hence I will establish that there are two potentially great costs to narrowcast virtual communities: an individual cost and a social cost. Further, I will suggest that attempting to remove these costs by introducing external controls actually reinforces the very attitude that makes these communities problematic. The communities in question are closed communities: communities with extremely restricted membership who silence dissenting voices and fail to engage in wide and healthy debate. To attempt to control such communities by imposing external rules buys into the closure that is the root cause of the troubles. Closed communities are to be fought with openness, not more closure. I point to some existing technologies that can help promote such openness. Thus this paper will attempt three tightly connected aims: (i) to draw attention to the costs of virtual community closure; (ii) to suggest that such closure is to be fought with openness; and, (iii) to point to some Internet resources and technologies that may be able support such openness.

There can no longer be serious doubt that the Internet can support the creation of communities. There may have been grounds for scepticism in the past,<sup>4</sup> but the net of today contains many an existence proof of well-functioning communities. Previously, I have argued that many of these communities are beneficial to their members.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most significantly, they can support substantive social and learning outcomes otherwise unavailable to certain

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, H. Dreyfus. Anonymity versus commitment: The dangers of education on the Internet. *Ethics and Information Technology* 1(1): 15–21, 1999; and W.A. Galston. Does the Internet Strengthen Community? *The Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy* 19(4), 1999. Accessed from [http://www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/fall1999/internet\\_community.htm](http://www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/fall1999/internet_community.htm) May 10, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See C. Townley and M. Parsell. Technology and Academic Virtue: Student Plagiarism Through the Looking Glass. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 6(4): 271–277, 2004; C. Townley and M. Parsell. The Cost of a Common Good: Putting a Price on Spam. *Philosophy and the Contemporary World*, 12(2): 68–75. 2005; C. Townley and M. Parsell. Cyber Disobedience: Gandhian Cyberpunks, *Scan* 3(3). 2006; Available at [http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal\\_id=81](http://scan.net.au/scan/journal/display.php?journal_id=81); M. Parsell and J. Duke-Yonge. Virtual Communities of Enquiry: An Argument for Their Necessity and Advice for Their Creation. *E-Learning*, 4(2): 181–193. 2007; Available at <http://www.wwords.co.uk/rss/abstract.asp?j=elea&aid=3031>.

members of society.<sup>6</sup> Further, considered as virtual artifacts, they carry considerable ‘internal’ goods. First, they are robust enough to ground moral behaviour defined internally to the communities.<sup>7</sup> Second and relatedly, they enable in-groups reform, along with sanctions for breaking norms.<sup>8</sup> Of course, I am not blind to the Internet’s many failings. Indeed, I have been at pains to place myself in the middle ground between unguarded optimism—for example, the crypto-anarchism famously defended by Tim May<sup>9</sup> – and outright pessimism – see the reactionary views of net critics like William Galston<sup>10</sup> and Hubert Dreyfus<sup>11,12</sup> As such, I have documented some of the problems associated with the virtual world. Many of these troubles result from the lack of robust virtual communities. For example, a large number of the legitimate criticisms leveled at the blogging ‘community’ result for a lack of serious communication between bloggers and, as such, the failure to actually develop a robust community.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the serious ills of the Wikipedia are partially due to the lack of resources necessary to build a mature community.<sup>14</sup> In education, the rise in plagiarism is partially the fault of educators. We as educators often fail to provide a clear model of attribution in an increasingly complex information world.<sup>15</sup> Relatedly, the massive drop out rate for online students is at least partially due to their failure to connect with a learning community to support and aid their educational experience.<sup>16</sup>

I do not wish to recant any of these claims. I still strongly believe that virtual communities carry a range of significant and sometimes unique goods.<sup>17</sup> Further, that many of the Internet’s own problems, and the problems in the ‘real’ world it aids and abets, result from the failure to construct adequate communities.<sup>18</sup> But I now appreciate that the Web 2.0

<sup>6</sup> See Parsell and Duke-Yonge, *ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2004), *op. cit.*; Townley and Parsell (2006), *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2005), *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> T.C. May. The Crypto Anarchist Manifesto, 1999, Reprinted in P. Ludlow (ed.). *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates and Pirate Utopias*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001, pp. 61–64.

<sup>10</sup> Galston, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Dreyfus, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2006), *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2004), *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> See Parsell and Duke-Yonge, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2004), *op. cit.*; Townley and Parsell (2005), *op. cit.*; Parsell and Duke-Yonge, *ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2004), *op. cit.*; Townley and Parsell (2005). Townley and Parsell (2005), *op. cit.*

enables the creation of virtual communities that are themselves negative. My concern is not with negative communities that merely leverage cyber-resources, but with communities that owe their very existence to the Internet. Many negative communities use the Internet to aid their activities. Organized crime rings have begun to use hacking techniques like denial of service attacks as a form of extortion. Terrorists use email and other communications tools to coordinate their activities. Although these negative communities employ cyber-tools, they can (and in fact did) exist without the Internet. Hence they are not problematic in the same way as communities whose existence *depends* on web resources. The members of the problematic communities I will discuss could neither find one another nor interact in mutually supportive ways without the resources provided by recent technology. Such negative communities present supporters of the Web 2.0 with a serious challenge: cyber-space and the resources it provides are a necessary condition for their existence; hence their existence can be seen as a strike against the present state of the net. Removing, altering or policing the Internet in the right ways could eliminate these negative communities. Thus their existence could be used to argue for policing, altering or removing web resources. But such external control is contrary to the openness of the Web 2.0, my support of internally governed virtual communities, and is unworkable in any case. We need to recognise the price some individuals and many communities pay for the autonomy and self-creation offered by the Web 2.0. Recognising this price is the first step to producing open tools, protocols and other measures to counteract the price in the future. The main aim of this paper is to take this first step. In addition, I hope to at least gesture towards the second step by highlighting some cyber-tools that can help promote openness.

### Virtual polarisation

Online we are free to associate with exactly whom we want. We are also free to construct and manipulate our online presentations. We are free to emphasize certain characteristics (e.g., our commitment to a certain political outlook), de-emphasize others (e.g., our age) and even ‘change’ some (e.g., our gender). These freedoms – of *association* and *presentation* respectively – are due to the vast amounts of autonomy enjoyed online. The Internet is open to involvement by anyone with very minimal technical skill and resources. All you need to be involved is access to a computer connected to the Internet and

the ability to use a web browser.<sup>19</sup> Further, the Internet destroys the tyranny of distance such that it is possible to interact with others across vast spaces. Relatedly, online communication via discussion forums, blogs and social networks is one-to-many or even many-to-many. Thus online it is possible to speak to enormous numbers of people, separated by vast distances with a single post. In theory, this increases the range of opinions that an individual can be exposed to, but it also increases the ability to narrow interactions to those who share very specific opinion sets. Thus, paradoxically, by vastly increasing the number of people it is possible to be involved with, the Internet enables a narrowing of focus. We can, given the nature of the Internet, the vast numbers of participants online, and the freedom of association it enables, choose to socialize or engage with people just like ourselves. The Web 2.0 provides a range of tools, from sophisticated search engines to specific social networking sites, that allow the easy location of other participants just like ourselves, communication methods for engaging in conversations with these ‘like-minded’ netizens, free resources for constructing communities limited to those who share your views, and mechanisms for easily and deliberately banning dissenting voices. In short, online we can intentionally restrict our interactions to those of exactly the same opinion sets as our own. Real world interaction cannot be so easily and deliberately structured and limited. There is good reason to fear such narrowing of focus and community, for it tends to make us more prejudiced and our attitudes more insular.

### Attitude polarisation

Some well-documented and often replicated empirical research for 30–40 years has established that people tend to enjoy interacting with others of like opinions<sup>20</sup> and that such interaction tends to polarise their attitudes and prejudices.<sup>21</sup> I will focus on political polarisation as one of the better-studied recent

<sup>19</sup> There are, of course, systematic differences in access to the resources required to be involved related to income, location, education, etc. A great deal has been written on what has become known as the Digital Divide and a detailed consideration of these issues is beyond the scope of the present paper.

<sup>20</sup> See D. Byrne. *The Attraction Paradigm*. Academic Press, New York, NY, 1971.

<sup>21</sup> For reviews of the data see D.G. Myers and H. Lamm. The Polarising Effect of Group Discussion. *American Scientist*, 63: 297–303, 1971; and D.J. Isenberg. Group Polarisation: A Critical Review and Meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30: 1025–1054, 1986.

domains of polarisation, because of the social significance of political opinion and because of the increasing move of political debate to the Internet.

For the past 20–30 years there has been a growing consensus that the United States has become increasingly politically polarised. In 1996 Paul DiMaggio, John Evans and Bethany Bryson questioned this consensus.<sup>22</sup> They found little evidence for polarisation from an examination of 20 years of General Social Survey and National Election Studies. The one prominent exception was an increasing cleavage on abortion between those who identify as Democrat and those who identified as Republican. In a recent follow-up, Evans found this cleavage has extended to sexuality more generally.<sup>23</sup> He argues this reflects the increased importance of these moral issues to conservative politicians in America. Over time it appears that what it means to be ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’, ‘Republican’ or ‘Democrat’ has become progressively more associated with moral attitudes to abortion and sexuality. This then drives a convergence on these issues for those that identify with political labels (conservative versus liberal, Republican versus Democrat). The cleavage observed in the general public then reflects polarisation between the two parties and their supporters. The primary instances of polarisation are observed among those who identify with *political* labels, rather than with their gender, race, religion or the like. The marginally political are not polarising, but those who identify with partisan labels – those who see themselves as liberal/Democrat or conservative/Republican – are polarising on exactly those issues taken to signify membership to the relevant political cohort. Evans concludes that polarisation of the American public generally is due to an escalating cleavage between the political parties and a crystallisation of what it means to identify with a political label.

For us the important result is that polarisation is occurring among those that are *active* participants and is restricted to those issues that are taken as *identifiers* of membership to particular communities. I will presently emphasize that these things are reinforced in *online* narrowcast communities. Web 2.0 resources encourage active participation and obscure all but the shared similarities that are markers of community membership. This seems to make the Web 2.0 tailored to produce polarisation. Prior to

considering narrowcast *virtual* communities explicitly, let us briefly examine evidence of polarisation and division in narrowcast traditional media.

There is emerging evidence to suggest that narrowcast media exacerbates both political and social cleavages. Matthew Mendelsohn and Richard Nadeau found that the fragmentation of print media in Quebec between French Quebecers and other Canadians produced polarisation of social attitudes.<sup>24</sup> More recently, David Jones found polarisation of the views of a conservative radio audience.<sup>25</sup> Jones found that Rush Limbaugh’s devoted audience displayed a significant rightward shift relative to non-listeners and casual listeners.<sup>26</sup> Devotees were much more likely to call themselves conservative and/or Republican in 1996 than in 1992; their rating of the Democratic party dropped from 40/100 to 29/100, whereas non-listeners ratings went up and casual listeners remained unchanged.<sup>27</sup> Individual-level analysis shows similar right shifts. The more frequently and closely an individual listened, the more likely they were to move towards the conservative end of the liberal-conservative spectrum, identify more strongly with the Republican party, have a reduced opinion of the Clintons and oppose government spending on a variety of social programs, especially student loans, childcare and public schools.<sup>28</sup>

This empirical research provides the first few premises of a worrying argument:

1. People tend to be attracted to others with like opinions;
2. Being exposed to like opinions tends to increase our own prejudices;
3. This polarising of attitudes can occur on socially significant issues (e.g., political outlook);
4. Thus, where the possibility of narrowing focus on socially significant issues is available, increased community fracture is likely.

The Web 2.0 provides exactly the resources needed to locate and/or create communities with deliberately narrowcast opinion sets focused on issues of social

<sup>22</sup> P. DiMaggio, J. Evans, and B. Bryson. Have Americans’ Social Attitudes Become More Polarised? *American Journal of Sociology*, 102: 690–755, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> J.H. Evans. Have Americans’ Attitudes Become More Polarised? – An Update. *Social Science Quarterly*, 84(1): 71–90, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> M. Mendelsohn and R. Nadeau. The Magnification and Minimization of Social Cleavages by the Broadcast and Narrowcast News Media. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 8: 374–389, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> D.A. Jones. The Polarising Effects of New Media Messages. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 14(2): 158–174, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> *Devoted listeners* pay either “very close attention” or “fairly close attention”, and listen either “everyday”, “most days” or “once or twice a week”; all other listeners were *casual listeners* (Jones *ibid.*, p. 163).

<sup>27</sup> Jones *ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>28</sup> Jones *ibid.*, pp. 170–171.

significance. Thus it is likely to generate increased community division. Jones concludes that as opportunities for narrowcast media expand through the Internet, people will have a greater ability to shelter themselves from perspectives different from their own and that this is likely to lead to the polarisation of opinions between various audiences.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the situation is possibly more extreme than Jones recognizes, for the very nature of Web 2.0 resources is likely to exacerbate polarisation by encouraging active participation and obscuring individual difference.<sup>30</sup>

### *Polarisation 2.0*

The Web 2.0 means almost no technological sophistication is needed to publish one's views for global consumption or to actively participate in political and other socially significant debates. Individuals are able to seek out partisan sources of information and actively participate in narrowcast communities. The likely result is radical opinion polarisation. Furthermore, the very nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC) may compound the problem by obscuring individual difference.

With an online population of over a billion it is highly likely that you will be able to locate like-minded individuals whatever your opinions, prejudices or fetishes. As we will see in the next section, online communities exist for 'Wannabe amputees', despite the fact that the world population is estimated to be in the mere thousands. The ability to locate such narrow communities does not depend on Web 2.0 resources. Discussion forums and news groups for extremely specific 'causes' have long been a feature of the Internet. Web 2.0 resources add the possibility of creating your own narrowcast communities where one for your specific cause does not already exist. Creating virtual communities with the aid of Web 2.0 tools requires very minimal technical skills and no financial cost. There are a plethora of free sites that enable just about anyone with web access to create

a community devoted to their cause and allow (or disallow) membership as they see fit.

Narrow sub-cultures do exist in the real world, but finding like-minded people is far more of a challenge offline. The Web 2.0 provides social networking sites, advanced search engines, an overabundance of discussion forums and a range of other resources that enable the easy location of individuals with extremely specific interests. Moreover, the mechanisms for creating narrow communities, restricting membership and punishing dissent are far more difficult to master in the real world. Online all of these can be achieved with but a few mouse clicks or keyboard presses: want to create a community devoted to the pleasures of being an amputee, just sign-up to one of the many free discussion-boards, promote your community with one of the many free services devoted to this and await members; only want members who have or are considering voluntary amputation, only approve membership status to such people; want to silence those who question the legitimacy of voluntary amputation, simply revoke membership privileges of those who post against it.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that the Internet and especially the Web 2.0 offers the possibility of creating narrow communities that are likely to increase attitude polarisation. I will now attempt to push this conclusion further by demonstrating that the nature of Web 2.0 resources may exacerbate this polarisation. The argument depends on two features of net-based interaction: the promotion of active participation and the very nature of CMC.

Web 2.0 resources and tools encourage active participation in and identification with communities. Active participation is vividly demonstrated by the democratization of information dissemination. Consider the growing influence of blogs, wikis and the integration of user-generated content into mainstream news media. This democratization depends on active participation by netizens who are no longer merely passive receivers of information from traditional media outlets, but active contributors. Consider the growing importance of the net to political news. According to Lee Rainie and John Horrigan the 2006 US mid-term elections were a significant turning point for using the

<sup>29</sup> Jones *ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth noting that even many who are sceptical of general political polarisation accept that the Internet is a potentially powerful polarising force. For example, In his *Brookings Institute Policy Brief* of January 2005, Pietro Nivola, while arguing the supposed general polarisation of the American electorate is basically illusionary, did accept that new technology is a fundamentally polarising force: "The revolution in communications – direct mail, cable TV, the Internet – has enabled ideological soul mates to seek each other out, organize, pool resources, and proselytise." P.S. Nivola. Thinking about Political Polarisation. *The Brookings Institute Policy Brief*, 137: 1–8, 2005. Quoted from pp. 4–5.

<sup>31</sup> Further, the 'benefits' of narrowcast virtual community membership can be enjoyed without removing oneself for other real life communities. You can still hold down a regular job and participate in ordinary real life events, while a member of your chosen virtual community. In this way these narrowcast virtual worlds are significantly different from extreme narrowcast real world communities like cults that very often require the physical isolation of members to maintain and reinforce group commitments.

Internet to get political news and share information.<sup>32</sup> They found that 31% of Americans used the net to get political news, while 15% named the Internet as one of their two primary sources for political news. Moreover, younger netizens use the net more for political news: 35% of people under 36 years used the net as their primary source compared with 18% for newspapers. And the average netizen is getting more active: 11% of web users were actively contributing to online political discussions, commenting on blogs or forwarding material via email.

Active participation is encouraged by the very structure of the new Web 2.0 environment. Tools for voicing opinions are becoming progressively more powerful and straightforward to use, while decreasing in expense. Blogs, for example, require very minimal technical skill, are freely available and attract an increasing audience. And commenting on another's blog is as simple as typing into a text-box. Thus we have a many-to-many model of information dissemination in an environment that demands almost no technical sophistication. In theory, this opening of content and lines of active participation are things to celebrate. But we need to be aware that with such autonomy comes the increasing possibility of narrowing what we hear and with whom we participate. Further, active participation in a community tends to generate greater polarisation than passive reception.<sup>33</sup> Thus Web 2.0 resources are likely to exacerbate narrowcast polarising effects and hence drive increased division on socially significant issues.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the very nature of CMC tends to occlude individual difference, which further intensify the polarisation effects of narrowcast communication.

Lack of face-to-face interaction can dramatically increase the polarisation observed in groups. Indeed, when individual difference is obscured by CMC, polarisation towards the group norm is at its strongest. The narrowcast communities that are the issue of this paper tend to be constructed on the basis of

very specific identifiers. One joins, for example, extreme liberal-democrat communities because one identifies as an extreme liberal-democrat. Community interactions are then likely to centre on the shared commitments such a label entails and individual difference will be obscured by the nature of CMC. It need not be obvious that community members are different in a variety of ways orthogonal to the label. Differences of gender, ethnicity, age and the like will not be evident as they naturally are in face-to-face communication contexts. The result is that community interactions tend to over-emphasise sameness of opinion. It is in just such situations that polarisation towards the group norm is at its strongest.<sup>35</sup>

According to the influential *Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects* (SIDE Model) developed by Postmes and colleagues, lack of visual cues facilitates deindividuation and increases the salience of situational cues.<sup>36</sup> Generally, deindividuation means people are not perceived as individuals, but as representatives of social groups. CMC leads to increased deindividuation and thereby an over-emphasis of the social situational norms. Thus online participants tend to over-attribute similarity to other virtual community members. Due to the lack of visual and associated individual and social cues online, participants drastically over-emphasise the significance of the few remaining cues, most of which are situational, such that posters of information are seen as idealised community members: members with exactly those attributes that signal community membership and identification with the core commitments of the community. Further, as posters of information, participants tend to optimize their self-presentation to over-emphasize the same shared set of community identifying commitments. Taking off from this model, Paul de Laat argues virtual community participants very often employ a *hyperactive* communication style.<sup>37</sup> Such a style develops to address the anxieties engendered by virtual communication due to the

<sup>32</sup> L. Rainie and J. Horrigan. *Election 2006 Online*. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007. Accessed from [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/199/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/199/report_display.asp) August 20 2007.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, G.D. Bishop and D.G. Myers. Informational Influence in Group Discussion. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 12: 92–104, 1974; and H. Lamm. Will an Observer Advise Higher Risk Taking After Hearing a Discussion of the Decision Problem? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 6: 467–471, 1976.

<sup>34</sup> Such a narrowing of focus is a particular worry in the blogosphere, for bloggers often display a lack of responsibility in their posts resulting in the propagation of mis-information or outright lies.

<sup>35</sup> For reviews of the literature see T. Postmes, S.A. Haslam and R. Swaab. Social influence in small groups: An interactive model of social identity formation. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 16: 1–42, 2005; and R. Spears, T. Postmes, M. Lea and A. Wolbert. The power of influence and the influence of power in virtual groups: A SIDE look at CMC and the Internet. *The Journal of Social Issues Special Issue: Social impact of the Internet*, 58: 91–108, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> See Postmes et al. *ibid.* and T. Postmes, R. Spears, and M. Lea. Breaching or building social boundaries? SIDE effects of computer-mediated communication. *Communication Research*, 25: 689–715, 1998.

<sup>37</sup> P.B. de Laat. Trusting Virtual Trust. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 7: 167–180, 2006.

obscuring nature of CMC. Members recognize the fragile nature of online communication, and by extension community building, and attempt to overcome these by adopting a hyper-trusting communication style. This style of online presentation is recognized by observers as a deliberate ploy to aid the building of the community. As such, it generates the admiration of observers and produces within them a normative pressure to use this form of participation in their own community interactions. Hence shared characteristics, convictions and opinions are again over-emphasized and difference obscured. Moreover, the many-to-many form of communication online is likely to sharpen this effect. A large audience entails greater risk that translates to greater esteem for online displays. A large audience also entails a higher likelihood that some members will recognize the value of the hyperactive style and respond in turn. The end result is a self-sustaining feedback cycle that cements the community and forces presentation displays to focus on similarities.

The general argument of this sub-section so far is that (i) the Internet allows the creation of narrowcast communities; (ii) Web 2.0 resources encourage active participation which drives greater polarisation than the passive reception associated with traditional media exposure; and, (iii) CMC tends to hide difference and exaggerate the shared opinions which signal community membership thereby producing the strongest polarising of attitudes. Combining these insights with the empirical research of the previous sub-section produces an extremely worrying argument:

1. People seek out others with the same prejudices as themselves;
2. The Internet allows individuals to find people with interests and prejudices just like their own;
3. The Web 2.0 provides the necessary resources to build communities with whom ever we like;
4. Being in a community of people with the same prejudices increases our own prejudices;
5. Moreover, the participatory nature of the Web 2.0 exacerbates the polarising effect of group membership;
6. Further, the very nature of CMC obscures difference and emphasizes shared commitments which produces the greatest opinion polarisation;
7. Hence, the Web 2.0 is likely to lead to greater prejudice, social cleavage and community division.

The creation of participatory narrowcast communities made possible by the Web 2.0 seems tailored to lead to attitude polarisation and thereby social division. This is especially problematic in relation to socially significant issues such as political views. But notice this disquieting conclusion does not depend

upon membership of radical communities. Indeed, something as simple and apparently unproblematic as the social networking of books can cause cleavage. The social networking of books refers to the now almost ubiquitous “Customers who bought this book also bought ...” recommendation on Amazon and other online bookstores. Valdis Krebs analysed the top 10 political books based on sales in 2006 from Amazon, together with the other books brought by those who brought these (that is, those books that would feature in customer recommendations).<sup>38</sup> The results reveal a substantial cleavage in the American political book buying public. A vast majority of those buying liberal political books bought more liberal books and those buying conservative books bought other conservative books. Indeed, only two books show crossover appeal from left to right. This is inline with, but more exaggerated than, earlier data from 2004. The top 100 political books of this year were also significantly cleaved, with only 15 of the top 100 having crossover appeal from conservative to liberal.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, not only is polarisation increasing between conservative and liberals, but a fracturing is also taking place inside the liberal camp. Previous data showed a clear middle ground between left and right, but in the 2006 data only the political left show an interest in this ‘middle ground.’ And even this middle ground shows signs of fracture: the books in this region are themselves cleaving into two distinct camps around books that address religion and those that address economics.

*In summary:* More people are increasingly turning to the Web 2.0 for information, including information of socially significant issues such as politics. The ease of use of Web 2.0 resources is encouraging active participation. Neither of these things are bad in themselves, but the Web 2.0 provides the resources to seek out like opinions and create communities based around shared prejudices and active participation in such narrowcast communities increases polarisation. It may be that the cost of online autonomy and community is social and political fracture. There is a potentially more dramatic cost to some ill individuals.

### Virtual identity

For most of us, freedom of presentation – the ability to construct our own online identity as we see fit – is

<sup>38</sup> V. Krebs. *Political Books and Polarised Readers? A New Political Pattern Emerges*. 2006. Accessed from <http://www.orgnet.com/divided.html> August 11, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> V. Krebs. *Political patterns on the WWW – Divided We Stand ... Still*. 2006. Accessed from <http://www.orgnet.com/divided2.html> August 11, 2007.

non-destructive at an individual level. It may exacerbate the polarisation observed in online narrowcast communities, but it is generally trouble-free for our notion of self. For unhealthy individuals, on the other hand, it can lead to some very destructive outcomes. It can lead to the construction of communities where people revel in their illness, constructing identities around diagnostic labels or promoting unhealthy behaviour as a positive life choice. Consider the extreme example of apotemnophilia.

Apotemnophilia refers to the extremely rare psychiatric condition in which physically healthy individuals desire to remove one or more unwanted limbs. These would-be amputees – or ‘wannabes’ as they often refer to themselves – are limited in number. Tim Bayne and Neil Levy estimate they number in the mere thousands worldwide.<sup>40</sup> Despite this, there are a range of websites devoted to their cause. Carl Elliot has made a persuasive case for apotemnophilia being completely manufactured online.<sup>41</sup> Bayne and Levy disagree. They argue that at least a vast majority of wannabes have some form of Body Integrity Identity Disorder. Wannabes seem to be motivated by their desire to achieve a closer fit between their actual bodily condition and their body image. A perceived misfit between one’s body image and one’s actual body need not result from membership in narrowcast virtual communities. Closely related conditions such as somatognosias – the delusional denial either of ownership or existence of a body part – exist without strong links to virtual communities.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Bayne and Levy do accept that “[t]he very awareness of a disorder can contribute to its proliferation”<sup>43</sup> and it is via the Internet that awareness of this disorder has primarily

propagated. Thus, whether completely created online or merely propagated there, apotemnophilia owes much to exactly the Web 2.0 resources that many people find most attractive: the ability to locate or easily create communities. Web 2.0 tools allow anyone to “find a community to which you can listen and reveal yourself, and [obtain] instant validation for you condition, whatever it may be.”<sup>44</sup> Such communities and the acceptance they offer can be particularly attractive to people, who because of their medical/psychiatric conditions, are socially alienated. For many such identity seekers “all they have is the Internet, their own troubled lives, and the place where those two things intersect.”<sup>45</sup> Membership in a community of others with the same problems reinforce the sense of identity provided by psychiatric diagnosis, with such reinforcement leading people to become more attached to their diagnosis and its associated label. When the medical labels themselves concern problems with one’s identity, the potential evils are radically exacerbated. Louis Charland has recently documented exactly this in his examination of the cyber-space reaction to the removal of the old diagnostic label Multiple Personality Disorder.<sup>46</sup>

#### *Perilous freedom of identity*

The newest incarnation of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (the DSM-IV) has deleted the condition once known as Multiple Personality Disorder in favour of Dissociative Identity Disorder.<sup>47</sup> The label change is far more than cosmetic.<sup>48</sup> The change involves replacing a label that signified one thing with a label that signifies something substantially different. The new something is supposed to be the real underlying cause, whereas the old something misidentified the fundamental problem. The old label implied the sufferer had too many identities, but the new label points to a lack of a single coherent identity. The change is significant for it means something once thought to be real – multiple *personalities* in the

<sup>40</sup> T. Bayne and N. Levy. Amputees by choice: Body integrity identity disorder and the ethics of amputation. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 22(1): 75–86, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> C. Elliot. *Better than well: American medicine meets the American dream*. Norton, New York, NY, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Somatognosias can occur with the loss of proprioception, commonly resulting from post-stroke neglect. Bayne and Levy claim wannabes come closer to this than to those who suffer from phantom limbs. Sufferers of phantom limbs have a mismatch between their actual body and their body *schema*, where the schema is “a representation of one’s body that is used in the automatic regulation of posture and movement” (op. cit., p. 76). Wannabes and somatognosias patients, on the other hand, have a mismatch between their body and body *image*: “a consciously accessible representation of the general shape and structure of one’s body” (ibid.).

<sup>43</sup> Bayne and Levy, ibid, p. 85.

<sup>44</sup> Elloit, op. cit., p. 217.

<sup>45</sup> Elloit, ibid, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> L.C. Charland. A Madness for Identity: Psychiatric labels, Consumer Autonomy, and the Perils of the Internet. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 11(4): 335–349, 2004.

<sup>47</sup> American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*, 4th ed. American Psychiatric Association, Washington, DC, 1994.

<sup>48</sup> Charland, op. cit., p. 342.

one subject – are now thought to be illusionary – multiple personality *states* that a delusional subject takes to be real, but which are not.<sup>49</sup>

Given the nature of the change it is perhaps unsurprising that many interest groups opposed it. The label change, as Charland rightly notes, could be potentially harmful to those that fall under its category. This is true of any label change that implies an aspect of a person once classified as real, is now thought delusional. But when those labeled have problems with their identity in the first place, the change is almost assured to result in serious iatrogenic trauma, compounding the original problems with disintegrated identity. Hence the change constitutes a significant potential harm. Perhaps unsurprisingly then resistance to the attack by sufferers on their already fragile sense of identity was considerable.

Cyber resistance to the label change falls into two broad areas. First, to deny that the change actually constituted a substantive transformation: to claim that the change is merely semantic, that the new term is equivalent to the old. To sustain this, one needs to argue that the two labels signify the same ‘object/phenomenon’ and that the new diagnosis does not imply a modification of treatment options. Such resistance is difficult to reconcile with psychiatric practice. Hence the second option, while far more radical, is at least more consistent. This option is to deny the validity of the change, to claim that the psychiatric profession has got things wrong. In

cyber-space it is possible to find large numbers of individuals and organisations who have simply retained the old label and associate their multiples with *real* alternative personalities.<sup>50</sup> According to Charland such outright denial constitutes a significant power shift, in which consumer autonomy can be marshaled to defy the edicts of psychiatric authorities.<sup>51</sup> Harold Merskey argues this power shift entails new responsibilities for physicians.<sup>52</sup>

Merskey claims the physicians have a duty of care to counteract online displays of illness when these are detrimental to the individual. He claims that those who promote themselves as suffering certain illnesses “must be open to challenge .... [for] they demonstrate the presence of a serious illness, or alternatively a deleterious state of mind, which the medical observer is morally obliged to counteract if opportunity permits.”<sup>53</sup> Previously, I have argued that similar responsibilities lie with other community members.<sup>54</sup> But there is a significant problem for both responses in the present case. Internal challenge is unlikely to come from other community members, as the community is deliberately restricted to those with the same illness, and indeed attachment to the illness, and its associated but now defunct label. Challenge cannot come from the psychiatric profession as psychiatrists are essentially barred from these communities. Self-revelation as a mental health professional is likely to lead to removal from the community. Indeed, even those merely suspected of psychiatric sympathies can see their community membership suspended. More radically, in some situations the entire community can ‘relocate’ by moving resources to other service providers and only making the move known to those who support the community’s views. Thus psychiatrists will not have the opportunity to challenge displays of illness. To become and remain a community member in many pro-illness sites requires hiding one’s professional alliance. This seems both dishonorable and unethical. In any case, it means that there will be no socially permissible steps to challenge illness displays open to psychiatric professionals for they are not permitted to enter these communities qua professionals. This creates a dilemma. On the one hand, healthcare professionals can hide their

<sup>49</sup> Charland, *ibid.*, p. 343. As Charland evocatively expresses it “[m]ultiple personalities during the reign of DSM-III were real, but after DSM-IV they were not. That surely is a big difference; from real entity to delusional figment” (Charland, *ibid.*, p. 343). While certainly evocative there is something fundamentally incorrect about this means of expressing the change. If the DSM-IV is right, then multiple personalities never were real. Consider a parallel: despite the fact that humours once occupied a space in medical thought, they *never* actually existed, either then or now, we just incorrectly thought they did. Loose talk to the contrary may actually aggravate the problems Charland is concerned to confront, by giving the impression that our labels make or break real world ontologies in a very straightforward manner. Of course, Charland is just speaking poetically for effect. Elsewhere, he has argued that current categorical schema of *personality disorders* in the DMS may need to be changed because they have not received sufficient empirical support and hence there is not enough evidence to suggest that the categories “actually capture *real* pathologies” (*ibid.*, p. 344, emphasis added). This clearly demonstrates he acknowledges empirical validity is the final test of ontology.

<sup>50</sup> Charland, *ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>51</sup> Charland, *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> H. Merskey. *Misprisions of Identity. Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology*, 11(4): 351–355, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Merskey, *ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>54</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2004), *op. cit.*; Townley and Parsell (2005), *op. cit.*

professional alliances and *monitor* such communities. This means forgoing the ability to challenge illness displays. On the other hand, healthcare professionals can act as healthcare professionals, challenging displays of illness and offering professional services. This means losing membership rights and, hence, both the ability to monitor the community and offer further services and make further challenges in the future.

Consider the first horn of the dilemma: hiding one's professional identity in order to monitor community activity. This at least allows information flow about these problematic communities to the relevant professions. But gaining such information comes at a significant potential cost to both the profession and members of the monitored communities themselves. The cost to individual community members, and by extension the community itself, is the loss of professional services for this horn of the dilemma bars healthcare workers operating as professionals and offering professional advice. This breaches the duty of care such professions have to ill individuals. Relatedly, there is also a clear breach of ethical standards. Withholding one's professional identity is ethically problematic for it entails premeditated deception. Such deception is especially problematic in the present case for if detected it is exceedingly likely to aggravate the distrust of the healthcare profession that these communities and their members already display.

The other horn of the dilemma is no more attractive. Revealing one's professional identity by offering professional services or challenging illness displays is likely to lead to being barred from the community.<sup>55</sup> This has two costs. First, any further

<sup>55</sup> It may be suggested that medical professionals could offer services and suffer barring, but then rejoin the community under another name. This option is ethically problematic for same reasons as the first horn of the dilemma: namely, it involves deliberately misleading the community. In any case, there are two reasons why this will not work as a long-term solution. First, most community building software allows the community owner to track the IP addresses of members and enables blocking of IP addresses so their users cannot obtain community membership. This function is often used to ban addresses that persistently spam community discussion-boards. The same functionality could easily deal with medical professionals who obtain multiple memberships. Indeed, some sites have a policy of only allowing one membership per IP. Second, the more radical option of moving the entire community is always open if a community is persistently abused.

ability to offer services or challenge illness displays will be lost. This is a significant cost for a very short-term gain. Second, any information flow from the community to the profession will be stopped.<sup>56</sup> Again a substantial cost for what is likely to be the one-off offering of professional services.

One possible middle ground between these two horns is to remain a community member by withholding one's professional identity, but offer services outside of the community's virtual space. Indeed, Merskey recommends this type of strategy in addition to online challenges. Unfortunately this is unworkable. Given the present state of the Internet it is essentially impossible to connect web-identities with real world individuals. Thus the only possible measures must occur within the virtual community. But there appear to be no such measures open to healthcare professionals except in one-off situations.

<sup>56</sup> The main concern here is the ability of health professionals to challenge illness displays. Nevertheless, a brief discussion of the ethical issues related to monitoring virtual communities is appropriate. H. Keller and S. Lee (Ethical Issues Surrounding Human Participants Research Using the Internet, *Ethics and Behavior*, 13(3): 211–219, 2003) claim that monitoring discussion forums creates a range of ethical problems. They argue that obtaining informed consent would offer a solution to all these problems. Unfortunately, they recognise that it is impossible to obtain informed consent from *all* members in most situations as membership to virtual communities is in constant flux. Informed consent is ruled out for the communities at issue in the present paper as members object to the very presence of health professionals. According to Keller and Lee, monitoring a community without obtaining informed consent could constitute a violation of Item 6.07 of the American Psychological Association's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code Of Conduct* (APA, 1992) which states that "psychologists conduct research competently and with due concern for the dignity and welfare of the participants" (p. 12). A new *Code* became effective June 1, 2003 in which this Item has been deleted. Nevertheless, the *Code* still demands "[p]sychologists respect the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination" (APA, 2002, p. 4). This principle – *Principle E: Respect for People's Rights and Dignity* (APA, 2002, p. 4) – seems straightforwardly violated by deceitful monitoring whether by health professionals or on behalf of the health profession. Finally, the most important ethical standard in the *Code* is the avoidance of harm (APA, 2002, p. 6). Harm is taken to include compromising dignity, self-esteem, or sense of agency (see M.C. Bier, S.A. Sherblom and M.A. Gallo. Ethical issues in a study of Internet use: Uncertainty, responsibility, and the spirit of research relationships. *Ethics and Behavior*, 6: 141–151, 1996). Deceitfully monitoring a community that has explicitly requested no monitoring seems a clear violation of this standard.

In any case, to work in principle the healthcare professional would need to continue to hide her professional identity, thus facing the ethical problem and the possible repercussions of detection of the first horn of the dilemma. Thus the options appear to be one-off offerings of help with subsequent loss of membership and the possibilities it provides or deceitful monitoring with costs to ill individuals and potentially great costs to the profession. Neither option is acceptable.

Another possible solution is to buy out of the dilemma by imposing regulations on web usage such that these illness communities cannot be created. Unfortunately, such externally imposed sanctions are both unworkable and inconsistent with very the principle of openness they are intended to uphold. These narrowcast communities are problematic precisely because they are closed: because they restrict membership to those who share the values and views of the community and because they deliberately ban dissenting voices. It is the web that enables this closure by providing the means of limiting, suspending or revoking community membership, or enabling the relocation of the community to isolate it from dissenting voices. Establishing external control to remove the possibility of creating these communities merely reinforces the attitude of closure it is intended to combat. To fight narrowing of community by imposing external controls buys into the very cycle of closure that is the root cause of the problems. The only consistent general response to these communities is the promotion of more open debate and voicing of diverse opinions. In any case, externally imposed regulation is unworkable given the present virtual world. The modern web is a beast that crosses national and jurisdictional boundaries and is almost impossible to legislate in fine detail. Powerful multinational organisations like the music industry and totalitarian regimes across the globe have failed to adequately restrict what they see as inappropriate use. There is no reason to suppose external controls in the present case would work any better. The only appropriate and workable response is to promote a more robust form of openness beyond the freedoms entailed by online autonomy.

In a strong sense, the creation of support groups that challenge the edicts of the health profession is actually positive. In the past, psychiatry was a closed profession delivering decisions that deeply impacted the lives of ill individuals with little to no consideration of the views of those people. Thankfully the modern psychiatric profession is no longer like this. Nevertheless, to many ill individuals the American Psychiatric Association is still perceived as an isolated, closed community that changes diagnosis,

labels and treatment options on the whim of psychiatric fashion. To complain that the Web 2.0 removes the unquestionable authority of the American Psychiatric Association should not be taken seriously. If the psychiatric profession's verdicts on mental illness are empirically, diagnostically and treatment valid – and I am not suggesting that they are not – then the profession should not shy from healthy debate about these verdicts with those impacted by them. Certainly, membership of the American Psychiatric Association should remain closed. Such professional organisations should only allow members with the requisite professional qualifications, training and skills. But closed membership should not entail closure of information flow. Indeed, the American Psychiatric Association has a duty to adequately inform those significantly impacted by their edict of the basis of those edicts.

The web offers the chance for the ill to provide a united voice that can challenge medical pronouncements. If the pronouncements are valid they should be able to face the challenge. If they are not valid then the profession should be thankful for the correction. If the web is seen as place of open debate in which all have a voice, community creation is a good. If a community closes debate the goods that can only come of open dialogue are lost. This is true whether the community is a profession or a support group. As I have previously argued, the web is a wonderful resource for undermining traditional power structures that have stifled debate in the past.<sup>57</sup> Significant social decisions should be open to debate by all interested parties. Such openness of dialogue does not preclude legitimate closure of membership to certain professional communities. But the edicts of such communities should not be considered legitimate merely because they are issued from the communities, but because they are valid. Openness of dialogue can help foster understanding of the mechanisms that ensure such validity. Closure of dialogue, on the other hand, is likely to lead to the perception that the pronouncements are being issued by an uncaring and untouchable elite. The problem with some illness communities is that they have taken the undermining of traditional power structures too far. Thus rather than developing an environment which promotes and enhances open dialogue, they have inverted traditional power structures and closed themselves off from debate.

In summary, the Web 2.0 allows the creation of extremely narrowcast communities. These communities can be constructed in direct opposition to the edicts of healthcare professionals. This comes close

<sup>57</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2006), *op. cit.*

to reversing the usual doctor-patient power structure such that professionals are powerless to control iatrogenic labels and identity based on these labels. There seems little prospect of professionals correcting these communities. Equally, internal correction from other community members is unlikely to occur. But, given the nature of the net, there is little chance of banning such communities. The most banning a particular community is likely to achieve is forcing its relocation in the ever-fluid virtual space of the world-wide-web. At present, perhaps the price we all pay for an open, autonomous Internet is the possibility of being drawn into communities that are detrimental to our mental health and identity. This is a price that is particularly high for those with certain illnesses. I now move to consider some available technologies that may be able to help combat these problems and open closed communities.

### *Autonomy 2.0*

For Charland, most of the blame for the problems associated with narrowcast illness communities is due to the high level of autonomy available online. This autonomy allows some identity-seekers to reinforce their illness by deliberately “indulging in their disease.”<sup>58</sup> This relies upon Internet resources and the autonomy this gives patients: as such, the phenomenon is “largely, perhaps entirely, a product” of the types of communities the Internet has made possible.<sup>59</sup> In this paper, I have articulated two forms of autonomy and argued that each can be corrupted online to produce negative consequences: freedom of association can lead to narrowcast community creation and freedom of presentation to the occlusion of difference and thereby the reinforcement of attitude polarisation. In this section, I will highlight some existing online resources that can be marshaled to combat the corruption of the freedoms of autonomy.

The problems associated with narrowcast virtual communities result from the closure of dialogue and communication. Illness communities lead members to revel in their illness by silencing dissenting voices. Polarisation results from only airing views consistent with the majority opinion within the community. But restricting memberships of communities need not result in such closure: communities with restricted membership can still be open to dialogue.

Certainly, the ability to restrict community membership is what enables the creation of narrowcast communities that can then become closed to outside dialogue. But the Web 2.0 also provides resources that can be used to encourage open dialogue. Generally, promoting such openness entails providing an environment that emphasizes responsibility to and inter-dependences with others. This is a challenge to achieve online. Virtual life tends to obscure our responsibilities and inter-dependences, as it can appear a solitary endeavour: we can often seem alone at our keyboard.<sup>60</sup> Hence, without explicit measures to counteract them, the corruptions of autonomy can easily arise online leading to obstacles to trustworthy, authentic and open interactions. To overcome these obstacles requires producing mechanisms that emphasize responsibility to the community. This can be done straightforwardly by tying online personas to real world individuals, by providing the opportunity to disclose individual level attributes and thereby encouraging the recognition of mutual relations between participants. Previously, I have emphasized the need for such an approach in learning communities. Students who make a social commitment to their learning community tend to achieve better course results.<sup>61</sup> Making such a social commitment entails introducing yourself as an individual and making social connections with other students because of similarities. Many social networking sites provide a range of tools for achieving similar outcomes. A prominent example is Facebook.

Facebook is a highly successful social networking site. As a default a Facebook profile includes an individual’s gender, birth date (although the year can be hidden), hometown, political position and religion. Other personal information can be added such as relationship status, education and work histories, contact information and pictures. This information is available to a member’s friends and, by default, to

<sup>58</sup> Charland, op. cit., p. 345.

<sup>59</sup> Charland, *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2004), op. cit. where I discuss this in relation to online trust. Also compare H. Nissenbaum, *Securing Trust Online: Wisdom or Oxymoron?* *Boston University Law Review*, 81: 635–664, 2001. Nissenbaum identified three obstacles to online trust. First, identities of online participants are obscured reducing the cues upon which trust can be based and occluding mutual relations. Second, personal characteristics are obscured and cannot mediate the construction of trust. Third, clear social roles are missing from the online world. Nissenbaum concludes that such occlusions can reduce our perceived responsibility to others.

<sup>61</sup> See Parsell and Duke-Yonge (2007), op. cit.

people in each of their networks.<sup>62</sup> Providing this individual level information may remove one bar to trust and openness online by allowing recognition of similarity and difference among a member's friends and others in their networks. Obviously, for this to succeed members must be able to trust the information provided is truthful. Facebook attempts to provide such an assurance by demanding that members use their real name.<sup>63</sup> Linking online identities with real world individuals encourages truthful, authentic and responsible contributions to the community. Moreover, Facebook uses a range of checking techniques to ensure responsible use of its tools and as a means of attempting to ensure people are who they claim to be. For example, Facebook uses email addresses to restrict and control membership to networks (and groups within networks). To be a member of a particular university network requires using an email address registered to that university. As a means of ensuring a responsible online environment, the Facebook model has much to recommend it, particularly for sites devoted to social networking. Nevertheless, it has a potentially serious drawback as a *general* model.<sup>64</sup> The problem concerns the genuine need for anonymity when participating online in some situations. The most obvious cases are political commentators in totalitarian regimes like China and Iran which imprison citizens criticising the government in cyber-space.<sup>65</sup> Fortunately, the Facebook model can be adapted so that it does not require the use of real names. Indeed, a recent decision by

Facebook points to what is required to encourage responsible contribution.

Recently, a political blogger writing under the pseudonym Jon Swift had his Facebook account deleted. In an email published on *Wired* Facebook said "[f]ake accounts are a violation of our Terms of Use, Facebook requires users to provide their real first and last names. Impersonating anyone or anything is prohibited."<sup>66</sup> Later Facebook revised their decision stating "[s]ince others on the site seem to know you by this name, and since you don't appear to be using the name to impersonate or to hide your identity, we have determined that you are not violating these Terms." Facebook requires real names to stop people hiding their identity or impersonating others. But when a person has a long-lived pseudonym linking to a real world identity it is unnecessary to stop such abuse. The individual will have invested time into the creation of the profile and reputation associated with the pseudonym. Thus they will be committed to the pseudonym and are likely to operate responsibly under that pseudonym. This provides a profitable model for establishing online authenticity: namely, the creation of long-lived online profiles so responsible contribution can be monitored.

There is no need for long-lived online profiles to be associated with real world identities in all situations. Indeed, in some parts of the world such direct linking with real world identities may close debate. The protection pseudo-anonymous contribution provides allows greater freedom to voice opinions. It is still possible to promote responsibility to the community by providing a long-term tie to online personas without this being linked to their real world identity. People become committed to their online persona even when the link to their real world identity is not transparent to other users. It is commitment to their online personas that promotes responsibility to the community by enabling the tracking of the reliability and trustworthiness of community members. There are a number of mechanisms already available for tracking online reputation. Sites for commercial transactions such as e-bay use feedback to make others' assessment of reliability or trustworthiness visible to all users, and various conventions and expectations for contributing to and understanding the feedback systems have arisen. Many discussion forums use similar measures to track contributions: for example, karma points, both good and bad, to

<sup>62</sup> Facebook is made up of a large number of networks, each based on geographical regions and places of work or study. Members are free to join any network they legitimately qualify as belonging to. Default level privacy settings displays profile information to all people in each of an individual's networks. This can be controlled such that only some networks can view this information or no networks have access to this information. Unlike information from other areas of Facebook (such as online status, videos uploaded by members or third-party applications), it is not possible to hide profile information from your friends. Friends are Facebook members who have bilaterally accepted each other as such.

<sup>63</sup> Facebook may have motives besides authenticity, as their business model relies upon providing information about *real* people. As my concern is not with Facebook's motives I will not pursue this point.

<sup>64</sup> There also appear to be a number of legitimate worries about privacy on Facebook, but these are beyond the scope of the present paper.

<sup>65</sup> See Townley and Parsell (2006) *op. cit.* for greater discussion of the value of anonymity online. Also compare Dreyfus *op. cit.* for the dangers of anonymity in relation to community commitment.

<sup>66</sup> T. Russell. Facebook Boots Pseudonymous Blogger, Then Caves to Blogosphere Pressure. November 1, 2007. Accessed from <http://blog.wired.com/business/2007/11/facebook-boots-.html> November 21, 2007.

document positive and negative contributions to the community.

These measures – long-lived profiles with associated trustworthiness ratings and the requirement of divulging some individual information – remove some bars to openness and may block the corruption of freedoms of presentation and participation. Mechanisms for emphasizing personal information means individual difference is not obscured, trust is more likely, and polarisation is unlikely to be exacerbated. Long-lived profiles with associated trust ratings help ensure responsible contribution. These measures do not, however, necessarily promote open dialogue. There are two online resources that could be used to promote this: mash-up technologies and link-back features.

A mash-up is a site or resource constructed from the aggregation of multiple other sources. There are a number of varieties of mash-up, but for the purposes of this paper only *data* mash-ups need to be considered. These provide a single point of contact for data from different sources. A number of sites have been set up which provide data mash-ups of the relationship in the USA between political donations and the bills members of the legislature support or oppose. These new resources provide open and transparent information otherwise unavailable to the average citizen. According to Michael Calore “[s]ites like Maplight.org, Opensecrets.org and Follow the Money .... are increasingly giving ordinary citizens the ability to easily document the flow of special-interest money and how it influences the legislature.”<sup>67</sup> In addition to providing this open data to end-users, MapLight.org also enables citizens to act as contributors to the information they store and deliver. Further, both MapLight.org and Opensecrets.org allow web-developers to create custom reports that access their community’s data and widgets for easily displaying information on other web sites. In these ways, these mash-ups are opening lines of communication between online participants for socially significant issues once reserved for professional journalists. This form of free and transparent information flow provides a wonderful model for encouraging open participation and dialogue between netizens. Link-back technology provides an even simpler to use opportunity for opening dialogue. A link-back is a protocol for notifying the authors of content when another person has linked to their content. This provides authors and content providers

an easy way of seeing who is referring and comment on their opinions. As such, it provides an easy way to open lines of communication and debate between parties.

These comprise my model for overcoming the evils associated with narrowcast communities. Long-lived profiles are the first step. Associated with each profile then needs to be some measure of the standing of the online persona within the community. This promotes responsible contribution. The profile should also have associated individual data. This will help combat the occluding force of CMC and hence will promote trust and the development (or recognition) of mutual relations and stop the exacerbation of polarisation within online communities. Finally, the use of mash-ups of data and link-back features promote dialogue between online participants. These mechanisms provide opportunities. They expose the interdependent nature of online life. Still it is possible for netizens to ignore these opportunities and interdependences. Nevertheless, by emphasising these features, sites can go a long way to combating the corruption of freedoms online.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have documented two costs we pay for the autonomy offered by the Web 2.0: a cost to the *individual* who is tempted to revel in their own illnesses and unwell notions of self, and a *social* cost in the form of increased cleavage and fragmentation. External regulation entails giving up autonomy and freedom. As such, it is counter to the openness it is intended to support. In any case, it is an unworkable option given the present state of the Internet. In the past I have argued for internal control by communities developing their own standards and enforcing their own norms. In the present case this seems ruled out for the critical communities are unlikely to desire to promote such standards. I have, however, pointed to some tools that may be able to help open these communities by promoting responsible contribution, leading to the recognition of our inter-dependences and social links, highlighting similarity and difference, and, most importantly, encouraging the free exchange of information and ideas. The Web 2.0 is an *opportunity* for everyone to engage in active participation on the issues they find socially significant and worth debate. This opportunity can be deliberately ignored. Nevertheless, it is a significant opportunity worth fighting for. But the battle must occur online and our weapons must be tools that encourage openness.

<sup>67</sup> M. Calore. Web Mashups Turn Citizens Into Washington’s Newest Watchdogs. *Wired*, April 26, 2007. Accessed from <http://www.wired.com/politics/law/news/2007/04/maplight> November 15, 2007.

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