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
(work in progress)

Introduction

Who am I? The words reverberate around my consciousness. Who am I? Similar cries echo in a million minds. Sometimes shared, but mostly hidden, unspoken. We dare not say that we do not know. We cannot admit that we fear to explore the unacceptable. Society imposes, we accept, and we are in danger of accepting that which is untrue to ourselves, that which puts us into straight jackets of conformity, fixed by the power structures of our society.

But there may be a way out. 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 in a way that is not possible when faced with the constraints and expectations of family, the workplace and even friends. 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.

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

This is potentially dangerous stuff! 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 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 theoretical issues underlying this heartfelt 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. 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. I start by exploring the centrality of imagination in creating both ourselves and our societies. This then leads on to a discussion of imagination and change, both of our identities and our communities. The specific changes in these that are available through the internet are explored before focusing on individual and workgroup virtual meeting places, and individual

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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.

"edge" versus organisational control. Finally, as mentioned, some possible areas and approaches of primary research are noted.

Creativity and imagination

"The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society." C. Wright Mills 1959 P.6

Without imagination there can be no renewal either of the way in which our macro and micro histories can be reinterpreted nor any hope of creating new and different relations between social structures and individual agency. With imagination, the social behaviour of the individual, if supported by available social structures, can be modified or even enact a counter-reality.

Fifty years have passed since Wright Mills wrote "The sociological imagination" and the manner in which reality is viewed has been massively altered both through the media and the internet. This has affected the way government, organisations and individuals both operate and view themselves. 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. However, the ability of the individual to actively participate in the internet seems to open up the possibility of 'fantasies' and social realities meeting in ways not seen before. An important starting point in this discussion is therefore an examination of imagination and creativity.

Reber (1995) suggests that the concept of imagination covers a spectrum of inner behaviour. At base, it is "the process of recombining memories of past experience and previously formed images into novel constructions" (P.359). He identifies three categories, reproductive, anticipatory and creative, and these are echoed in a number of ways by other authors.

Reproductive imagination brings together an outer material reality with an inner psychic reality, creating a common framework emphasising likeness and continuity (Wallerstein 1988). Hart (2003) also sees our "knowing" of the world as being imaginatively constructed from the outset and Warnock (1994) describes a primary imagination that is deployed in all perception, reproducing our world from our experience.

Imagination is also a necessary concomitant of future action. 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. Morgan (1993) suggests that this type of imagination is personally empowering and a way of breaking out of the powerlessness we often feel. However, for most of the time, this anticipatory imagination still functions within current social power structures when it is seen as normal rather than "pathological" (Hersch 2003), and the usual way by which we decide future actions.

Warnock and Elliot both recognise the existence of and the need for a more obviously creative imagination. For Warnock (1994), this rarer form has to "co-exist with the conscious will" and has to "dissolve, diffuse and dissipate in order to recreate" (P.42). It is this process that "makes new worlds". Elliot (1992) emphasises the creativity of the unconscious and recognises an imaginary dimension of subjectivity, "the dimension through which human beings create themselves anew and the potential shape of their society"(P.4). He refuses to accept the inevitability of

individual passivity. Humans actively receive the symbolic forms of society and creatively reconstitute them. This process of self transformation has important political and ethical issues. The pathway out of the suppression of freedom and autonomy has to be "the pure and unrepressed realm of fantasy", this "personal core on inner selfhood, a negation of the repressiveness of the social world as well as a prefiguration of new possibilities for that world" (P.90).

The placing of the individual at the centre of this debate on imagination, creativity and the potential for change inevitably leads to questions on the relationship between identity and society. It is to these relationships in the light of the part played by imagination that this paper now turns.

Imagination, identity and community
> *"Society, in its immediate aspect, is a relation among personal ideas. In order to have a society it is evidently necessary that persons should get together somewhere; and they get together only as personal ideas in the mind. Where else? … Society exists in my mind as the contact and reciprocal influence of certain ideas"* (Cooley 1964 P.119).

Thus, "ideas are not tails wagging at the end of society; they inspire and inform, create and destroy" (Reymers 2002 P.12). Institutions that allow for the exploration of ideas will have an impact on the construction of personal identities (purposefully stated in the plural as we all have a number of different identities). Societies, or the more intimate idea of communities, can therefore be seen to exist in the mind. They 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 may be an illusion, but could work on the basis of a common destiny rather than a common origin.

This sense of unity seems to rely on a shared experience of reality. As Warnock puts it, "We are not alone in our imaginative boat, but bound together in it by imagination and sympathy" (1994 P.98). However, what is so typical of today's culture is the large number of worlds we inhabit, whether looking purely at the workplace with changing organisational structures and contractual arrangements (Handy 1985 and 1989) or more widely with family, friends and the media (for example, Abercrombie et al 1990, Burawoy 1979). I take the view that this multiplicity of contexts results in one individual maintaining a number of identities simultaneously, rather than viewing identity as being fragmented and ephemeral – such a post-structuralist view of change fails to recognise the importance of past experience and learning. As already emphasised, I see individual biography and imagination as important in theorising change[2].

A potential problem to individuals may be the seemingly overwhelming number of identities they accumulate. Thoits (1991) suggests that the notion of identity salience deals with this. An identity has greater salience if seen as more self relevant as the individual then has a greater commitment to it. Identities can be organised into a

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[2] By now, it is probably apparent that I am taking a social constructionist approach to the self and reality. However, problems remain in dealing with the interface between psychological and social theories of identity and many sociologists have decided to leave the psychological implications of identity well alone. Craib (1989) is concerned that denying the psychological, while avoiding "the messiness of internal conflict" (P.196), will put important issues such as creativity and imagination into "residual categories" (P.89). He claims that sociology has to know its limits (Craib 1998). A number of writers, most notably Elliot (as presented in this paper), as well as those drawing on interactionist literature, have made links between the construction of identity through psychological processes and the prevailing power structures. Using such an approach, identity is seen as dynamic, in a continual state of flux.

"hierarchy of salience" (Reymers 2002), not only depending on "who I am", but also on "who I ought to be", or even, "who I would like to be", highlighting the importance of values as well as situations.

The inherent conflict between self and society has already been mentioned. 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 of those writers who have taken this approach.

Melucci's writing (1989 and 1997) presents a passionate account of the way individuals and groups can function with choice. He is interested in the "subterranean" dimensions of contemporary social life and sees individuals experiencing changing patterns. "We are compelled to take the risk of decision making" (1997 P.62) as we inhabit an increasing number of both real and/or imagined worlds. We cannot function on our own but have to be part of the social. This need to participate he explored through an examination of social movements (1989). His emphasis on process rather than outcome led him to different conclusions than other writers in this area. He saw participation in movements as a goal in itself, where "actors can self consciously practise in the present the future social changes that they seek" (op. cit. P.6). These movements normally consist of invisible, or submerged, networks that stress individual needs, collective identity and part time membership. They are "laboratories for the invention of new experiences" (P.6). (I will return to his work in later sections.)

If imagination is a key requirement for both identity and community change (as I have argued), the question can be posed, can the necessary imaginative processes be enhanced in order to achieve change. The literature at this point shows an interesting divergence. At both political and organisational level, there is much rhetoric about change, to such an extent that change has itself now become ideologically charged. Change without change seems to be the underlying message (for example, the messages from the American management 'gurus', speeches by Tony Blair and Barack Obama).

Morgan (1993) seems to probe a little deeper. He fears that "if we dwell on the enormity of the problems [of resistant power structures], our powerlessness soon becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy" (P.292). Large scale change has to start with individuals and small groups and then build. He suggests that story-telling is part of this vital process and Warnock (1994) also sees this as central to our sharing of experiences and values. LaGrande (1996) suggests a rather more radical idea. She proposes that political resistance requires training to undo habits of oppression as the way images are used in the creation of "spectacle" mainly reinforces existing power relations. She looks at the potential role of actor training in playfully transforming the workings of our imaginations and thereby bringing new skills to movements for social change. Even more compelling is Warnock's statement that "the education of the imagination is by far the most important educational goal" (1994 P.173).

This paper now places the above into the context of the recent massive technological changes, most notably the use of the internet, in order to examine identity and community in the "network society".

Identity and community in the network society
Melucci emphasises the importance of communication in the process of social change and he sees communication networks as a resource (1989). In looking at the

changes brought about by the increasing "techno-scientific" apparatus and agencies of information and communication", he envisages us as being "transformed into sensitive terminals, transmitting and receiving large quantities of information". These "information societies" create an infinity of worlds (1997 P.60-61).

Castells (1996) demonstrates similar reasoning 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[3]. 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.

A more detailed look at how identities are constructed on the internet and both the scope and dangers of these processes now follows.

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). People are able to construct and reconstruct their identities in a variety of ways, though, 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 (op.cit.).

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.). There is also a lack of knowledge as to how a reconstructed online identity can be carried across into the offline world. As Warnock

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[3] 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 (although it can be argued that the individual who passively holds certain 'potential' identities is still acting, in Berger and Luckman's terms, by choosing to do nothing, thus maintaining the social structure in which they are found).   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.

(1994) points out, our personal images have to be shared in order to be reinforced, and this sense of unity can be provided on the internet. However, McKenna and Bargh (2000) suggest that 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. McKenna and Bargh conclude:

> *"Although some individuals hide behind it to propagate hate, for many others it is a liberating mode of communication, especially where social or government sanctions exist for the expression of those ideas and beliefs. 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 take second place to the power flows embodied in the structure and language of these [CMC] networks" (P.476).

Practical implications of the network society for individual and workplace influence

At work and at home, individuals use a number of CMC styles. These are typically available through a connection to the internet, e-mail being the commonest but other forms growing at an ever increasing rate, for example, chat rooms, instant messaging, e-conferencing, e-cafes, newsgroups, while the number of individual websites with their own "blogs", linking with other individuals through Facebook, Utube, MySpace and similar constructions, are massively popular. For example, in Dec.2002, Google reported that it had indexed almost 2.5 billion individual web pages (Reymers 2002).

As mentioned in the previous section, individual motivations vary but to view the users of this medium as lonely individuals seeking companionship is clearly a misconception in light of the sheer numbers. 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. "In many companies, the de facto assumption is that employees are always at work, whether they are in their office, at their home, or even on vacation" (Carr 2008 P.201).

Carr 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 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
Hopefully, the 'why' of this research topic has been well and truly established by now, as well as a strong theoretical argument supporting further investigation. This section will look at the practicalities of 'who' and 'how'. The suggestions are tentative as it is difficult to envisage what is possible until several steps have been taken into this primary research exploration.

The 'who' could involve two or three separate strands. The first may be to undertake a case study of a particular individual who has used the internet to develop his own movement. I had not heard of the US Republican presidential candidate, Ron Paul, until I had started talking to people about the ideas in this paper. This was not surprising as his presidential campaign had been blanked out by the media. However, he 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. As regards the methodology adopted, a historical approach would be appropriate and it is likely that there is a wealth of both current and archival material available.

A second strand would be to focus at a more local level, looking at some smaller scale groups. Melucci (1989), in quoting Castells' work on urban social movements that were directed at local transformation rather than global social change, identified some potential useful locations and worker groups. As knowledge is a key resource (and see also the discussion on ideas earlier in this paper), universities are worth investigating. Fields of collective consumption, e.g. housing and health, and of communications media, might also prove fruitful. 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.

For this strand, drawing on previous work for methodological direction might give some help but most papers on the social implications of the internet highlight the need for more work in the area. Chat rooms were used to identify chatters' personality profiles and networks of virtual and real relationships (Peris et al 2002). A longitudinal study of discussion forums was used to research personal definitions of racial and ethnic identity (Franklin 2003). E-mails were used along with non-electronic data to illuminate the interconnection of story-telling and networking strategies at work (Bird 2003). Reymers (2002) suggests some possible research directions based on language and time and using network and content analysis, while McKenna and Bargh (2000) apply the main qualitative techniques to internet research.

In order to proceed with this second strand, I propose to have some informal discussions with a number of health care professionals and university academics on how they use the internet. From these, I hope to identify some newsgroups and discussion forums used by these individuals. Analysis of the posts on these sites, how they give indications on the construction of identities and the building of community would follow. Any evidence of the move from virtual to real meetings would be noted.

Case study approaches face the criticism of skewing and therefore an inability to generalise, but the lack of any similar research requires a start to made somewhere! However, 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" (Scrimshire 2006), although seeming utopian, may result in social action and this paper has attempted to argue the possibilities of this. The basic requirement of a creative imagination is discussed and its pervasive, although often subconscious, existence is explored. How the internet has the potential to transform how we use this 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 fears and dangers of these processes are presented and the steps taken by various power groups at government, media and workplace levels 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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