

3 Social network sites

What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks. (boyd and Ellison 2007)

[S]ocial networking sites don't publicise community, they privatise it. (Andrejevic 2011: 97)

Social media is increasingly infiltrating everyday media practices. As we witness the rise of smartphones that allow users to move ambiently between social media like Facebook and Twitter at all times of the day, how we define social network sites (SNSs) is changing. As a series of cultural practices and artefacts that are both commercial and cultural, SNSs are becoming an integral part of identity, social and political management. But does this pervasiveness of SNS result in a flattening in definitions of the 'social' as some critics might suggest (Lovink 2012)? What does the ubiquitous nature of social media, especially as it becomes incorporated with mobile and locative media, say about contemporary media practice? Are SNSs transforming notions of publicness, privacy and intimacy (boyd 2011)? Or are the changes more dynamic and complex than previously theorised? Can alternative social media practices be formed in the face of monopolies such as Facebook (Lovink 2012)?

SNSs are at the interface between people and social media. These sites represent some of the most well-known and most highly valued brands (in market, if not social terms) on the internet today. For many the 'internet' is synonymous with SNSs. Names such as Facebook, Qzone, Twitter, Habbo, Renren and Badoo boast millions of online users who use these services to build connections with other people, to stay in touch, to find support and answers to questions, to reinforce common ideas and values, to share news and other information, and to be entertained. These sites have become exemplars of the Web 2.0 ethos and the shift in focus from users as audiences to users as networked publics that we identified in Chapter 2. In many ways

SNSs represent the intersection of networked publics and business interests, although, as we will see below, this is by no means a perfect fit.

In this chapter we want to develop an understanding of SNSs that goes beyond the popular and stereotyped notions of SNSs as being an Anglophonic domain populated by under-25s engaging in banal conversations about what they got up to on the weekend. Instead, we present SNSs as a global phenomenon that is engaging people from broad demographics in a variety of ways. Most importantly, we are interested in the ways that SNSs provide places for the construction and maintenance of relationships between people. Building on the themes we established in Chapter 2, and will expand upon in Chapter 4 (Web 2.0, networked publics, produsage and playbour), we look at how SNSs are deeply embedded within offline contexts, and support many kinds of activities which have very real social, economic, political and cultural consequences.

In the first part of this chapter we explore research that reveals the complexity that lies behind SNSs. Then we examine how SNSs have developed in non-Anglophonic contexts, and explore some of the ways that these contexts challenge Anglocentric understandings of social networks. In this section we consider how different groups that cut across demographic, cultural and social boundaries are using social networks, casting doubt over the persistent stereotypes and memes about online relations that still get presented in many forums, especially the mainstream media.

The final part of this chapter will review some of the ways that SNSs are being researched, to provide a broad overview of the main themes and topics in what is becoming a very closely studied phenomenon. We will end the chapter with a summary of the key points we have covered. But before we begin with the deeper analysis, let us begin with a working definition of SNSs.

DEFINING SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

There are dozens if not hundreds of sites that meet the functional definition of an SNS (which is, at its most fundamental level, a site that allows users to create some kind of online presence and articulate that with others). SNSs come in a range of shapes and sizes, from the behemoth that is Facebook, which at the time of writing claims it has over 800 million subscribers, to the small and niche-like WriteAPrisoner.com, a US-based SNS that allows penal-like communications with the outside world, with the goal of easing prisoner's transition from jail back into the community.

In attempting to define social network sites, it is useful to note boyd and Ellison's (2007) comment that the terms 'network' and 'networking' are often used interchangeably in critical literature. boyd and Ellison prefer the use of the term 'network' because, for them, networking implies the initiation of relationships by strangers. Consider, for example, a business *networking* event, where the point of the event is for people who have certain interests to meet other people who also share those interests. Here the emphasis is on the construction of new relationships. SNSs, while supporting this kind of relationship construction, are more frequently used by people to maintain existing relationships, and so boyd and Ellison elect to use the term 'social network site' to emphasise their role in maintenance of relationships that in many cases exist in offline as well as online contexts. We will return to this point later in the chapter.

At the core of social network sites is the construction of social networks that are enabled and enhanced by the internet. To date, boyd and Ellison's definition of SNS has been the most accurate. SNS are:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (boyd and Ellison 2007)

Most social network sites share a number of common features such as profiles, lists of connections, comments and private messaging. Profiles are how users identify themselves to the social media site, and usually contain a range of information about the user, including a name (and sometimes a screen name), email address (which is often kept hidden), birth date and other biographical information. Many sites also encourage users to upload a photo for use in their profiles. This information helps to build social networks and allows for site features like annual birthday reminders but also has clear implications for users' privacy. Some sites make their users' profiles publicly available, while others keep profiles hidden, only revealing them to other users of the SNS based on their relationship with the profile's owner.

A list of connections or relationships with other users of the SNS – sometimes called 'friends', although as boyd and Ellison point out, people in these lists may not actually be considered friends by the user – allows individuals to assert relationships with other individuals on the network. How these links are created depends on the site. For some SNSs, like Twitter, connections can be made unilaterally by one party, and a distinction is made between those people a user has linked to, and people who have linked

to the user. In Twitter these incoming/outgoing links are distinguished by the terms 'followers' and 'following'. Other SNSs, such as LinkedIn, require the link to be agreed to by both parties. Most SNSs also have ways of enabling users to link with contacts who are not signed up to the service, usually by dispatching an email to the other party which contains instructions on how to sign up for the SNS so they can accept the connection. This is one mechanism through which SNS can increase their subscriber base.

Comments, status updates and private messages allow communication between people on the network. The communication may be used like instant messaging (real-time conversations), may be a question inviting a response ('Does anyone know what's going on with the traffic this morning?') or may simply be a statement ('Just had lunch, tuna is great!') that is not intended to provoke a response but serves to keep an individual's social network alive by reminding others in the network that the individual is still there (Crawford 2010).

There are many dozens of SNSs, with some based around a theme, while others have no theme at all, other than offering a way for people to make connections. For example, LinkedIn is themed around people's working and business relationships, and Flixster is for developing social networks based around films. On the other hand, Facebook, Twitter and Google+ have no central organising theme (although Facebook did start as a site for US college students). Some sites aim to cater for specific social groups (BlackPlanet for African-American users; OUt everywhere for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual users, for example), although many do not. Even amongst sites that do not target any particular group some level of social differentiation does seem to have occurred. For example, in the US at least, LinkedIn has an older demographic than MySpace (Hampton et al. 2011), and Orkut is popular in Brazil and India (even though the service is based in the US). As we will discuss below, this connection of SNSs with national identity incorporates public displays of intimacy that help to establish and reinforce connections in an online environment, reflecting underlying influences in the way people use social networks that are not immediately visible.

COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS

Despite social media being a relatively recent phenomenon, research into people using network technologies to communicate with others pre-dates the development of social media by decades. From the 1980s, pioneers like Barry Wellman were already engaging with questions about the nature of sociality within what was generally referred to as 'computer-mediated

communication'. This included internet-based networks, but also bulletin board systems and networked work places. While one theme in this early work suggested that online interaction was a poor substitute for face-to-face communication (often based on workplace-based studies), others recognised that some people were using the networks for more social activities.

This section provides an overview of the discipline of internet studies, which looks at the subject of what people do online, what kinds of structures are re-mediated and what kind of structures are new. We will look at the 'ethnographic turn' that has become increasingly apparent in internet studies since the late 1990s and how debate has emerged in this discipline around the question of whether online interactions are best described as communities or networks.

Virtual communities

Back in 1993, Howard Rheingold popularised the idea of virtual communities in his book by the same name (and subtitled, importantly, 'Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier'). Rheingold's book examined his experiences with an early online community called the WELL, a pre-internet community based around Northern Californian new age ideologies. The WELL – an acronym for Whole Earth Lectronic Link – was a computer bulletin board maintained by a group of alternative lifestyle users who also produced the Whole Earth Catalog. Stewart Brand, editor of the catalogue and founder of the WELL, coined the aphorism 'information wants to be free' (Clarke 2000).

Rheingold's work popularised the notion of online communities, and fed into emerging media interest in the fledgling internet. On one side of what Wellman and Gulia (1999) have described as a Manichaeian and unscholarly debate were those who derided the idea of online communities as mere escapism, and yet further evidence of the decay of society and social relations. Here, the image that was constructed was of a socially awkward computer nerd, sitting in his basement engaged in a fantasy world that further removed him from reality and social connections. Castells points out that these negative images of online communication fed into existing pessimistic narratives about the loss of community in the modern suburb or megacity (2001: 125).

Others, like Rheingold, saw potential in these online environments to create new kinds of communities that could reinvigorate public discussion and debate. Instead of seeing these networks as socially isolating, many argued that the internet created a new space for social interaction and democratic participation, establishing some of the basis for claims about the

internet as an empowering medium, as discussed in Chapter 2. For others still, this online or virtual construction of social spaces was reminiscent of what Ray Oldenburg (1989) had described as 'great good places' or 'third places'. Such places exist outside the home and work, and are places where conversation is the main activity, positions are levelled (for example, the boss/worker relationship is left at the door when entering the third place) and the mood is generally playful. Most importantly, they are places that are readily accessible to everyone. A number of scholars (Kendall 2002; Soukup 2006) have argued that online spaces meet Oldenburg's criteria for third places, and it is a theme we will return to in Chapter 6 when considering the social environments constructed by social media games.

Some, like Sherry Turkle (1984, 1995), also argued that these spaces opened up opportunities for experimentation with new forms of identity, and pointed to the ways that online communication had the potential to free the individual from his or her body, allowing them to play in the realm of their imagination. This, in turn, allowed the playful exploration of concepts like gender. The online environment appeared to be a space which acted like a playground for identity, although some of the best work in this area still acknowledged the importance of offline factors (Turkle 1995; Baym 1998). However, in Turkle's later work, *Alone Together*, she did an about-face in terms of her celebration of the online.

These studies were conducted in the early days of the internet and often referred to people's own journeys through online communication environments. However, as larger numbers of people started joining the internet and commercialisation and dotcom excitement began to kick in, the character of these early environments began to change.

Networked communities

As the number of people using the internet began to burgeon in the mid-1990s, internet researchers had more opportunity to study online communities. Researchers began to discuss and emphasise the continuity of offline relationships and behaviours of users over discontinuity, amplifying the importance of social context. While a great deal of research has been done into online communities over the years, it is difficult to ignore the contribution of certain key scholars. Wellman conducted some of the first studies into the ways people used information technologies, and was one of the first people to argue for the importance of offline factors in online communication.

In one study Wellman, along with his colleagues, studied the ways that computer scientists working in universities used computer networks as part

of both their work and social interaction. One of the key findings was that people communicated more depending on how strong their offline ties were. People who were already friends, or who had developed relationships with each other through work, communicated with each other more often on these networks (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1998). The findings of this and other studies led Wellman to argue for more robust models of understanding online communities where offline factors were recognised as having an important role in online communication. Wellman and Haythornthwaite brought these perspectives together with other research in their edited collection *The Internet in Everyday Life* (2002).

The recognition that online experiences were grounded in real-world settings led to what could be termed an 'ethnographic shift' in internet studies. A good example of the ethnographic shift in internet studies is reflected in Daniel Miller and Don Slater's (2001) study, which looked at the use of the internet by Trinidadians. Their focus went beyond the online behaviours of Trinidadians to engage with the way in which internet use is contextualised with other (offline) cultural activities. Rather than attempting to generalise their study to describe all internet behaviour, Miller and Slater concerned themselves only with explaining the specific instance of internet use that their study focused on.

Unlike earlier studies of online communities, which typically started by constructing the online environment as a novel communicative space, Miller and Slater saw geographical place and the offline social world of their users as an extremely important consideration in their attempts to understand Trinidadian use of the internet. They describe their approach as 'one that sees it [the internet] embedded in a specific place, which it also transforms' (Miller and Slater 2001: 21). In this way, the internet shapes, and is shaped by, the cultural context in which it is performed. Miller and Slater found that being Trinidadian was an important factor in how and why people in Trinidad went online. Furthermore, they discovered in some cases that the online environment provided a space where people could be Trinidadian.

A key facet of these new internet community studies was the recognition that the internet is not one monolithic or homogeneous communication technology. Instead, the internet is presented as an unbounded object, which escapes a single all-encompassing definition. Unlike a mass media subject such as television, the internet is not understood as representing a totality. From this perspective, the internet is defined by an ongoing process of meaning making, a process through which the internet is socially constructed through its use. Moreover, in this understanding there is not one definition of the internet but many, depending on the context of the people who use

the internet and the context of that use. Miller and Slater, for example, argued that the internet must be 'disaggregated', emphasising that it is important:

not to look at a monolithic medium called 'the Internet', but rather at a range of practices, software and hardware technologies, modes of representation and interaction that may or may not be interrelated by participants, machines or programs (indeed they may not all take place at a computer). (Miller and Slater 2001: 14)

Miller and Slater describe the internet as both a 'symbolic totality' (as people do refer to an entity called 'the internet') as well as a 'practical multiplicity' – because one individual's definition of the internet might be radically different to another's (2001: 16). Christine Hine, another leading researcher who uses an ethnographic approach to the study of internet communities, reinforces this by pointing out that while common parlance might invoke the phrase 'the internet' as a single technological object, the actual meaning of 'internet' can be quite different depending on who is speaking and who is being spoken to. For example, she refers to the variety of different attitudes and ideas about the internet reflected by the students in her undergraduate classes (Hine 1998: 30).

Following her own interests in studying the internet from an ethnographic perspective, Hine has argued that the internet can be treated as both culture and a cultural artefact (1998). She points out that the notion of 'the internet' has meaning attached to it through a process of social negotiation. For example, the parents of grown children may have internet access, but not know what to do with it. However, when one of their children moves interstate or overseas, email may become an important method for maintaining contact. And when a baby is born in a family, a family member sets up a website with digital photographs of the new baby, and so the internet acquires meaning again, this time as represented through the web.

Manuel Castells picks up this theme and connects it back to his well-known overarching metaphor of the networked society. Castells points out that in studies such as Wellman's early work, and the Pew Internet and American Life Project, internet use is revealed as instrumental to the activities of everyday life. Earlier characterisations of 'virtual communities', then, needed to be reconsidered to de-emphasise the virtual and emphasise the connectedness of activities both online and offline.

Both Wellman and Castells argue that while the family still forms the basis for many of the strongest social ties in people's lives, other strong ties are formed through activities like work or play, and these ties may not necessarily be based on geographic proximity. We may work with people who live

hours away from us in the modern city, but we develop ties with them based on shared knowledge and experience, and the internet allows us to maintain these relationships over distance. These relationships take on the character of networks in that each of us is connected to others by ties that, if mapped out, would resemble a map of a computer or telephone network.

This does not mean that these ties between people are always strong, but as Castells points out, just because a tie is weak does not mean that it is not important. People coming together in an online forum to discuss a topic of shared interest may come to know one another through their posts, but never meeting in real life or knowing the real person means these are weak ties. However, dismissing these 'weak ties' as unimportant is clearly a mistake, as Clay Shirky demonstrates in telling the story of a lost Motorola Razr phone (2008). In this example of the power of social networks, Shirky relates the story of how a lost phone that had been taken by a passerby was recovered through the activities of an online community. The links between the protagonist in this story and the community could be characterised as weak – he didn't know any of the people who helped him recover the phone – but the weakness of the relationships did not make the relationships ineffectual.

Wellman has pointed out that in many modern societies, a phenomenon he calls 'networked individualism' has arisen; that is, individuals build networks to solve problems, make decisions or get support. The internet has vastly extended these networks so that they are no longer constrained by space. This change moves people away from traditional geographically bounded social groups – neighbourhoods, for example – and towards 'sparsely-knit and loosely-bounded networks' (Wellman 2003). For Castells, networked individualism is part of the networked society, rather than the internet *per se*, but can be supported and augmented by the internet to produce 'new patterns of sociability based on individualism' (Castells 2001: 130). To illustrate this, ask yourself a question: if you are thinking of buying something – let's say a new car – do you first get advice from a neighbour or someone you work with, or do you Google it? If the answer is the latter, then you're engaging in networked individualism.

Networked publics

With the rise of the SNS, questions about the nature of online community have again become a topic of interest. danah boyd has reworked the idea of networked communities within the SNS to describe networked 'publics' as an extension (but not necessarily an alternative) to the word 'communities'. When we speak of 'the public', we are in fact talking about a collection of

publics. A public, on the other hand is a bounded collective of individuals who have come together under a common set of principles, affinities or beliefs that bind and define the public – 'a relation among strangers' (Warner 2002). The public forms a single new entity that can be a social actor. There is also the assumption that these publics are open and designed for participation by everyone; they are not 'privates', although, because they are bounded, they necessarily have implicit rules which define what is considered part of that public, and what is not.

According to boyd, networked publics are:

publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice. (2011: 39)

There are two fundamental components outlined here that are worth reiterating: networked publics are both spaces *and* groups of people who are connected through practice and technology. They are 'simultaneously a space and a collection of people' (boyd 2011: 41). Importantly, boyd argues that these publics are not just networked because they are linked together by the technology, but they are transformed and restructured by networked media. SNSs are examples of online technologies that support the production and reproduction of networked publics. As boyd notes, there are three key dynamics in SNSs: invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private (2011: 49). In examining the transformation of publics, she observes that 'the affordances of networked publics rework publics more generally and the dynamics that emerge leak from being factors in specific settings to being core to everyday realities' (p. 53). In the pervasiveness of networked publics, boyd perceives erosions of physical barriers while, at the same time, 'many people feel unmotivated to interact with distant strangers' (p. 53). In sum, in networked publics, 'attention becomes a commodity' (p. 53).

While the notion of networked publics has considerable overlap with Castells' concepts of a networked community, networked publics differs primarily in its use of the idea of 'publics' rather than 'communities' as the organising metaphor for conceptualising online users. This is a useful alternative, because it allows us to drop the cultural associations caused by that term, a problem that Castells himself is keen to avoid (2001: 127).

NETWORKS OR COMMUNITIES?

There is still healthy debate in the scholarly discourse about the nature of the social structures that are enabled by network technologies. While Castells

and others have moved away from the idea of online communities, and embraced the network metaphor, others argue for the value of understanding networked sociability as a kind of community.

The term 'community' is complicated and contested. There are a variety of definitions that make it difficult to use without also accepting the intellectual baggage that comes with them. This is why some, like Castells, prefer to avoid the term altogether. Others have persevered, with interesting results. Celia Pearce has attempted to sidestep some of the baggage by drawing on German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies' definition of community (*Gemeinschaft*) as 'an association of individuals with a collective will that is enacted through individual effort' (2009: 5). Pearce notes that 'a community of practice is defined as a group of individuals who engage in a process of collective learning and maintain a common identity defined by a shared domain of interest or activity' (2009: 5). One of the key factors in making and maintaining a community is social capital. The concept of social capital requires a few paragraphs to explain, but it is important so it's worth a minor detour.

The term 'social capital' is used by Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) in his widely read work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Bourdieu was interested in taste and how taste becomes naturalised in people. In other words, Bourdieu wanted to know what societal mechanisms led to a person from one kind of background enjoying caviar and opera, while someone else likes fried chips and hard rock music. These tastes are naturalised so that people don't even know why they like them, or how they came to like them – it just seems 'natural' for them to feel such responses. For Bourdieu, capital was a form of 'knowledge' that helped produce and naturalise taste.

To explore this, Bourdieu interviewed 1,200 French people from varying class backgrounds about their tastes in art, music and popular culture. As a result of this research, Bourdieu deployed his concept of capital to discuss what he saw as three significant kinds of capital that influenced people's taste: cultural (informed by education and upbringing), social (community and networks), and economic. These factors, along with the individual's own 'habitus' (the regulatory patterns of everyday life and everyday practices), were the contributing factors in determining one's identification with a particular lifestyle niche.

Bourdieu's concept of 'social capital' took on new significance when it was reworked by James Coleman (1988) to infer a more ego-centred concept. Social capital was then redefined by Robert Putnam as part of his savage exposé on the declining role of community and social welfare in the US in *Bowling Alone* (2000). Here Putnam characterised social capital as

societal-orientated activity based upon notions of trust and reciprocity. Social capital, therefore, can be seen as an integral component in the sustainability of online communities. Reflecting upon the literature about social capital from Pierre Bourdieu onwards, Ellison et al. note that an SNS such as Facebook:

facilitates specific types of connections between people that can generate social capital ... SNSs are continuously reshaping our social networks and the communication practices we use to maintain them, and thus constitute a vibrant, important, and challenging context for studying communication practices and their social capital outcomes. (2011: 141)

In his reworking of the concept of SNS as community, Parks argues that Rheingold's depiction of the virtual community may find a new home in SNSs (Parks 2011). Reviewing various definitions of community, he determined that there are five characteristics that constitute a virtual community. Each of these characteristics are difficult to measure, so Parks derived three affordances that would indicate activities that were conditions for community: membership, personal expression and connection. Parks argued that if an SNS demonstrates all three affordances, then it can be said to be supporting a virtual community. Using MySpace as a case study, Parks examined how often people logged in, how often they updated their profiles and how many friends they were connected to.

Parks' results were surprising. Instead of finding that communities thrived in MySpace, he found that many people (as many as 40 per cent) had so few online friends and logged in so infrequently that it was questionable whether they could even be considered ongoing subscribers to the service, let alone members of any virtual community. Other studies tend to confirm Parks' observations in other social media, although there is also the possibility that the way people use MySpace may differ from the way they use other SNSs like Facebook (Hampton et al. 2011). Only 15 to 25 per cent of surveyed members met Parks' basic requirements for constructing online communities.

Parks also noted, however, that for people with large numbers of friends on MySpace, a high percentage of those friends lived within a relatively small geographical distance from the user. In other words, the online social networks were being used by these people to maintain or supplement existing offline connections. He also suggested that users who find their that friends are already online might be more likely to stay online themselves, and to build communities. The key point here is that these online communities are tightly tied to local relationships, and that offline and online communities are tightly linked – much more so than we might imagine. The Pew Research

Center's Internet & American Life SNS survey conducted in 2010 supports this claim. In this study (which was conducted by phone) it was reported that 89 per cent of North American users' Facebook friends are people they have met more than once in person, and a high percentage of the total number of friends on Facebook are people who are known to the user through school/university, work, family or volunteer groups (Hampton et al. 2011).

This data suggests that SNS relationships are geographically and socially oriented towards the local. Significantly, these findings suggest an important point: it's not just the size of the network that matters, but the quality of the connections. More intimate connections seem to be more valuable and more common for SNS users than large numbers of less intimate connections. This weakens the importance of network effects and increases the relative importance of intimacy, suggesting that rather than being characterised as networked publics, SNS-constructed publics might alternatively be defined as 'intimate publics'.

Intimate publics

The idea behind intimate publics is that as social and mobile media become more pervasive, different modes of using these media mean that increasingly publics are defined by the strength of their relationships, rather than the total number of network connections. The term 'intimacy' when used here not only refers to the common-usage kinds of intimacies that exist between lovers, family members or close friends (though these can and do play a role), but also to intimacies that can exist at a social or cultural level. As Michael Herzfeld observes, cultural intimacy describes the 'social poetics' of the nation-state; it is 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (1997: 3). To put it a different way, intimacy can be something that exists between strangers because of the common bond they can share by virtue of them belonging to the same cultural group, whether that be a town, city, nation or some other sociological or political grouping. An example might be a small country town where everyone who grew up there knows that the town has a reputation for having the worst weather in the nation (or the most boring night-life, or the most superstitious people in the province and so on). This shared knowledge, even if it is potentially embarrassing, also acts as a kind of social bond – a 'cultural intimacy'.

An example of when cultural intimacies come into play would be when two people from similar cultural backgrounds but who are otherwise strangers accidentally meet on a train in an unfamiliar country, and find that they

immediately have a connection. The way that SNSs have been developed or simply picked up by different nations and cultures across the world is also a tangible example of this kind of cultural intimacy. China's QQ is not just any SNS; it is *the* Chinese SNS, and to use QQ is to participate in a community that shares a set of cultural intimacies. Facebook has become popular in Korea, but it does not speak to and of Korea in the way Cyworld minihompy does (Hjorth 2007). One of the first SNSs, Friendster, began in the US but soon became widely adopted in the Philippines. Many Brazilians use Google's original SNS, Orkut. The list of SNSs which have become associated with particular nationalities goes on. In these examples it can be argued that a sense of community emerges through the performance of personal intimacies and the aggregation and identification of public socio-cultural intimacies.

At a more interpersonal level, SNS can be regarded as a technological tool that mediates interpersonal intimacies. Esther Milne (2004) has suggested that new media, such as SNSs, function socially as tools to mediate intimacy, and should be historically contextualised with other technologies that have filled this role. Far from being a new phenomenon, others have argued that intimacy has always been mediated (Hjorth 2005), with examples of other technological intimacy mediators including texting on mobile phones, the telegraph (see, for example, Standage 1998), and written correspondence. When seen in this light, the only thing that has changed with the arrival of SNSs is that people have appropriated computer networks as yet another technology that mediates intimacy.

Intimacy in SNSs is also represented by how people manage their online details. All SNSs have a concept of a profile, or something similar, which reveals something about the user. This profile, as we mentioned above, may include images and other information, and can often be made public or private through the software, with these two categories defined fairly rigidly: sharing with everybody (public) or sharing with friends (private). Google+ introduced the idea of 'circles' that allow people to place friends into different and potentially overlapping user-defined categories like 'work mates' or 'school friends'. The amount of information about oneself that is revealed through the profile is part of the performance of intimacy online.

For boyd (2011), US youth have responded to the growth in networked media by creating networked publics that engage in various forms of semi-public and semi-private modalities. Choosing what to share and who to share it with allows people to control the privacy or publicness of their information that goes beyond the relatively clumsy tools provided by social networks. Instead, people use new kinds of strategies to control their information, carefully assessing the social value of revealing information against

the potential costs (boyd and Marwick 2011). Privacy, in other words, is not simply an on/off switch or a setting that is chosen and then ignored. Rather, the boundaries between public and private are something that people are constantly revising as a perpetual work in progress (Hjorth and Arnold 2013). Rather than viewing all SNSs as 'networked publics', as boyd does for the context of the West, we could characterise SNSs instead as 'intimate publics' that are played out, and through, social media practices. Some of these practices are expanded and examined in a Korean context in Chapter 7.

TRENDS IN SNS STUDY

The different perspectives presented above demonstrate that SNS are highly complex phenomena, and virtually demand the social scholar's attention. Reflecting this, the study of SNSs has become prominent within internet studies and related disciplines. One glance at the programme of key annual conferences such as AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) shows the various methods and approaches in the multitude of papers addressing SNSs. This is hardly surprising as SNSs are highly visible internet phenomena, not only because they are so widely used, but also because they provide a potential wealth of information for researchers about how people interact. Through the popularity of Web 2.0, the riches that have become associated with social media entrepreneurs like Mark Zuckerberg and the corresponding media coverage SNSs have become the 'new new thing' (Lewis 2000).

Much of the research into SNSs until recently has been preoccupied with the uses of SNSs by young people in Western contexts (Goggin and McLelland 2009). However, to think of SNSs as a Western Anglophonic phenomenon would be a mistake, as SNSs are fast becoming a global phenomenon and are no less emergent in developing countries (boyd and Ellison 2007). Surveys of SNS users continually put a lie to the idea that SNSs are the domain of the young. While younger users are often more active on social networks, they are not the dominant age group. For example, the average Facebook user was 38 in 2010 and the average age is increasing every year (Hampton et al. 2011). As the demographic continues to widen, SNSs are also becoming increasingly important sites for emerging forms of familial interaction, socialising, relationship management and identity construction (Bennett 2008; Bennett et al. 2009; Ito et al. 2008; Rheingold 2008; Hjorth and Arnold 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012).

Methodological approaches to the study of social networks also vary. Following on from the virtual ethnographic research traditions we mentioned

above (Hine 1998; Miller and Slater 2001), some researchers of SNSs have used qualitative approaches (boyd 2004, 2009, 2011; Miller 2011) to focus upon more detailed, local and personalised understandings of the intimate and social dimensions of SNS use. Other approaches are broader, analysing and criticising social media, or particular aspects of it (Shirky 2008). Studies around SNSs as part of broader forms of twenty-first century media literacy (Ito et al. 2008) have also begun to emerge.

SNSs are also implicated in other areas of research, like journalism, politics and law. As we will see in Chapter 4, social media are enabling changes in the way people engage with politics via citizen journalism and online activism, and SNSs are often the sites and technologies that support these activities. The discussion is thus rapidly moving beyond Western and teen contexts and expanding to engage with broader social issues that include censorship, privacy and copyright. This means that study into SNSs is highly multi-disciplinary, and thus methodologies and motives for research are highly varied. In the remainder of this chapter we are going to paint an impression with broad brush-strokes of some of the major areas of current research that engages with SNSs. As we will see, SNS studies are maturing and multiplying, reflecting the way that SNSs are occupying an increasingly important role both within and across societies.

Non-Anglocentric studies

Initial research into SNSs focused upon contexts familiar with the researcher's own cultural context. Given the nature of English as the *lingua franca* in 'global' studies, many studies into SNSs came from Anglophonic researchers (Goggin and McLelland 2009). Later, non-Anglophonic models began to grow, relating the cross-cultural and global nature of SNSs (Yang et al. 2003; Goggin and McLelland 2009).

This shift is important when we consider that many of the locations for hardware and software manufacturing have been situated in non-Anglophonic contexts. The Asia-Pacific region, which encompasses locations such as India and China, is one such non-Anglophonic context that is home to some of the oldest SNSs such as Cyworld (Hjorth and Kim 2005). Many nations within the Asia-Pacific also have longer histories with mobile and locative technologies (see Chapter 7) and demonstrate examples of new social uses of the technologies in areas such as gaming, location-aware social media and social networks (Hjorth and Chan 2009). This makes the region difficult for researchers to ignore.

Studies of social media use in the Asia-Pacific region, for example, have found that for youth, SNSs are not only a fundamental part of everyday life

and the exercise of their social capital (see below), but also a space that helps to maintain intergenerational ties when geographic distance might be involved – a point we will illustrate more clearly through a case study of social media games in Chapter 6.

As studies in the US have found, in many countries in the Asia-Pacific it is no longer just ‘youth’ that are using SNSs, as adult-to-adult and inter-generational forms of dialogue and digital literacy expand with increased net accessibility. Moreover, the demographics are shifting too, as internet access becomes a tool not just for the rich or middle classes, but as an integral part of a new mobile working class (Qiu 2008). Interestingly, in China it is working-class use of the internet that is growing exponentially, mainly through mobile media (CNNIC 2009). This gives us insight into the ways that some of the largest societies on Earth are developing and integrating new media into this development.

Cross-cultural approaches to the study of SNSs also provide us with insights into the differences and similarities between new media practices in different cultures. By moving the cultural frame to another context, we often find we learn a lot about the way that social media works in our own culture, as behaviours which are rendered invisible through familiarity become visible in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

SNSs and political action

In Chapter 4 we will look at the participative qualities of social media, and the way that political engagement can emerge from activities like citizen journalism and online activism. We will also suggest that mobile technology is playing an increasingly important role in the way that groups of people can organise, as outlined by Howard Rheingold’s concept of ‘smart mobs’ (2002). The possibilities of using SNSs and social media for political action has been further promoted by events, such as the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, which helped to establish the idea that social media was no longer only about social networks for maintaining interpersonal relationships. Social media was presented here as a powerful communication technology that changed the nature of how information gets disseminated through new affective channels that have the potential to motivate and mobilise people in ways that media has never before – as we will see with the *Kony 2012* campaign example in Chapter 4.

While we need to be cautious about claims that any new technology is very different or revolutionary, in this case this technology is a particularly useful tool for organising and communicating. This is partially because there is a greater degree of affective personalisation involved with social media.

In other words, if you receive a pamphlet about a protest from a stranger in the street it is a different experience to receiving the same information from a friend on Facebook. In the latter example, there’s already a connection between you and the friend, so the message has more significance and it is likely to affect you on a different level. Messages can also take on unique forms not just in terms of media format (text, image, video) but also discussion and active engagement through messaging, online petitions and so on (Bennett 2008; Bennett et al. 2009; Ito et al. 2008; Rheingold 2008). Social mobile media also provide new spaces for networked, *effective* civic responses and *affective* interpersonal responses (Hjorth and Arnold 2012).

Privacy

One of the more significant and complex concerns associated with social network sites is the issue of privacy and, not surprisingly, this is a burgeoning area in the field of SNS research. This issue has received a great deal of attention not just in popular media, but in critical literature as well. Privacy is a highly popular topic precisely because it is so complex, and because it provides a handhold for anchoring fears and anxieties about a new technology.

Most new technologies are met with an initial social response that contains elements of fear, paranoia and anxiety (Kember 1998). The media frequently plays into these fears, often emphasising them out of proportion by focusing on the exceptional and presenting it as the norm. SNSs are no exception to this, and have been implicated as the culprits in a range of modern anxieties from playground bullying to terrorism. The media is happy to offer a range of anecdotes to support these fears (Marwick 2008).

For SNSs, concerns about privacy are tantamount. Parents worry that their children are able to publish too much about themselves, attracting unwanted attention, damaging their reputations or breaking laws that they may not even realise they are breaking. For their part, teenagers often resent their parents’ interest in their online activities, and see parental attempts at monitoring their online behaviour as an invasion of their privacy (boyd and Marwick 2011).

Some studies have examined the uses of SNSs and their built-in privacy systems and have concluded that many users of SNSs – especially younger users – do not take advantage of the privacy features (Gross and Acquisti 2005). Others suggest that to understand young people’s attitudes to privacy in the online environment requires a more thorough understanding of online practices. boyd and Hargittai (2010), for example, show that teens in their studies are very aware of the privacy implications of their online

activities and are very selective about what they share and who they share it with.

Much of the work on privacy concerns the relationship between individuals and how people negotiate, public and private, between themselves and other users of the SNS. However, another dimension of privacy that has been less explored concerns the relationship between users and the SNS itself. The issues associated with this go back to fundamental questions about user and used, and control, that we examined in Chapter 2.

Analysing social data

As we saw in Chapter 2, SNSs collect and generate data about their users and about how users connect with each other. Although much of the data that SNSs collect remains private, some of that data is public, especially those things that the users themselves want to share. An example is posts on Twitter, which provide information such as time and date sent, sometimes a geographic location for the originating post, the user name of the person who created the post and so on. The richness of Twitter posts also comes from the use of hashtags, which allow people to track issues rather than individuals.

Many SNSs now provide application programmable interfaces (APIs) that allow various applications, including custom-built applications, to access the data generated by the SNS. This can provide researchers with a wealth of information about the use of the SNS, but can also provide enticing glimpses into the social machinery. Research using this data has resulted in a wide range of different applications. For example, Bamman et al. (2012) have used statistical analysis techniques on data from Twitter and Sina Weibo (a Chinese SNS, similar to Twitter) and Chinese instant messaging services to gain an understanding of levels and application of censorship in mainland China. From their analysis they claimed to be able to identify terms that were censored and even to show how censorship varied by province.

Data visualisation techniques are increasingly being used to provide visual representations of the data, too. In this work, large amounts of data collected from an SNS is used to draw images, charts and graphs which reflect some aspect of the SNS. For example, Facebook intern Paul Butler (2010) used data on the location and frequency of Facebook posts, resulting in a map that lights up the world based on Facebook use. Large chunks of Africa, China and Russia are rendered dark, providing a startling visual mapping of population density, global wealth and aggressive censorship.

In a similar vein, Jer Thorp, a Canadian artist and educator, developed *Just Landed In ...*, a visualisation of the location of Twitter posts that contain the phrase 'just landed in'. In this visualisation, lines appear superimposed across the globe, representing people's travel and providing a visual representation of human movement through space and time and their connections with social media (Thorp 2009).

Others are using social media sources and applying sophisticated information processing techniques to explore the relationships and uses of SNSs as a way of providing quantitative data that supports (or refutes) qualitative research. Thelwall has conducted a number of such analyses of SNSs. In one such study, Thelwall (2008) collected a random selection of around 20,000 profiles from MySpace users and analysed the information provided in these profiles to develop a statistical overview of data such as age, religion, frequency of access and so on. Thelwall found that users were younger than previously reported (the median age was 21), and that the median number of friends was 27. He also saw that there were groupings of this data; there were a lot of people who only had 1 friend, a group who had 2–9 friends, another that had 10–90 and a third group who had more than 90. The authors noted that this was consistent with qualitative research that suggested that people who use MySpace categorise friends into close friends, acquaintances and strangers. Given that the median was 27 friends, the data suggested that for MySpace users, most friends were acquaintances rather than close friends. The suggestion here is that people made friends online, rather than using the SNS as a way to maintain offline relationships. This is at odds with some research, although it may also reflect the kinds of users that were using MySpace.

Others still are using social media data to gain insights into how people respond to events. For one example, Bruns et al. (2012) analysed social media postings in the aftermath of the 2011 floods in Brisbane, Australia. They followed the changing social media etiquette and the response by the Queensland police to the disaster through large-scale data collection of Twitter hashtags, and then created visualisations of the patterns of media use and themes around this event. For another example, in Hjorth and Kim's (2011) case study of the role of social and mobile media in the crisis of Japan's earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster (known as 3/11), they found that many victims of these events relied on older media and communication methods. This seemed to be because the participatory nature of social media made understanding the event more confusing than when it was encountered through 'packaged' media like television. One respondent noted that prior to 3/11 he had viewed Twitter as 'conversational',

but during and after the crisis his opinion changed dramatically; he felt bombarded by conflicting social media threads which then made him redefine the discourse surrounding Twitter as more like a 'conference' than a 'conversation'.

If we are to understand the impact of social media in times of crisis or political upheaval we need to move our analysis from an *effect*-orientated focus to *affect*-orientated one. We need more hybrid studies that combine the micro and macro analysis, using such methods as Ken Anderson's 'ethno-mining' in which ethnographic processes are used to analyse data mining (Anderson et al. 2009). Data-mining and visualisations may paint pictures of media phenomenon during these times, but as anyone who has lost an intimate will attest, they are abstract in the reality of grief's texture. Instead, there needs to be more ethnographies of media affect and mobile intimacy to understand the micro, meso and macro levels of intimate publics in times of trauma.

There is certainly a proliferation of data in current society, leading some to call this moment the 'era of Big Data'. However, as boyd and Crawford note, 'Big Data' is 'in many ways, a poor term' (2012: 663). They argue that:

like other socio-technical phenomena, Big Data triggers both utopian and dystopian rhetoric. On one hand, Big Data is seen as a powerful tool to address various societal ills, offering the potential of new insights into areas as diverse as cancer research, terrorism, and climate change. On the other, Big Data is seen as a troubling manifestation of Big Brother, enabling invasions of privacy, decreased civil freedoms, and increased state and corporate control. As with all socio-technical phenomena, the currents of hope and fear often obscure the more nuanced and subtle shifts that are under way. (2012: 663-4)

Representations of Big Data are compelling, illustrating Matt Jones' point that data is seductive material (2009). Data holds the promise of containing answers to questions you haven't even asked yet, so long as you have the tools to collect, sort and analyse the dataset. But this can be a compelling illusion, as there are limits to what the data alone can tell us, especially when it comes to the analysis of social data. Sentiment analysis, for example, is a technique where the computer attempts to determine the affective meaning pieces of text. This is done through statistical analysis of words and word proximity. So, a piece of text like 'I'm having the worst day of my life' could be analysed and determined to be a negative sentiment. However, the computer cannot read context. When one person claims that a particular person is 'sick', for example, it has different meanings that depend on the person being referred to and the person doing the referring. Kamvar and Harris's

We Feel Fine (2009), which builds up an interactive mapping on sentiment in blog posts, is probably still the most engaging use of sentiment analysis even though their purpose is more artistic than analytical. As Anderson et al. (2009) note, data mining by itself provides little insight beyond abstract pattern recognition. Forwarding their hybrid model of 'ethno-mining', Anderson et al. argue that the socio-cultural depth provided by ethnography needs to be brought to data mining in order to render these abstractions into dynamic reflections of lives and subjectivities.

The use of data analysis techniques as a research tool raises a number of issues. boyd and Crawford (2011, 2012) point to a number of them, including issues with the ethics of using public data that was never intended to be used in this fashion, the methodological reliability and limits to the approaches used (sentiment analysis is an obvious problem here) and the potential of uneven and inequitable access to data sources. As boyd and Crawford observe, the 'Big Data' move should be understood as part of the *computational turn* (Burkholder 1992) that, in turn, creates new digital divides. This is an emerging and valuable area of research in social media that would benefit from a more rigorous examination of its techniques.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, SNSs are *the* definitive social media technology. They are the interface through which people engage with social media, and increasingly they are the way that people engage with the internet. SNSs are shining examples of the Web 2.0 ethos we discussed in Chapter 2 – they are user-oriented, providing a space for people to make things, share things, communicate and connect with each other, allowing for a wide range of empowering practices from activism to creative production. However, we must not forget that they are also commercial ventures, and as such can and do commercialise users by collecting and using their data and details. SNSs are free, in that we do not pay subscription fees to access them, but companies like Facebook have multi-billion dollar valuations. The question we must ask here is, why? If we are not paying in cash then are we paying in some other way, and are we getting value?

In the first part of this chapter we have looked at the evolution of the internet as a medium for sociality. From virtual communities we have explored networks, networked publics and intimacy as structural features of the sociality afforded by SNSs. Questions persist about whether SNSs and online interactions are better understood as a network or a community. We suggest that SNSs exhibit properties of both.

SNSs are also both global and local. From Manchester to Manila, and from Seoul to Sydney, people are using SNSs for similar reasons, and in this way they are a powerful symbol of the way that communication technologies really are spanning the globe, crossing cultures and encouraging research that appreciates the diversity this represents. Yet SNSs are also intensely local, emphasising rather than erasing geographical proximity. SNSs may span the globe, but the relationships we maintain through them are generally those that we also maintain through face-to-face contact.

There is, of course, a faddish element to SNSs, and it is likely that today's darlings of the digerati will be tomorrow's old news, but it would be a mistake to dismiss SNSs as nothing more than a fashion, as they reflect social practice as much as they create it. SNSs have not become popular because they create social networks, but because they provide a space for social networks to exist. These social networks, as we have seen throughout this chapter, and indeed in other chapters, exist in both online and offline worlds. They provide spaces for online relations, but also structure our offline relationships.