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Ahls 1

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English 104

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The Problems with and Possibilities of

Online Communities

The emergence of online social networks has raised controversial

questions about the meaning of identity and community in cyber-

space. For example, to what extent do the identities users craft for

online communication match their real identity? And to what extent

does a virtual community approximate the traditions and values

associated with real face-to-face communities? These questions have

prompted many researchers to point to the abuses of online communi-

cation. However, other researchers, while acknowledging the potential

dangers of online communication, remain enthusiastic about the edu-

cational value of social networks and their importance to democracy

and citizenship.

A major abuse often encountered in the virtual world is "cyberbul-

lying." According to Phil McKenna, cyberbullying is "sending threatening

messages, displaying private messages, and posting embarrassing video

or photos online." McKenna explains that by assuming a false identity, a

person can enter the supposedly safe world of a chat room and spread

all sorts of destructive information about other members of the online

community. Because the targets of such cyberbullying have no way

to correct the destructive information, they can become extremely

depressed. After being continually taunted in her MySpace profile,

a 13-year-old girl from suburban St. Louis committed suicide (Malone).

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A related abuse is "cyberstalking." According to a report from the United States Department of Justice, *1999 Report on Cyberstalking: A New Challenge for Law Enforcement and Industry*, online stalking is similar to offline stalking. Both stalkers engage in repeated and unwelcome threatening sexual behavior. However, online stalkers can explore online communities, such as dating sites, to gain extensive personal information about their victims. The report acknowledges that while online stalking may not involve physical contact, it may serve as a "prelude to more serious behavior, including physical violence." Tom Zeller, Jr. reports a particularly sinister case of cyberstalking: the stalker not only bombarded his victim, an innocent 44-year-old publishing executive in Manhattan, with menacing sexual threats, but he also encouraged  others to stalk her by posting her "full name, address and phone number, along with a solicitation to call and drop by her home."

The cause of these online abuses and many other problems associated with online social networks is "Internet Addiction." Like other forms of addiction—drug abuse, alcoholism and gambling—Internet Addiction is a compulsive behavior caused by the need to escape everyday problems. Kimberly S. Young points out some of the signs of Internet Addiction:

> If we feel isolated, we can pour out our repressed feelings and act out hidden aspects of ourselves in meeting rooms and interactive games. If we long for love and affection, but fear rejection or AIDS, we can cruise for cybersex. And if we are bored with our family or cynical about society, we can retreat into a subculture of Internet

**Quotation:**
**Quote from government document on Web**

**Quotation:**
**Quote from online newspaper**

**Quotation from book**

**Long Quotation:**
**Quotation of more than four lines is set off from text and is *not* placed within quotation marks.**

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addicts who offer support, encouragement, excitement

and intrigue, and maybe even an invitation to come run

away from it all. (29–30)

Working with the strategies used to diagnose other compulsive

disorders, Young devised a questionnaire that asked Internet users

questions such as, "Do you feel restless, moody, depressed or irritable

when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?" (3). Respon-

dents to the questionnaire who Young classified as addicts admitted

that they "were investing more and more time online at greater and

greater cost to their real lives" (5).

Although the accessibility of online communication provides op-

portunities for abuse and addiction, many researchers remain convinced

that online social networks extend and enrich the way users experience

the world. In particular, individuals who are trapped or excluded by dis-

abilities express feelings of liberation as a result of their ability to com-

municate online. In *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators*, Jason Rowe, a

severely handicapped boy from Crosby, Texas, explains how the virtual

world has changed his sense of identity and community:

Online it doesn't matter what you look like. . . .In the real

world, people can be uncomfortable around me before they

get to know me and realize that, apart from my outer ap-

pearance, I'm just like them. . . .The internet eliminates

how you look in real life, so you get to know a person by

their mind and personality. Cooper.

In addition to liberation, researchers report that users of social

networks feel enriched by their ability to communicate with and un-

derstand people all over the world. William C. Diehl and Esther Prins

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report that "participation in 'SL' [Second Life] enhanced participants'

intercultural literacy." Their research revealed that "SL" participants

gained a "greater awareness of insider cultural perspectives and

openness toward new viewpoints."

**Short Quotation: Quote worked into writer's own sentence**

Many researchers argue that the most promising prospect for on-

line social networks is their ability to "revitalize citizen based democ-

**Documentation: Author and page number enclosed in parentheses**

racy" (Rheingold xxix). A compelling example of how such networks

can reconnect alienated citizens to the political process is the election

of Barack Obama. Throughout his campaign, Obama's staff used the

Internet to form a community of supporters who communicated with

each other about the major issues being debated in the campaign. Once

he became President, Obama held the first Internet town hall forum

where citizens from across the country contributed over 100,000

questions and then watched their president answer a wide range of

thoughtful questions about the economy. He also answered a question

**Short Quotation: Quote from online newspaper. Author's name enclosed within parentheses**

about "whether legalizing marijuana might stimulate the economy by

allowing the government to regulate and tax the drug" (Stolberg).

The "marijuana question" suggests the possibilities and prob-

lems in the virtual world may be no different than the possibilities

and problems in the real world. Both worlds enable you to find ideas,

share information, connect with other people and contribute to your

community. Both worlds also enable you to disguise your identity,

abuse other people, escape into fantasies and ask silly questions. How

**Documentation: Author's name used to introduce quote**

you participate in both worlds is up to you. Esther Dyson argues that

what you do online could or should change your offline life "by mak-

ing you less willing to accept things the way they are and more sure

**Page numbers enclosed within parentheses**

of your ability to build a life to suit yourself and your family" (280).

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*Annotations:*

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Sample entry: A book by one author

Medium of publication

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