The reality of virtual society:
an exploration of how imaginative behaviour using the resources of the internet can create new or modified identities that have an impact on current social structures

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Introduction

This paper is about imagination. I take the view that imagination is the necessary and unavoidable process of bringing together my outer material and inner subjective realities. Imagination enables me to reach an understanding of how my own personal history somehow fits into and interacts with those wider social structures in which I find myself. I also take the view that imagination is the vital component of reinterpreting and potentially recreating new and different relations between those structures and my own individual agency, perhaps even to enacting a counter-reality. However, this raises two questions; why should I want to do so and how might this be achieved?

To a marked extent, society imposes and I accept. I am constrained by the expectations of family, the workplace and even friends. However, gender, age, ethnicity, and a variety of other attributes, may, or may not, be relevant to who I feel that I am now, to how I view myself and how I would like to express the identity that is most relevant and important to me but perhaps sidelined, marginalized or ignored by those around me. I am in danger of accepting that which is untrue to myself, that which puts me into a straight jacket of conformity, fixed by the power structures of our society.

However, the perennial argument of whether the individual creates society or society creates the individual[1] may be entering a new phase. And this phase may be due to the way we relate to each other via the internet. This new way of communicating with each other is different from any other; it is different from the written word, it is different from the spoken face-to-face communications, it is different from the visual images bombarding us from the media. It is not only that it is interactive – written, oral and media communications can all be made so. It is that the internet allows us to be anonymous. I can choose who I am. Is this a fantasy? Perhaps, if the identity I construct bears no relation to reality. However, of the small amount of research done on how we present ourselves in internet relationships, most indicate that the vast majority build identities based on reality

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[1] Berger and Luckman (1966) are particularly interested in the dialectic between the individual and society. Their view that "man produces reality and thereby produces himself" (P.204) allows for some agency within the constraints of social structures.

rather than fantasy and aim to present an honest statement of their beliefs and values.

This is potential dynamite! If I can start, not just exploring who I am, but can now also find a way of expressing that to others, I may find myself becoming part of a new 'virtual' community of like-minded individuals. Questioning how we relate to our society through these recreated identities may lead us to a desire to create new patterns of power in order to enable us to live more freely and honestly. Utopian fantasy maybe, but this paper aims to set out the issues underlying this introduction in order to demonstrate that the fantasy might just be the start of changing our society to a different reality from that currently existing.

The key issues are laid out as follows. First I look at how identities are constructed on the internet and link this to the social support that such a process requires. Secondly, I explore some of the literature on change and social movements and relate this to the internet. The potential scope for change in this way has to be balanced with the controls such action triggers. Ideally, I would like to have included some actual case study material but this is such a new area of research that I have been unable to find any. That will have to await my own exploration and at the end of the paper I do make some suggestions of possible research areas.

Identity construction on the internet
The first point to be noted is that how a person is affected by a given communications medium depends on that person's reasons and goals for using that medium. Therefore, people will use the internet differently and it will have different effects on them according to their particular motivations (McKenna and Bargh 2000). However, writers/researchers agree that the anonymity of the internet does have an effect, although not necessarily as expected.

The online identities constructed are usually built on the basis of trust and reality rather than fantasy (Hardey 2002) and are developed as a complement to healthy face-to-face relationships (Peris et al 2002). However, imagination is also a necessary concomitant of this creativity. Wallerstein suggests that we all experience a 'continuous stream of fantasy thinking' (P.312) or 'daydreaming' in more everyday language, and this unconscious activity both influences how reality is perceived and how this perception reframes both our view of ourselves and of those around us. People are able to construct and reconstruct their identities in a variety of ways and do engage in very different behaviours on the internet than they do in the real world (McKenna and Bargh 2000). Nonconforming behaviour is more likely to occur and the anonymity provided means that people can honestly express how they think and feel. This is important in relation to identity, where people feel that their identities are constrained in non-internet relationships.

There is both scope and danger in these processes. Public fears about paedophiles and 'hate groups' have been enhanced by the misreporting of weak research but there is a potential problem if a fantasy self is constructed and then expressed in real life with negative reactions (op.cit.). However, there is a lack of knowledge as to how a reconstructed online identity can be carried across into the offline world. What is true is that our personal images have to be shared in order to be reinforced, and this sense of unity can be provided on the internet. As Warnock puts it, 'We are not alone in our imaginative boat, but bound together in it by imagination and sympathy' (1994 P.98).

Societies, or the more intimate idea of communities, also have to be imagined. Bradley (1996), although looking specifically at nations, race and ethnicity, suggests that 'all types of communities are essentially imagined or invented' (P.123). Individuals feel a sense of unity that could work on the basis of a common destiny rather than a common origin. However, McKenna and Bargh (2000) suggest that on the internet this may be fallacious as the size of groups supporting certain views may be very small. The internet may give 'the illusion of large numbers' (P.64) and individuals may fail to realise how different and unusual are their views.

Change and social movements in the network society
The theme of much sociological theory is the over-riding importance of social structures in maintaining current power relations. The stance of this paper is that change is possible, although extremely difficult and what follows is a look at some social movement theory can be applied to the internet.

Melucci sees individuals as being 'compelled to take the risk of decision making' (1997 P.62) as we inhabit an increasing number of both real and/or imagined worlds in our 'high-tech information society'. He explored our need to participate in these worlds through an examination of social movements (1989). He sees participation in movements as a goal in itself, where 'actors can self consciously practise in the present the future social changes that they seek' … they are 'laboratories for the invention of new experiences' (op. cit. P.6).

Castells (1996) takes a similar approach but uses the term, 'network society', which seems to me to more accurately define what is occurring. In spite of the vast array of virtual communities created by computer-mediated communication (CMC), he sees the distinctive social and political trend of the 1990's as 'the construction of social action and politics around primary identities, either ascribed, rooted in history and geography, or newly built in an anxious search for meaning and spirituality' (op.cit. P.22). A look at the impact of technology on community therefore should include a study of the identities that take shape in cyberspace (Reymers 2002).

In fact, Castells talks of the 'rising power of identity' (1997) and sees our search for identity being as powerful as the technical changes affecting society at macro as well as micro levels[2]. Although the networking form of social organisation has existed in other times and spaces, the sheer pervasive expansion via the IT paradigm ensures its spread throughout the entire social structure (Castells 1996). The implications for politics and power are major.

McKenna and Bargh conclude, 'The internet seems to be a powerful means by which individuals can overcome totalitarian governments' control over communication media and through which people can gain social support for stigmatised and embarrassing aspects of their identity' (P.64). Castells (1996) adds '… Ultimately, the powers that are in the media networks[3] take second place to the power flows embodied in the structure and language of these [CMC] networks' (P.476).

Scope and control of the network society for individual and workplace influence

At work and at home, individuals use a number of CMC styles and these are typically available through a connection to the internet. The workplace sets up a number of these CMC's and the use of these may differ from those used outside of work. The reasons for this are not just work related but due to the visibility and awareness of e-controls. Most organisations seek to regulate and control their employees but placing communicative resources at their disposal potentially facilitates individual autonomy and self-expression (Melucci 1989). The downside to this is the growth of the 'performance principle' of late capitalist society (Elliott 1992 P.89) with increasing surveillance of the workforce.

Carr (2008) sees power shifting from institutions to individuals and back again. Developments in computing and networking have usually been spurred by the need for greater control. However, these same developments then become tools for personal empowerment before ever more powerful IT re-establishes control (P.196) along with the enactment of legal constraints to individual freedom.

For both employees and all citizens, surveillance becomes an increasing reality as controls are enacted at government level. At both work and at home, these 'acts of

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[2] Bradley's (1996) three levels of "social" identities could be relevant here. At the passive level, the identity is not being enacted and remains as a potential only. The active identity is one that is felt consciously and provides a base for actions.   It will often occur as a defence against the actions of others, particularly if these are negative.   At the third level, the identity is politicised and is retained constantly in consciousness, is formed through political action and provides a base for collective organisation. These levels could usefully be applied to the construction and power of online identities.

[3] The control of the imaginative processes of the individual via the media can be seen as largely directive, as acting on a passive individual. Real and 'unreal' may become blurred but continue to follow the same overarching institutional frameworks.

control become harder to detect and those wielding control more difficult to discern' (op.cit. P.199). Individuals may have to rely on the time delay between technological progress and bureaucratic response and the massive volume of communication bytes that cannot all be viewed, in order to assume some degree of freedom and autonomy. To what extent individuals at work and home take that risk is their decision, but no risk taking equates with no change.

Research directions for this paper
This section will look at the practicalities of possible research directions. The suggestions are tentative as it is difficult to envisage what is possible until several steps have been taken into this primary research exploration. Three strands are proposed.

The first strand may be to undertake a case study of a particular individual who has used the internet to develop his own movement. Ron Paul, a US Republican presidential candidate whose campaign had been blanked out by the media, was the first major political figure to use the internet (apart for fundraising) and gained considerable support via this medium. He has since set up a 'Campaign for Liberty', again with considerable internet visibility and initial success.

A second strand would be to focus at a more local level, looking at some smaller scale groups. With my own previous work and research in health care, I am suggesting an investigation into how various health care professionals use CMC and how this interfaces with their view of their own identities. University academics would also be a group in which I would be interested.

A third strand using a totally different approach may prove possible. This would be in the nature of action research. I propose to set up my own site on Facebook in order to make contact with others who are interested in joining me in this research enterprise. The way in which this group (hopefully) develops and grows would in itself demonstrate how the internet can support the growth of new ideas and identities. Virtual and real-life research meet each other!

Summary and concluding comments
Widespread disillusion with our late capitalist society increasingly raises the issue of not just if, but also how, social change may be effected. However, the ability to imagine another world, although seeming utopian, may result in social action and this paper has attempted to argue the possibilities of this. How the internet has the potential to transform how we use our imagination to reconstruct ourselves along lines that are truer to the ideas and values that we hold dearest is explained. The key importance of anonymity in giving us the courage to communicate these modified identities to others, enabling virtual communities of like minded

individuals to gather on the internet meeting places, is then linked to the potential growth of new social movements and the remaking of current realities.

The steps taken by various power groups at government, media and workplace levels to control these processes are briefly described. However, on balance, this paper concludes that there is still scope for individuals to act in the ways described although the question still remains of how virtual identities and communities move into and affect the real social structures in which we operate.

Finally, a number of possible primary research strands are suggested involving case studies and action research. It is hoped that when this work is carried out it will highlight whether CMC does provide sufficient freedom and autonomy for individuals to reconstruct their identities in order to incorporate previously suppressed views and values, and to gain sufficient confidence within virtual communities to take the risks that Melucci suggests are becoming unavoidable.

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