

Culture in a Network: dykes, webs and women in London and Manchester¹

Sarah Green

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Manchester

sarah.green@man.ac.uk

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Introduction

In the past few years, networks have come to be regarded as *the* form of postmodern sociality: they imply no essential or fixed boundaries and no necessary hierarchies, which results in a tendency to allow overlaps, hybrids, transitions and transformations, apparently with little disturbance.² Within networks, people can make their own webs, connecting anything with anything else.³ However, some puzzles arise here: within this networked sociality, what is culture (as opposed to 'cultural') and, more to the point, where is it? Can one speak of 'British ethnography' and actually mean anything by the phrase in a networked world?⁴

The problem, I suggest, is a lack of attention to three elements of sociality in most discussions of networks: first, the importance of *disconnection* as well as connection in social relations; secondly, the fact that connection must have some

¹ The first part of this title is obviously borrowed from Strathern's "Culture in a Netbag" (1981). However, this (mis)use of the phrase is not intended to be a direct comment on Strathern's article; rather, it is wordplay on two themes, one to do with critiques of certain kinds of feminist positions on the notion of 'woman' (a theme in Strathern's paper), and the other to do with the popular use of the idea of information and communications technologies ('networks') as a means to generate a discourse on perceived cultural change. These points will hopefully become clearer later in the paper.

² This paper is not centrally concerned with the thorny issue of unpacking various definitions of network. See Riles (2000) for a thorough critical analysis of the use of the term 'network', and in particular, the notion that 'network' is a self-evident concept that is principally concerned with links, or connections.

³ The clearest example of this kind of theorising about sociality is to be found in actor network theory. See, for example, Law (1999); Latour (1993).

⁴ To my mind, another question also arises: how is it that this idea of networks is so strongly reminiscent of a form of individualism that was politically promoted both in Britain and the USA (amongst others) during the 1980s and early 1990s? However, that question is beyond the scope of this paper. See Green (1997) Chapter 6, and Smith (1994) for a discussion of the development of this form of individualism.

substance – in crude terms, people need a reason to connect and the connection must be meaningful to them, which implies there must be something beyond the connection itself, and upon which the connection is based; and finally, lack of attention to the way people make use of the *idea* of networks (as opposed, say, to ‘society’ or ‘group’ or, indeed, ‘culture’) to generate an understanding of social relations. In short, focusing on networked connections has tended to lose sight of the conditions that make networks possible, and thinkable.

This paper will address these gaps by using two ethnographic research projects carried out ten years apart, the first in London and the second in Manchester, to explore experiences of ‘network’ in practice, and it uses sexuality as an issue around which to develop the argument. The first project, on lesbian feminists in London, was carried out pre-Internet; the second was based on looking into the introduction of new information and communications technologies (ICTs)⁵ in various organisations in Manchester. Both cases involved women’s organisations, and it was notable that in both, the women involved expressed a sense of fragmentation, or disconnection, in their lives. The interesting element here is that this sense of disconnection was expressed in much the same way by both groups of women, despite the lack of Internet and ‘network mania’ in the earlier project.

Through looking at these two examples, I argue both that disconnection is as important an element of networks as is connection, and that culture is indeed *in* the network, in three ways: firstly, by showing that networked relations need to be meaningful and relevant, for otherwise they become empty connections; secondly, by arguing that people are using the idea of network as a metaphor to discuss other things (i.e. network is good to think); and thirdly, by arguing that network is a familiar and culturally marked concept, and one that is a popular way to view sociality at the moment, at least in Britain. In short, networks in themselves are not new phenomena, they do not constitute the only or even main basis for sociality today in Britain, and they are not only

⁵ The acronym ‘ICTs’ started to be commonly used in 1998, and replaced both ‘IT’ (information technology) and ‘telematics’ (referring to multimedia communication across a distance). It refers to all telecommunications and computer-based technologies and techniques used to manage, organise, transmit and translate information, and it refers to the use of these technologies to communicate. ‘IT’ became insufficient when the Internet and mobile telephony became important elements of these technologies, as communication was a key element in both; ‘telematics’ was never a very popular term, being used mostly by specialists and policy makers, and therefore fell largely out of use when ‘ICTs’ emerged as the more popular term.

about connection, but also about disconnection. I am not suggesting that the notion of network is therefore ontologically meaningless; I am suggesting that culture intervenes to make it meaningful in a particular way, and that there is clear continuity between earlier and current meanings of the term, which implies that it is not the new technologies – or, indeed, any other ‘globalising’ process – that is at the bottom of the idea that networks are currently at the centre of things.

I. Lesbian feminists in London and Cyber-women in Manchester

Both the ethnographic projects discussed here have at times given me the impression of being somewhat off-centre within anthropology. However, this was only mildly because they involved ‘anthropology at home’ in Britain; more to the point was *what* they were about. In the late 1980s, it was lesbian feminist separatists, their attempts to carve out a space for themselves in London and to make sense of the rapidly changing contexts in which gender and sexuality were being debated, both intellectually and in the ‘alternative scene’ of London (Green 1997); in the late 1990s, it was the introduction of information and communications technologies (ICTs) across a range of sectors in Manchester, exploring how these technologies became interwoven with the historical and social specificities of Manchester.⁶ The research included looking at the voluntary sector and in particular spending some time at the Manchester Women’s Electronic Village Hall (WEVH), a computer skills training centre for women, one aspect of which will particularly concern me here.

The first project was slightly off-centre because it focused on an issue almost invisible within anthropology at the time: political activism based on sexuality. That shifted sexuality at least partially out of its usual anthropological location within kinship and/or gender relations,⁷ though remaining centrally linked to these themes. The research concerned women who explicitly challenged the kinship and gender relations existent within their own social context (i.e., contemporary Britain), and tried to construct different forms of sociality for themselves.⁸ The broad lesbian feminist argument

⁶ This was a joint research project with Penny Harvey and Jon Agar, “The Social Contexts of Virtual Manchester”, and was part of the ESRC’s *Virtual Society?* programme.

⁷ See, for example, Ortner (1988); Herdt (1984); Rubin (1975). There have of course since been considerable changes in the treatment of sexuality within anthropology. See, for example, Stoler (1991) and various papers in Lancaster & DiLeonardo (1997).

⁸ For a brief description of feminist separatist theory, see Green (1997), pp. 16-19.

behind that effort was this: the sexualities normally available to women ('compulsory heterosexuality',⁹ 'abjected lesbianism'¹⁰) were read as politically constructed to produce women as self-perpetuating subordinate persons. These sexualities were generated at the level of interpersonal relationships, particularly but not exclusively between men and women; they constantly informed those relationships, maintaining and reinforcing the inevitability and 'naturalness' of the resulting oppressive, and by some readings often violent, relations between men and women.¹¹ An alternative reading of sexuality was needed in order to escape this self-perpetuating cycle, and this alternative had to be put into practice within personal interrelations in order to be effective in producing different kinds of persons.¹² It was not possible to simply think your way out of (hetero-)patriarchal oppression, by altering your consciousness: it was also necessary to alter the kinds of relationships you had, both with yourself and others, because those relationships (re-)produced and maintained both the consciousness and the oppression.

For feminist separatists, this implied dislocating oneself from prior relationships, and in particular any relationships with men, and generating new kinds of connections between women, which would simultaneously be both a personal and political project. It was the attempt to put these alternative connections into practice within London that was a main focus of the research. The aim was to try and understand how being somewhere in particular (in this case, late 1980s London) would articulate with an abstraction (in this case, lesbian feminist theories of sexuality and sexual relations) in the generation of alternative connections in practice.¹³

The second project, carried out jointly with Penny Harvey and Jon Agar, created an occasional sense of being off-centre in a different way. The first indication of a problem was that discussing the research project in seminars generated an air of biliousness in

⁹ Rich (1980)

¹⁰ Butler (1990); Ettore (1980); Jeffreys (1985); Kitzinger (1987); Faderman (1991)

¹¹ See, for example, Jackson (1987); Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1981); Hanmer (1987); Brownmiller (1975)

¹² See, for example, Hoagland (1986a, 1986b); Jeffreys (1990)

¹³ In this sense, I was confronted with something more than what Strathern refers to as 'auto-anthropology': 'that is, anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it' (Strathern 198, p.17). It was not simply that I was researching 'at home', amongst women who knew about and accepted the notion of social research, and in which there were many shared ideas about what society, sociality, writing and analysis actually involve; it was also that these women were often reading the same theoretical literature as I was reading concerning gender, sexuality, feminism and the like. This was 'super' auto-anthropology.

anthropological audiences: the question of the Internet and its associated electronic technologies seemed altogether *too* close to 'home' for many, as the increasing pressures to deal with emails, machines that crash and the impossibility of finding something useful on the Internet within a reasonable space of time (not to mention the incessant and *ad nauseam* public debates about the Internet) was causing many an anthropologist to glaze over when the topic was mentioned.

This casual observation will become relevant later, but more importantly here, information and communications technologies (ICTs) were commonly understood to be about globalisation and the creation of new kinds of spaces and places for sociality ('virtual' or 'cyber' spaces). Yet the Manchester project was firmly focused on Manchester, contained a strong historical rather than future-oriented slant, and was not conducted on-line, but in the more usual way of spending time with people as they went about their business - in this case, the business of trying to cope with the hardware and software that had entered their lives in one way or another.

In this sense, both the London and Manchester projects deliberately brought an abstraction about connection together with located connection: lesbian feminist abstractions about sexual relations were brought together with located connections within London, and abstractions about the capacity of ICTs to connect anything with anything else irrespective of the distances and differences between them was brought together with located connections in Manchester.

The Manchester research began with the expectation that the way ICTs became involved in people's lives would be linked to factors that introduced ICTs to Manchester in ways particular to that city and the groups within it. It seemed highly likely that people would draw upon the rest of their lives, their other connections, to provide this basis for on-line connection, including having a reason to connect at all. This approach was in distinct contrast to the main social research focus for ICTs in the late 1990s, which concerned the abstract ('virtual') connection capacities of ICTs, and in particular, the ability to hold connection in place within a separate electronic ('virtual') space long enough for social interaction to develop.¹⁴ In that approach, where you are in the world ought not to matter, because the 'place' made through on-line connection is always already somewhere else. In contrast, the Manchester project started from the view that

¹⁴ See, for example, Hayles (1999); Heim (1993); Jones (1997); Rheingold (1995); Mitchell (1995); Slouka (1996); Springer (1996); Featherstone (1995); Shields (1996).

whether or not this is the case, on-line connection will always already incorporate other kinds of connections, because connection between people (as opposed to computers) must have some content and meaning in order to exist.

The Manchester Women's Electronic Village Hall (WEVH) was studied as one kind of transformation of that. Its formal aims were to provide ICT training for women in Manchester, which was intended to reconfigure the relations women had with such technologies, for whatever purpose women wished. Interesting as that is, it is not the aspect which concerns me here: rather, an additional element of the WEVH was to generate and maintain a network of connections between women and organisations involved in ICTs in Manchester, and to link these to other organisations elsewhere. Partly, this was so as to be free of dependence upon established public institutions within Manchester (and in particular, the city council) in the continual search for funding to maintain women's ICT organisations; partly, it was to build up a network of supportive connections between women who wished to use ICTs in ways that did not particularly resonate with current commercial or political policies. These connecting activities inevitably drew upon the particular links WEVH members and staff had with people, groups, organisations and other things in Manchester, and therefore the connections ebbed and flowed in different directions as people came and went. The underlying point though, was always the same: to create and maintain an 'alternative' web of connections between women. In this, and as might be expected, the use of email and the Internet was easily blended with other kinds of connection.

II. Connections and disconnections

In one sense then, the research in both cases was an exploration of how people fashion alternative located connections, of conscious intent to create practical social links that are different from those already available, and based on ideas about sociality that are, at least in part, in opposition to those available. The studies were also about the creation of networks between diverse scales of experience – of deliberately linking abstractions with practices, and of bringing together different groups and types of people in order to pursue the alternative sociality imagined. The aim in both studies was to look at the practice of theory, as it were, rather than to consider the theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977).

However, in both cases, the focus on located connection turned out, in practice, to be more about *disconnections*, in two senses. First, in the straightforward sense that a major concern for women in both projects, though for different reasons, was an increasing sense of fragmentation in their lives that led to a sense of disconnection, a feeling of the different aspects of their lives being fragmented rather than coherent in some way. And secondly, in the more indirect sense that something has shifted in dominant understandings of what actually constitutes connection between persons in the ten years that separated the London project from the Manchester one. The shift was already implied in the London project, but has now become so commonplace that there is less of a sense of shift, and more of a sense of 'the way things are.'¹⁵ The 'way things are', the sense of general disconnectedness, seems to be due to an increased involvement in open networks that ultimately have no underlying coherence - or alternatively, that can have many different coherences simultaneously, but in any event lack closure. This is where a return to sexuality is useful, as a means to explore the disconnections implied in the proliferation of possible 'alternative' webs of located connection; too much connection, it turns out, can cause one to lose connections. I will take each case in turn.

Lesbian feminist separatism and disconnection through diversity: the postmodern challenge

To put the situation briefly for the case of lesbian feminist separatists in London: some women's groups and individuals, involved in the social networks that lesbian feminists were attempting to transform, directly challenged the lesbian feminist reading of sexuality and proposed different kinds of 'alternative' connections between lesbians. These challenges came particularly from two sources: groups involved in anti-racism of various types, and groups involved in experimenting with visual representations of sexuality, especially in film and photography, but also in their own choices of fashion and style. Many groups representing black women were by the late 1980s regularly attacking separatists, accusing them of being racist by default, because their conception of women did not appear to include any recognition of the differences in

¹⁵ This is not intended as an indirect reference to Jackson's edited collection (Jackson 1996), as the point being made is neither a phenomenological nor 'radical empiricist' one.

experience of black women in white-dominated cultures. The groups experimenting with representations of sexuality (often called 'libertarians' by lesbian feminists)¹⁶ argued that identities were complexly culturally and historically constructed and were continually being reconstructed, and therefore lesbian feminist readings of sexuality were as restrictive as what they opposed, and also probably missed the point.¹⁷

Those kinds of challenges had the effect of fragmenting the coherence of social networks generated by the lesbian feminist reading, through offering both a critique and a range of possible alternatives. Moreover, the fact that the challenges came mostly from postmodern readings of sexuality - that is, readings that resisted closure, so that there were no longer any clear boundaries between sexualities (this later became queer theory) - meant that the reasoning behind creating the alternative networks in the first place began to unravel. In short, too much connection between differences generated disconnection in located networks. Let me expand on this a bit.

During the late 1980s, the increasing number of challenges to lesbian feminist approaches indicated to many lesbian feminists I met that something fundamental was changing, but they did not know quite what, and that was deeply unsettling. In 1989, all that most of these women knew was that criticisms against them no longer came solely from their 'natural' opponents – anti-feminists, homophobes, the moral majority – but from their own ranks, and from others whom separatists thought should be their allies. A few prominent hard-line separatists had publicly abandoned the separatist cause and declared that the thinking behind separatism had been fundamentally wrong. And on the whole, these women were relatively young, energetic, often well-read in the latest feminist theory, and they took their feminism seriously. In other words, they had not become bored of, or burned out by, feminism; rather, they had changed their minds in some way. Both the anti-racist and the 'libertarian' challenges were part of the ongoing assault on the coherence of the concept 'woman', which had been crucial to separatist readings of sexuality.

The conflict between 'libertarians' and separatists was particularly bitterly expressed. The 'libertarians' were not a group as such, but a disparate collection of young women, who had only recently begun to be noticed around 'alternative' London.

¹⁶ See, for example, Leidholdt and Raymond (1990) for an example of lesbian feminist counter-attacks against this approach.

¹⁷ See, for example, Blackman (1990), Egerton (1985) and Rubin (1982) for examples of this kind of approach.

As briefly outlined above, they were experimenting – playfully if seriously as they saw it, and dangerously as separatists saw it - with sartorial and bodily styles and performances.¹⁸ Some of these women were especially interested in experimenting with concepts of dominance and subordination in sexual relationships. What is more, they were not only putting these experimental ideas into practice themselves, but they were taking photographs and making films about it as well.¹⁹ One of the more famous of these women was Della Grace, whose photographs became more and more extreme explorations of sex- and gender-bending, with prominent use of leather, chains, body piercing and so on.²⁰

Nothing could provoke and upset separatists more than that combination of activities: sexual domination of women, their objectification through dress and style, and their abuse in the pornography industry had been at the core of feminist separatist conceptions of what patriarchy is all about, and the reason they were dedicated to fighting it. For separatists, patriarchy was fundamentally about structural, embedded injustice towards women based on the sexual exploitation of women; a patriarchal society did not treat women as full social beings, but as subordinate beings. So, to have women, particularly those who engaged in relationships with other women, as most of these young women did, *experimenting* with such sexual practices, styles and representations rather than attempting to eradicate them was appalling to most separatists.²¹

The younger women were adamant that they were politically aware, but that their approach reflected a different politics from that offered by separatists: one drawn from the still fairly nascent influence, in this context, of postmodernist thought; an approach drawn from the world of signs and simulacra, which increasingly argued that experience is made up of linguistic and visual manipulation and nothing *but* that: no hope of finding authenticity beneath the metonymic web. And if that was the case, then experimenting with these manipulations could change the world – or at least, change these women's experience of the world. In short, they were dealing with ideas that focused on *diversity* rather than *difference*. The concept of difference always implied a stable difference between one kind of person and another kind of person: you either are or are not a

¹⁸ See Green (1991) for details of these 'style wars'.

¹⁹ For a range of views reflecting this perspective and the controversy it provoked, see Sheba Collective (1989); Vance (1984); Ardill (1986); Blackman (1990); Nestle (1987)

²⁰ See, for example Grace (1991)

woman; are or are not black; are or are not gay. Even if these categories were regarded as being socially constructed, they had an experiential reality. The concept of *diversity*, however, implied something very different: it focused more the continual process through which categories are constructed, and argued that these apparently stable categories were in fact constantly having to be constructed and maintained in order to continue to exist. In the fight against oppression, therefore, the thing to do was to reject any categorisation and to treat yourself as a project, creating and re-creating different mixtures and hybrids of identity as you yourself saw fit. That shift from difference to diversity was the crucial one, though at the time, most women felt that what they were doing was experimenting with something to see where it went.

In this sense, lesbian feminists had been confronted directly, and rather early, with the possible implications of trying to break modernist assumptions apart by living in a world of signs and images. However, most of the women I met, even the ones who were doing the experimenting, also felt that it was a personally fragmenting, even if occasionally liberating, experience. Even though previous assumptions about the fixity and authenticity of gender, sexuality and the body had to be rejected (both on the grounds that these assumptions appeared to leave out many people who did not quite fit these identities as defined, and on the grounds that analytically, such assumptions could no longer be supported), women commonly expressed a sense of disconnection, both personal and social. They were not entirely sure why or how a perspective that appeared to offer them infinite connection, and infinite combinations of connection, could leave them feeling they had lost something, in terms of a sense of belonging to a network of women in London, in terms of a sense of purpose, and in terms of a sense of themselves in the world, as opposed to a sense of themselves, in themselves, as an endless project.

Strathern, by way of introduction to her own critique of the notion that all women everywhere have something inherently in common (i.e. that there is closure in what constitutes womanhood), says that, "In Hagen, netbags certainly stand for womanness; it is what womanness stands for that we should ask" (Strathern 1981, p.674). She followed this with a detailed exploration of how gender constructions are cross-culturally variable and therefore there can be no such thing as a 'universal woman'. This same critique directed against lesbian feminists in London in the late 1980s undermined the

²¹ For examples of such a dispute, see Ardill (1989) and L.I.S (1988)

reason to close their networks around a coherent reading of sexuality and gender. The network opened, became plural and lost its location, as it were. It became disconnected.²²

The Manchester Women's Electronic Village Hall and disconnection through over-connection

The case of the Manchester WEVH was different from the lesbian feminist experience, but the outcome, the sense of disconnection, was the same. The continual ebb and flow, and expansion, of connections led to the networks, as imagined coherent entities, becoming relatively invisible to women, or rather, chaotically and excessively visible, which comes to the same thing. The effort involved in maintaining the connections seemed to take increasing amounts of time and work, while at the same time, the relevance of maintaining them seemed to become less and less obvious. The result, again, was disconnection: a reduction of connections to those of immediate relevance and interest.

The experience of one multimedia trainer at the WEVH, Pat,²³ provides both an overlap with the London project and an example of this in practice. Pat combined personal interests in art, sexuality and ICTs; she read widely on the interrelations between all these themes, particularly queer theory, kept in touch with those involved in one or all of these interests in Manchester, used ICTs to experiment with both sexuality and art (often in combination), and incorporated her reading of these themes in her teaching at the WEVH. In many ways, she had the kind of perspective on sexuality that had so seriously challenged lesbian feminist readings in London in previous years: one that aimed to break down boundaries and generate connections between diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. For a time, she experimented with being a drag king (though never at work at the WEVH), and commented ruefully on the negative reception she received in public lesbian and gay places about this - in contrast to drag queens, who cause hardly a second look these days, let alone any attempts to eject them from bars and clubs, as Pat had frequently experienced.

In sum, Pat combined use of websites, email and other ICT applications,

²² See also Stein (1997) for an account of the American experience of this.

²³ This is not her real name.

experiments with her own presentation and style, personal social networks and links with a variety of places and organisations in constructing her connections within Manchester and elsewhere. Over time, however, the sheer quantity of connections this generated caused severe pressures on Pat's time, and increasingly, the demands of her made by the WEVH began to seem onerous. She started to feel distanced from the WEVH, and eventually, after repeated requests for time off to do research were turned down on the grounds that the WEVH could not spare her teaching skills, she found another job in London. In this instance, the disconnection was dramatic.

III Losing Connection and Imagining Networks

The irony of these repeated disconnections, both in London and Manchester, is twofold. First, once connections lose closure, once being linked to others are opened up to any kind of connection, it is easy to shift towards making connection itself the reason for being connected. However, that is unsustainable in terms of generating and maintaining located networks, for the reason outlined earlier: connection between persons must carry with it some meaningful content; connection for connection's sake therefore tends to generate disconnections - people drop out, because there is nothing to be 'in', as such. The shift in the nature of connection between persons from the time of the London project to the more recent Manchester project thus seems to be in the incoherence of these networks: meanings and content, where they exist, are often short-lived and constantly competing both with other meanings and against the threat of being reduced to connection itself. People end up connecting and then disconnecting, repeatedly.

Intriguingly, where ICTs did directly come into this in Manchester was as a means to express views about such forms of connection and disconnection. The Internet and email easily provided the symbolic baggage to talk about re-imagining the world, and particularly to talk about connection, disconnection, and about images and simulacra. People in community ICT projects, small e-commerce companies and even most of the women in the WEVH were not wondering which theoretical approach on postmodernity would be most appropriate to use to guide their lives, as was the case amongst separatists in London; but similar issues were being debated. As already implied, the question seemed to circulate around how seemingly infinite connection can

simultaneously feel like disconnection. The technologies did not in themselves produce this effect in Manchester any more than they did in pre-Internet London; but these technologies were most certainly used to discuss it in Manchester.

The second irony is that far from removing the relevance of location, the tendency for over-connection to generate disconnection makes the specific and the located all the more important. Sometimes, it is all that people in both London and Manchester felt they had left. A number of lesbian feminists in London commented, while discussing the fragmentation caused by challenges to their understanding of sexuality, that they had 'retreated' to their close friends and their area of London, having become exhausted with being continually challenged elsewhere. In the WEVH, many had reduced their links - electronic and otherwise - to their immediate social and work-related connections and a few special interests, and had rapidly learned the art of deleting emails without reading them. Too much (dis)connection had led many to seek more coherent connection in their immediate social networks and surroundings.

I referred to this shift in terms of the London project as one that moved from a focus on *difference* to a focus on *diversity*. That was about an intellectual debate, representing a transition in social theory away from a focus on the *differences between people* (seen in the earlier 'identity politics' range of perspectives),²⁴ which placed the analytical gaze on boundaries; and towards a focus on the (loose and contingent) *connections between differences*, which placed the analytical gaze on overlaps - hybrids, cyborgs, trans-everything - which celebrated the (apparently infinite) diversity of ways such overlaps can be made between differences.

This is where the observation that ICTs were being used to discuss the sense of over-connection and disconnection in Manchester comes in. The emerging consensus and popular rhetoric about what ICTs are and what effects they may be having appears to be the most effective source of metaphors for popular discussions about Harvey's 'postmodern condition' (Harvey 1990). That has generated an elision between the technologies themselves and the presumed *causes* of social over-connection and disconnection (easily enough done in the context of widespread technological determinism). But more interesting for my purposes here is how the rhetoric about ICTs has come to achieve this status: in short, how the digital networks have come to contain the cultural substance to talk about other things.

²⁴ For feminism, this is excellently described in Echols (1989)

I suggest the answer is that ICTs have been imagined, and thus created, from the social contexts that both groups of women discussed here were dealing with: a shift in social connection from one of imagined closure to both imagined and experienced lack of closure. The first part of that assertion is a rather banal statement, in that it is difficult to see how any technology could come into being outside of the social conditions in which it was both developed and became popular;²⁵ the more interesting point is what it is that these technologies are used to imagine. The Internet and email came to typify that shift in sociality in concentrated form: for many, in the Manchester case study at least, ICTs came to represent entirely open connection *par excellence*. Yet ICTs did not start life as that kind of technology, but rather as a series of professional tools, used both for military purposes and in more obscure academic pursuits such as the astronomy element of particle physics, which needed to track the activities of the heavens from various points around the globe.²⁶ An enormous effort had to be put into making the Internet and email what they are today, including developing the hardware and software, laying thousands of miles of special cabling as higher connection speeds have been demanded (many more thousands of miles are still needed), formulating international protocols and legal conditions (many of which still remain to be agreed), and so on. That level of effort and investment, both commercial and political, is astonishing. That is by the by here, except to note that ICTs did not appear magically out of the ether, and that the form they have taken was neither random nor dictated by technological capacity itself (something made particularly clear by recent disputes between Microsoft and the US federal courts); more to the point is what resulted from this orgy of ICT development: a powerful set of imaginings and assertions about ICTs that made them represent, and apparently actually produce, something like concentrated super-diversity within apparently limitless connection potential. The outcome looks remarkably like a cardboard cut-out image of the kinds of shifts in sociality noted in the two ethnographies discussed. The Internet and associated technologies have become - that is to say, have been made into - a stereotype, in the terms suggested by Herzfeld (1997).²⁷

²⁵ For various versions of theories suggesting this, see Bijker (1992, 1997, 1987), Woolgar (1988), Law (1991). For a critical assessment of these theories, see Downey (1998, pp. 21-31).

²⁶ For a summary of the development of ICTs, see Beniger (1986) and Winston (1998).

²⁷ As Herzfeld put it in the rather different context of discussing his notion of social poetics: "The confluence of stereotypes, their use in social interaction, and their

In short, I am arguing that the emergence of ICTs have not *caused* the host of imaginings about what is happening in the world, it is the other way around: the social (and political and economic) contexts in which ICTs emerged brought them into existence in a particular form, and that form became ideal for use as a stereotype – by governments, by commerce, but also by other people to discuss their conditions of life, the universe and everything, as it were. The culture was always in the network.

What remains is to go through some of these stereotypical renderings, the underlying assumptions, fears, obsessions and leitmotifs of the world for which ICTs are being used as both metaphor and metonym, which illustrate some of what people are telling themselves about themselves, a way of understanding how they see themselves, as persons, in relation to the world. This includes going through political, media and academic assertions, for these constitute a good deal of the substantive material that people used in Manchester to think through these issues; it was available, and use was made of it.

IV. The Structure of the ICT Hype

I will briefly take the media hype about ICTs seriously (initially rather a difficult step, I have to admit). What marks this hype out is its character of radical doubt: the possibility that the structure of social and material connections, their *form* as opposed to their content, is radically changing. And as outlined above, the net has rapidly become both metaphor and metonym for this postmodern condition, whilst also being regarded as one of its ultimate products and one of the driving forces that makes it possible.²⁸

Of course, the internet and its associated digital methods of communication is not the only technology involved in this kind of story people are telling about themselves. In addition, there is also digital television and multimedia in terms of things that manipulate signs, information and images; but more than that, there are the technologies that manipulate flesh and the material world: the new reproductive technologies, genetic engineering and the human genome project, genetic modification of plants, cloning of sheep. In the strongest expression of the hype, both within the

necessarily unstable evocation of competing histories is the defining object of a social poetics, especially a social poetics concerned with life in the context of the nation-state.” (Herzfeld 1997, p.15).

media and in the literature, all of these are connected to one another, and implicated in some fundamental change.²⁹ A restructuring of everything is under way, and in particular the interrelationship between nature and culture, people and machines, minds and bodies. All those old modernist chestnuts are being thrown up in the air and reconfigured, this time not as dichotomies, but somehow as inter-subjectively linked entities with fuzzy boundaries. In this respect, it is somewhat ironic that the debate about the *effects* of these changes have, on the whole, remained stubbornly dichotomous: nirvana or armageddon, global utopia or dystopia. But I will pass over that for the moment, except to note that the question of inequality between persons has been reconfigured as well: in the shift from an identity politics of difference to the pursuit of the self in diversity, inequality comes to seem a bit of an anachronism, in this kind of debate at least.

Fragmentation

Paul Rabinow tried to identify this transition in how new technologies were being related to the world a few years ago in his paper, "From Sociobiology to Biosociality".(1992) In it, he claimed that the new techno-scientific paradigm generated by these technologies is focused on a metaphor of information for understanding the human condition, rather than, as had been the case before, a metaphor of machine. Everything can now be reduced to codes rather than the nuts and bolts, cogs and wheels. And unlike physical bits and pieces, codes look much the same whether they are the genetic code of a human being or the structural code of the video tape containing an episode of *The Simpsons*. Suddenly, the ability to tell the difference between objects and subjects, between the social and the natural, between the body and the mind, between an image and the object it depicts, becomes something of a problem. This is indeed a deeper shift than that suggested by the young women in London: for them, images and codes might re-create experience of the world, but they did not physically *make* the world.

Since Rabinow's article, there has been an exponential increase in literature on

²⁸ Some of the more extreme examples include Slouka (1996); Mitchell (1995); Springer (1996); Hayles (1999).

²⁹ This interconnection between diverse technologies has recently been referred to as 'convergence'. An example is a television that also gives access to the internet, email

the issue of how these kinds of technologies, the ones that seem to particularly mess with the relationship between human flesh, the mind, machines, the places humans live, the things humans eat and the way humans interrelate, are revolutionising the experience and understanding of being human. Donna Haraway, who has been paying attention to this kind of thing since the late 1970s, has recently suggested that indeed, our connections have been reconfigured. She analyses this in some detail in her new book, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millenium.Female Man@_Meets_OncoMouse* : *Feminism and Technoscience* (1997). She says, for example,

...in the wombs of technoscience, as well as of postfetal science studies, chimeras of humans and nonhumans, machines and organisms, subjects and objects, are the obligatory passage points, the embodiments and articulations, through which travellers must pass to get much of anywhere in the world. The chip, gene, bomb, fetus, seed, brain, ecosystem, and database are the wormholes that dump contemporary travellers out into contemporary worlds. (Haraway 1997, p.43)

In short, Haraway is claiming that people's images, their connections (articulations), and the way people move around in the world, are today either created, or at least mediated, by the kind of 'technoscience' that blends flesh, mind and computers with everything else. And in breaking down all those nature/culture dichotomies, the raw, categorical distinctions and differences created by them, the essentialisms upon which inequalities, most especially gender inequalities, were based, are thrown up in the air, become almost meaningless. Another view is the opposite of this: that all those technologies do is reinforce whatever assumptions we previously had, and give us the opportunity to embed them ever deeper into our very beings.³⁰

Simulacra

So much for fragmentation, for the breaking down of boundaries between things that the modernist world kept separate. There are also the commentaries about images and

and other kinds of communication.

³⁰ See, for example, Boal (1995); Moore (1995); Wynn (1997); Anderson (1996)

signs, claims that the image has become all-powerful. According to that perspective, we now live in a world of glitzy images and copies of things, a world of the inauthentic, and we rarely get the opportunity to see or experience the original. Ranging from Jean Baudrillard (1994) through to David Harvey (1990) and a whole host of commentators on postmodernity in between, the centrality of signs, of images, of copies and simulations has been regarded as *the* hallmark of postmodernity. In the fragments of postmodern deconstructions of any claim to authenticity or ontology, we find signs, codes, metaphors, images, which had been used to construct a modernist reality, used even to make flesh. Today, according to the likes of Baudrillard, it does not much matter whether we are interacting with an image or an object, the 'real thing' or a projection, or a copy of it. Since aesthetics is more important than ethics these days, it is how it looks that is the point, not how it is. Marc Augé makes a similar point in his most recent attention to this issue:

□ a culture dissolving in quotations, copies and plagiarism, of an identity losing itself in images and reflections, of a history which is swallowed up in the here-and-now of a here-and-now which is itself indefinable (modern, postmodern?) because we perceive it only piecemeal, without any organising principle which can enable us to give meaning to the clichés, advertising commercials and commentaries which stand in for our reality. (Augé 1999, p. 10)

Augé's earlier concept of 'non-places' also draws close connections between an obsession with images and 'realistic' copies with the generation of inauthenticity in everyday experience (Augé 1995). 'Non-places' include airports, freeway service stations, supermarkets, hotel chains, and buildings constructed using Computer Aided Design software, so that the end result looks much the same in London as it does in Tokyo. Note that for Augé technology here is producing the inauthenticity through the removal of difference: through standardisation, processing, its capacity to produce identical copies. That is the mark of technology in the modernist perspective, of course: it is the key difference between human persons, who can never make completely identical copies of anything and also can never be completely identically copied themselves, and machines, which can hardly do other than make identical copies, except when they break down.

In any event, Augé suggests we are all living most of our lives in ‘non-places’ these days. There are some ‘places’ left, spaces which were made through people using them, moving through them, building things in them, interacting within them repeatedly, and over time coming to identify themselves with them. But such places, Augé suggests, are not where we live anymore: they are cordoned off, floodlit, signs are put up explaining what these places once were, and we are often charged for visiting them. Our postmodern lives (Augé calls it ‘supermodernity’) are too ephemeral to allow us to create places anymore: instead, we copy past places, we borrow things from anywhere and everywhere, to create hybrids, chimera and cyborgs. We are and live within simulacra according to this perspective, and are incapable of creating our own places anymore.

Now it is easy to see how people point to the power of today’s computers to manipulate, infinitely copy and reproduce, mutate, collage, and transform into three-dimensional moving entities any image fed to them, as being central to the world of simulacra. There is no denying our environment is chock full of images today as never before, and that the seams of alteration of those images do not show anymore. The power of ICTs in this respect is widely regarded as both a perfect metaphor and creator of the image-obsessed world. Rather more extreme writers such as Mark Slouka (1996) have argued that most people have become so used to images being the same as the objects they depict that they are beginning not to be able to tell the difference. Slouka says: ‘More and more of us, whether we realise it or not, accept the copy as the original.... We seem more and more willing to put our trust in intermediaries who ‘represent’ the world to us.’ (1996, p. 1-2). And there is nothing more dangerous to our sense of reality, for Slouka, than virtual space and cyberspace, which he refers to as ‘that strange non place beyond the computer screen’ (*ibid.* p. 5), which is controlled by ‘net religionists’ who believe that the real world ought to be downloaded onto a computer (*ibid.*, p. 9). Slouka concludes: “Cyberspace, I realised, represented the marriage of deconstruction and computer technology – a mating of monsters if ever there was one.” (*ibid.* p. 30). Why monsters? Because, Slouka says, postmodernism has the theories which suggests nothing is authentic or real in the world, and, quotes, “cyberists had machines that could make it so.” (*ibid.* p.32)

I have to say that as I was reading this book, I was also spending some time visiting the WEVH in Manchester. I could see little connection between Slouka’s

nightmare and my experience at the WEVH; the women there seemed entirely capable of telling the difference between an email message and talking to someone in the same room. Perhaps I missed something, but it seemed to me as though most of these women's reason for seeking out the WEVH was in order to deal with mundane matters such as having to make a living, and wanting to expand their possibilities and experiences of the world around them. Their practical, located, experience of the technology itself (which was often very positive in the WEVH) was not in fact the subject of their abstract discussions about the effects of ICTs, and the problem was not difficulties in telling image from 'reality': the subject and the problem was a sense of over-connection and disconnection in the way they experienced their lives, and popularly available rhetoric about what ICTs do were used to express this, a point I shall return to in a minute.

In any event, I think have provided enough of a flavour of that particular discursive leitmotif: that ICTs have made the world into a simulacrum of itself. The positive reading of it is the notion of transcendence, the ability to move beyond the restrictions of apparently fixed identities, fixed locations, fixed states of mind, body and being, and move instead into a much more flexible world of signs and choice. Ironically, from the same technology that generates the standardisation and homogeneity of our inhabited spaces we can also apparently produce infinite diversity. If there is no one truth, nothing original anymore, we can all produce our own truths – and what could be more democratic or free market than that? The price to be paid for this according to a good deal of the literature is a sense that things are not, and can never be, entirely what they seem to be, because it is never possible to sense them in more than a partial way: knowledge of diversity, and of diverse truths in particular, has ensured this.

Manchester fragments and simulacra

There were echoes of this kind of thing being discussed in Manchester, but it was related in more practical terms to experienced life rather than some notion of 'cyberspace' or 'virtual reality', and that made the implications drawn somewhat less extreme. The use of this kind of fragmentation, transcendence and/or simulacrum idea was often related directly to what were perceived as new forms of sociality. An example, and this was the most notable way both women at the EVH and others in ICT

organisations in Manchester drew upon these kinds of ideas, was in discussing the confusion generated by the increasingly common network structure of organisations, as opposed to the more familiar pyramid-style hierarchical structure of businesses and institutions. Network structures emerged in making collaborative links between different organisations (e.g. between universities, local city councils and local healthcare organisations); usually, the interests, ways of working, hierarchies and structures of each collaborating organisation were quite different from one another. As a result, in the 'meta-networks' that linked them together, people found it difficult to locate any centre or any boundaries, and in practical terms, that meant it was difficult to know who or what to contact when the organisation was needed for something. This had two effects: first, an increasing reliance upon personal and informal knowledge, so as to know where to go and who to speak to. This is an example of how the 'virtual' networks relied on face-to-face networks in order to work; there was no reduction in the need for located knowledge in order to operate within such new organisational structures, and in fact the opposite was often the case. And secondly, which is more relevant here, it increasingly generated a sense that each organisation involved in such links and collaborations was losing its own boundaries and centre; the diversity was producing a greater focus on the connections between organisations, rather than on the self-contained, internal structure of the organisation itself, and it led to a sense that there would only ever be a partial grasp of what the entity itself constituted.

The case of the women's EVH is an interesting example. It was linked to a range of 'meta-networks' of this kind, both because of the need to continually search for new funding, and because of a desire to keep informed of new developments within the city and elsewhere, so as to assist women who came to the service in finding jobs and so on. Such networks consisted both of 'web-rings' and of various outreach projects, where members of the WEVH attempted to develop links between organisations and individuals across a variety of sectors in Manchester, and to then link those links in with other organisations, both in Britain and Europe. These projects were grant-aided, usually by the European Union, but also by various British government programs; the aim of such grants was usually precisely to encourage cross-sector links.

This kind of continual linking activity had the double effect of both highlighting the particularities of the 'image' of the EVH – as a voluntary organisation, physically located on the fringes of central Manchester, focused on providing services for women, and

represented as such in its links with others – and of making the organisation itself feel something like it lacked closure for both staff and students. The range of projects underway in the EVH at any one time (anything up to fifteen), all of which had incomprehensible acronyms, were extremely hard to keep track of for those not directly involved, and the women managing those projects were often fairly disconnected from other women within the organisation. Moreover, it was quickly realised by most project co-ordinators that any hope of reducing confusion must involve fairly regular and structured face-to-face meetings of people and organisations linked to their particular projects, which in itself was a difficult thing to arrange, because of the diversity of interests and working conditions of those organisations and people. And as a result of all that, women thinking of becoming involved in the EVH were often confronted with what seemed to them an enigma - there was no direct, and certainly no complete, answer to the question: what exactly *is* the WEVH?

It is not too surprising that under such circumstances, the rhetoric surrounding ICTs and what they represented were used regularly by WEVH members to discuss what was happening. In such discussions, the technologies themselves were blamed for having generated much of the incoherence, confusion and mirrors-within-mirrors experiences of trying to work in this new sector, with its proliferation of 'meta-networks' (another form of too much connection). However, this location of blame at the doors of the technology was not because of any sense of these technologies having generated some kind of 'cyberspace' or 'virtual reality'; rather, it was seen more pragmatically as a combination of what grant-funding bodies imagined these technologies ought to be able to achieve in terms of new connections, contrasted with the reality, which generally speaking failed to do any such thing. Using the technology both as a metaphor and causal explanation for these political and practical conditions seemed almost unavoidable.

Conclusion

I am suggesting that digital networks have become a sort of paradigm for talking about culture, both within social theory literature and amongst people using ICTs in Manchester (one of Strathern's 'straw people', as outlined in 'Culture in a Netbag'). At the same time, the culture is 'in' the network, both in terms of being represented as

causing cultural change, and in terms of reflecting the kinds of shifts in connection and disconnection that are occurring elsewhere. The London research, conducted before the Internet became a trope of postmodernity, picked up on the beginnings of these shifts, in the rather unusual context of women who explicitly abstracted certain ideas about persons and their connections, and were therefore aware of the possible implications that challenges to their readings of sexuality could have. That suggests, if this is needed, that the technologies themselves, as technologies, are not at the core of this matter. It is the cultural work that the technologies are being made to do that is at the core.

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