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## The relationship between online and offline communities: the case of the Queer Sisters

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One of the effects of the Industrial Revolution was the destruction of communities – at least that was received wisdom among sociologists until 1950s, when studies found that, in fact, traditional communities were maintained through new means (Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). As we are going through what some call the ‘information revolution’ (Altschiller, 1995), the fear of losing communities has resurfaced. The appearance of human associations on the Internet has prompted claims that it provides an escape from (Willson, 1997) and a substitute for (Doheny-Farina, 1996; Lajoie, 1996; Nguyen and Alexander, 1996) offline communities, that it fragments offline communities (Sassi, 1996). Are the fears about online communities<sup>1</sup> grounded? Are online communities unconnected to offline communities? Many have pointed out the need to understand how online communities relate to offline communities (Jones, 1999a, 1999b; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Slevin, 2000; Uncapher, 1999), but there have hardly been any such studies (Wellman and Gulia, 1999) and the topic has been left to opinion instead of evidence (Hill and Hughes, 1997; Kollock and Smith, 1999).

This article takes a first step towards filling the gap in existing research by examining the autonomy of online communities in relation to their offline counterparts. The article is based on a case study of a bulletin board on the world-wide web and the women’s group in Hong Kong, the Queer Sisters, who created the board. Using content analysis, an online survey, interviews and observation between September 1999 and August 2000, I found the community formed on the bulletin board differed from the Queer Sisters over major goals and norms. Although participation on the bulletin

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board increased a sense of belonging to the Queer Sisters, this seemed to be hampered by the differences between the two communities.

'Medium theory', a term coined by Joshua Meyrowitz (1985, 1994) to refer to the research tradition best known through the work of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, considers technology as a shaper of the communications environment. The new environment created by communications technology is considered a more important source of influence than the content transmitted by the technology. Medium theory focuses on the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media, and contends that their characteristics and typical patterns of use encourage certain behaviours, social interactions, social identities and structures of social life (Meyrowitz, 1986, 1994, 1997). Applied to the Internet, characteristics of interconnectivity and interactivity are considered to reconfigure time and space, and in turn this reconfigures the individual and networks of relationships.

Investigating the autonomy of the bulletin board community in relation to the Queer Sisters with the use of medium theory, this study suggests that online spaces are not necessarily autonomous from their offline counterparts. Rather, the autonomy of the online community is contingent upon technology and a number of conditioning factors, the most important of which is the original purpose and intention behind creating the online space.

### **Facts and opinions about how online communities affect offline communities**

Online and offline communities are often posited in opposition to each other in a zero sum game. Those taking this view warn that people are more and more seduced from their geographically placed lives to the Internet (Lockard, 1997) – a trend they call the 'virtualization of everyday life' (Doheny-Farina, 1996: xiii). They argue the solitary mode of online access encourages people to focus more completely on their private interests (Foster, 1997; Holmes, 1997; Willson, 1997). The presentation of the self online that is separate from body cues reduces the person's involvement in place-bound public life (Lajoie, 1996; Nguyen and Alexander, 1996). Participation in online communities, therefore, draws people away from their offline communities.

Although such a view has popular purchase, there is as yet little evidence to substantiate it. There are reported cases of individuals withdrawing from offline life, if only temporarily, because of addiction to online group games (e.g. Kaufman, 1996; Turkle, 1995). But a national survey in the USA found no statistical difference in participation rates in

religious and community organizations between Internet users and non-users (Katz and Aspden, 1997). It must be pointed out, however, that the study made no distinction between using the Internet for facilitating existing activities/relationships and for making new friends or participating in communities online, and thus is limited in helping us understand how online community participation affects offline participation.

At the interpersonal level, the view that online engagements draw people away from offline life is also unsubstantiated. There are reports of withdrawal from offline interpersonal relationships in favour of online ones (e.g. Kaufman, 1996; Markham, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995), however, surveys in the USA found no evidence that Internet use diminished social or familial involvement (Katz and Aspden, 1997; Nie and Erbring, 2000). Participants in two major nation-wide bulletin board services in the USA reported significant decreases in talking on the phone and letter writing, but face-to-face communication, public addresses, small group meetings and other offline communication was not affected (James et al., 1995). In the Asia Pacific, the majority (64 percent) of Internet users with credit cards reported that Internet use had not changed the amount of time they spent with their family and friends; 20 percent reported spending more time, and 12 percent spending less time (MasterCard International, 2000). Again, one needs to remember that these studies (James et al., 1995; Katz and Aspden, 1997; MasterCard International, 2000; Nie and Erbring, 2000) did not distinguish between using the Internet for offline functions and for online social purposes.

At the other pole to those who see online and offline communities in a zero sum game are those who see online and offline communities as interconnected (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Some evidence seems to support this view. Online communities have been found to have extended offline to become new communities (e.g. Cheung, 1998; Damer, 1998; Rheingold, 1993), and some researchers conjecture that online communication strengthens offline communities (e.g. Dertouzos, 1997; Elkins, 1997).

Indications of how online communities may affect offline communities emerge in studies of electronic civic networks, where computer networking is adopted with the aim of strengthening offline geographic communities. In some cases, improved communication did help strengthen local communities, giving them a greater sense of citizen involvement. Interestingly, in some other cases online communities were formed, and then gave rise to new offline communities. On the Public Electronic Network (PEN) in Santa Monica, California, women participated in public discussion of various issues in the online interactive conferences. Consequently, their interest in community politics was stimulated and new offline communities, including a paper-recycling committee, were formed (Rogers et al., 1994). A Homeless Conference was also formed on the network and later

extended offline to become the PEN Action Group (Rogers et al., 1994). On Big Sky Telegraph, Montana, participants in the civic network gave rise to an online community, which became one among many communities that influenced each other in power and resource distribution (Uncapher, 1999).

Drawing on the experience of six electronic civic networks in Europe and the USA, Tambini (1999) claims that civic networks tend to overestimate the homogeneity and common interests of local communities. He argues that in a period of globalization, civic networks could forge new communities that transcend spatial constraints on the basis of common economic interests.

The appearance of new communities on electronic civic networks helps to strengthen the offline geographic communities only if the online communities have the same goals and norms as the offline communities, and only if the sense of belonging to the offline communities is strengthened among participants of the online communities. Whether in fact this is the case has not been studied. The present study follows this line of inquiry to investigate the goals, norms and sense of belonging of an online community in relation to those of its offline counterpart.

### **The Queer Sisters and its bulletin board on the web**

Formed in 1995, the Queer Sisters (QS) is the oldest queer/lesbian group in Hong Kong. It proclaims itself as a human rights organization fighting for the sexual rights of women. Queer Sisters does not have a membership system and is run by volunteers, some of whom run the group as a self-proclaimed core group of organizers.<sup>2</sup> The group created its web site in November 1997 (<http://www.qs.org.hk>), to which a bulletin board was added in October 1998.

The Queer Sisters and its bulletin board were selected for study as they are both active, and have some overlap in participants. They are also accessible for data collection. Like other organizations in new social movements, the Queer Sisters organize themselves around a collective identity and therefore are likely to use the bulletin board for such a purpose. The social disapproval facing lesbians/queers, who are potential supporters of the Queer Sisters, is likely to attract more participants to the bulletin board, thus making the study of community formation meaningful. An indication of the size of participation on the bulletin board came from a survey posted by the group on its home page, asking what new features people would like to see on the site. In six weeks from mid-May to the end of June 2000, there were over 1000 respondents.<sup>3</sup> Most postings on the board are in standard Chinese or Cantonese dialect,<sup>4</sup> but some are in English.

### Community formed on the Queer Sisters bulletin board

The interconnectivity of the Internet successfully aggregated people around the bulletin board. The existence of a sense of belonging, social interactions and social ties confirms the existence of a community on the bulletin board.

My online survey<sup>5</sup> found that 76 percent ( $n = 77$ ) of respondents shared a sense of belonging to the bulletin board: 62 percent ( $n = 63$ ) visited it (almost) every day; another 15 percent ( $n = 15$ ) visited it 2 to 3 times a week; 94 percent ( $n = 95$ ) had posted messages or replies. The great majority of messages posted were meant for all participants on the bulletin board, with the average message drawing around 4 to 6 replies. Being lesbian, with the associated difficulties in life, was observed to be the core commonality shared among participants. Fifty-six percent ( $n = 53$ ) of board participants said they had made friends through the board.

A sense of belonging was found among participants on the bulletin board, even though some disagreed with the board for various reasons. One board participant said although she was not interested in most of what was talked about on the board, she was glad that the board maintained its activity by attracting lesbians of all interests (author's interview, 28 October 2000). Another participant, who did not like the abundant expression of personal feelings on the board, still preferred the Queer Sisters' board to other lesbian online spaces in Hong Kong because it is better managed: she complained that in some other sites, information was not updated regularly. She also enjoyed information messages that talked about lesbian books and films, or that cited famous quotes (author's interview, 19 October 2000). One board participant who had not taken part in offline Queer Sisters activities said she appreciated the group's efforts in working on political issues, although she herself enjoyed using the board only for sharing with others (author's interview, 16 October 2000).

The attraction of the Queer Sisters' bulletin board is also cultural. Some participants commented that they found lesbian bulletin boards in Taiwan more interesting but they still visited the Queer Sisters' board from time to time. Some participants still visited the board after leaving Hong Kong, so they maintained their links to the cultural community to which they felt they belonged (author's interviews, 20 October, 20 November, 1 December 2000).

What constitutes a community has been an issue of contention. Among operators of commercial web sites, there is a tendency to equate online groups with online communities. Sorting through the 94 definitions collected in George Hillery's 1955 analysis, Marcia Effrat (1974) found that the most commonly included component was a shared geographical area. Next came the existence of common ties and social interaction. Historically, the rural village was associated with the definition of community, but the emphasis on a shared locality as a component of

community diminished in the 1950s as scholars acknowledged the existence of communities serving more specialized functions (Effrat, 1974; Wellman, 1999). Conceptualization of the symbolic approach, according to which a community is imagined by its members through the sharing of common symbols (Anderson, 1983), further undermined the importance of locality in the definition of community and shared experience became the basis on which a community is imagined (Castells, 1997).

The interconnectivity and interactivity of the Internet foster an 'empty space', a cyberspace, that is no longer defined by geographic place (Giddens, 1990), but cyberspace can be a social space (Stone, 1991) for the development of interpersonal relationships; it can be a public space (Rheingold, 1993) for the formation of communities. On the Queer Sisters bulletin board, it was both.

### **Bulletin board community differs from QS in goals**

Content analysis, online survey, interviews and observation together found that the goals and norms of the bulletin board community are substantially different from those of the Queer Sisters.

To investigate the goals of the bulletin board community, I found it helpful to categorize messages on the board as follows: information, relational, task, expression, sharing, advice, discussion, management, intrusion, and others. The categories were further sub-divided according to whether messages are posted for people known offline, online or not known at all.<sup>6</sup> The analysis found that the most important goals of participants on the bulletin board were sharing with others and self-expression. Like the majority of other categories of messages, sharing and expression messages are communication among people brought together by the Queer Sisters bulletin board who do not know each other offline. This online communication works towards building new relationships and forming a community.

#### *Use of the board for sharing and expression*

A message that carries the poster's feelings or views, not addressed to anyone in particular, and that attracts replies, is classified as a sharing message. A similar message that does not draw replies is categorized as an expression message. Sharing and expression messages together made up 39 percent ( $n = 235$ ) of the content analysis sample. Although expression messages do not draw replies, the expression of one's views or feelings to an audience itself may serve a purpose of sharing for the poster. Indeed 'sharing with others' was the answer picked by the greatest number of

respondents (65 percent,  $n = 66$ ) when asked<sup>7</sup> what they got from the Queer Sisters bulletin board.

The content of sharing and expression messages could be the same. They touched on all aspects of life, but romantic love was a persistently popular topic. This sharing message posted on 13 July 2000 drew three replies:

When you court or love someone, you become interdependent with the other person. It becomes a habit.

When it becomes a habit, you can accommodate the shortcomings of the other person.[. . .]

Have you had this experience? The one you love does not choose you on the grounds of habit:

I am used to this one I'm staying with.[. . .]

I'm used to her habits; she's used to my habits.

Though we aren't happy, we're used to it. . . .

I hate habits. . . . (author's translation from Chinese)

One of the replies ran as follows:

You don't hate habits; you are not sure if you want to continue getting used to the bad attitudes and habits of the other person. I think the longer we stay in a relationship, the more complaints we have about the other person, and we want to find another lover. . . . I suggest you start anew and find someone who loves you. . . . (author's translation from Chinese)

The following message excerpt on the bulletin board from 25 April 2000 illustrates the sentiment about sharing:

Recently there was a discussion here about finding a partner in the latter halves of our lives. I think the atmosphere of the discussion is really nice. I really appreciate the harmonious atmosphere.[. . .] I hope the harmonious atmosphere will continue so we can have a place to express ourselves freely. (author's translation from Cantonese)

Interviews<sup>8</sup> with board participants confirm the central importance of sharing on the bulletin board. Board participants, be they active posters or not, talked about the bulletin board as a space for 'us' lesbians. An infrequent poster described how she felt when she found the bulletin board on a web search: 'I was very happy, very excited. I felt I had discovered a place that I belonged to' (author's interview, 28 October 2000). Another rare poster described the bulletin board as 'like a home for the lesbian circle' (author's interview, 24 November 2000). An active poster said the



board gave her 'family warmth' (author's interview, 21 November 2000). An inactive poster said she could talk about her sexual inclination on the bulletin board but not with her friends or family, who did not know she was lesbian (author's interview, 16 October 2000). Some sharing messages related to the poster's lesbian identity, like this one:

16 July 2000

I had dinner in Causeway Bay last night and I saw many les[bian]. As soon as I got off the bus, I saw a pair who was holding hands. Then I saw some others on the way to Chuen Cheung Kui [name of a restaurant]. In the restaurant was a table of them next to mine. When I left, I saw some others queuing for tables. Suddenly I felt like on another planet. The feeling was: 'Wow, the world has changed.' [name] (author's translation from Cantonese)

Other sharing messages were merely personal, like this one:

06 July 2000

It's now 8 a.m.

I'm dressed and going out

For what?

The results are out today. I'm going to the school to view the results.

Not nervous?

Can't be . . .

Whatever

I just want to say a few words:

When I was unhappy,

I made some very good friends here who supported me

Can't imagine that

I've come back here for support.

(author's translation from Chinese)

Expression messages were almost all about romantic love, and often went like this one, posted on 4 September 1999:

To whom?

Why do I have to wait

Until you've left

To admit

I love you

(author's translation from Chinese)

### *Use of the board for liaison with friends and lovers*

The expression message quoted above looks as if it could be posted for intended addressees to read. If such messages bear the names of both the poster and addressee, or the name of either plus enough cues for the other party to be identified, or if the message draws a reply from the intended addressee(s), then the message is categorized as a relational message. Relational messages made up 34 percent ( $n = 207$ ) of the sample. Almost two-thirds of relational messages (22 percent of total,  $n = 133$ ) were posted for people whom the posters knew offline. The others were posted for friends known online (in or out of the Queer Sisters bulletin board) and for socializing with others on the board.

The people known offline included lovers and ordinary friends. Relational messages posted for ordinary friends contained social chatting, like this one:

Thank you

Sunday, 16 July 2000

Thanks [name], for setting up the web page for me. Thanks [name], the oven that you gave me is very nice. Really thanks. And thanks for the VCDs from [name]. I'll play them with delight.

Relational messages posted for lovers, such as this one on 31 August 1999, mainly communicated passion:

Although these few weeks you have been busy with your work with no time left for me, and we have little time to meet, I do not mind. I would only support you silently.

Listening to Kenny G's music while going over the love letters and caring cards between us gives me special feelings – some sweet, some romantic, some funny, and some moving. In these years I deeply feel your love for me – true, frank and whole-hearted.

I feel I am very lucky and happy. Thank you.

No matter what comes ahead, I will stay with you.

[name]

(author's translation from Chinese)

Given that messages on the bulletin board are displayed for every visitor to see, use of the bulletin board for liaising with particular offline friends and lovers is unexpected. Interviews with board participants found that the board served a number of functions in these liaisons. One was as a 'public mail box' (author's interview, 10 November 2000). An active poster said, 'I feel very close to the QS board. I go there to chat with my friends every night' (author's interview, 27 November 2000). A frequent poster said that she did not think that strangers would be interested in reading the messages she posted (author's interview, 27 November 2000). Another function that the bulletin board served was as a display board. A poster who often displayed her passion for her lover on the board described the bulletin board community as a 'witness' to her passion: 'She [my lover] would not trust me if I just speak to her privately' (author's interview, 21 November 2000). A participant who occasionally posted for her friends said, 'I'm proud of having such good friends; I want others to know' (author's interview, 10 November 2000). Sometimes the bulletin board served a messenger function. One participant said she used the board for indirect communication when 'something was difficult to talk about' face to face. For example, when she has some misunderstanding or an argument with her girlfriend, she would use the board to apologize (author's interview, 24 November 2000). The board's messenger function is partially dependent on the small size of its potential community. In a small community, even when the addressee does not visit the board, there is a good chance that one of her friends will, and that she will tip off the addressee. Indeed, two of the interviewees reported that their friends had tipped them off (author's interviews, 20 and 27 November 2000).

### *Goals of QS*

Sharing, expression and relational liaison were the major goals participants achieved on the bulletin board. These were not the goals of the Queer Sisters. As a group, the Queer Sisters had political, educational, service and administrative goals. Politically, the Queer Sisters campaigned with other women's, gay and lesbian groups from time to time. The group also granted press interviews on issues relating to the sex rights of women. Educational activities of the group included a bi-weekly radio talk programme broadcast on a commercial web site, and essay competitions held every four months. Social activities were organized as a service. The

monthly meeting, which had once been a discussion organized around a theme, had in recent months become a social gathering. Other social activities, such as barbecues, dinner parties, boat trips and dance parties were held several times a year. The group's main service was telephone counselling on the hotline one evening a week. Workshops organized from time to time trained volunteers and achieved the group's administrative goals.

### **Bulletin board community holds different norms from QS**

As indicated by its name, the Queer Sisters are organized around a queer identity. Esterberg (1996) found that the term 'queer' became more common in 1994 during her study of lesbians in the USA. The Queer Sisters was formed in 1995 by three ethnic Chinese women, one of whom grew up in the USA, and another who completed her university education there. Heavily influenced by postmodernism and post-structuralism (Esterberg, 1996), queer theory challenges the notion that sexual identity is a unitary essence residing in the person irrespective of social location (Esterberg, 1996; Gamson, 1996; Stein, 1997). On the other hand, lesbianism is an essentialist identity that positions one in opposition to the heterosexual patriarchy where the family is the basic social unit (Castells, 1997).

My observation<sup>9</sup> found that the bulletin board, unlike the Queer Sisters, was divided over queerness and lesbianism. A debate that erupted on the bulletin board between lesbians and queers ended with the queers leaving or becoming inactive on the board. In the debate, the queers criticized the Queer Sisters as being too narrowly concerned with lesbians, while the lesbians attacked the group of being non-committal about lesbian identity.

On 10 September 1999, the Queer Sisters replied to a question directed at it on the board and explained that the group mainly served *tongzhis*,<sup>10</sup> whom the group defined not as lesbians but 'non-heterosexuals of multi-dimensional sexuality'. In response came this posting on 12 September:

Why the hell is 'tongzhi not the same as lesbian'?

Why the hell 'the choice of wording is consistent with the ideals of the Queer Sisters'? . . .

In organizing an activity you talk about political incorrectness even in picking a word.[. . .] You spend your whole life pondering about the publicity flyer, and leave 15 percent of your time for organizing it.[. . .] (author's translation from Cantonese)

On 14 September came this posting from a queer:

[. . .] I can see QS is/has become an organization which only serves the narrowly defined communities, namely LESBIANS. So where the hell are those

QUEERS? I have no intention to speak against LESBIANS. I liked this web site, i liked this chat room, because i thought it was the only organization in Hong Kong [that] had its own stance which I stand up with and which provided us, as women, as queers or as whatever you dare to be (no matter what gender(s) you fxxk) to talk OPENLY about gender and sexuality.[. . .] (capitals are the poster's emphasis)

Amid the series of messages and replies that followed was this one posted on 17 September, which indicated that the queers felt they had been sidelined:

I'm glad that some serious discussion has surfaced in QS. . . . But sometimes the human brain is like a silted-up river or an ancient closet. No matter how much others try, the stubborn old silt or garbage can't be cleared. . . .

The perspective on sexual inclination of the Queer Sisters has enlightened me. It liberated my thinking from labels found in the closet. [ . . . ]

The arguments in recent days have troubled me a lot. This is my last posting for this argument. (author's translation from Chinese)

Discussion on the above issues has since disappeared from the bulletin board, but it showed that the Queer Sisters' fundamental norm of cherishing 'queerness' might not be the same as that of the bulletin board community.

The Queer Sisters upheld the norm of concern about public issues, while the bulletin board community practised the norm of focusing on one's private affairs. Organizers of the Queer Sisters were critical of the abundance of self-pitying emotions related to romantic love displayed on the bulletin board. One core organizer commented that the norms of the board community differed tremendously from those of the offline group: 'They [participants on the board] are very young, very shallow, and would not look further than their immediate lives'<sup>11</sup> (author's interview, 3 November 2000).

### **Participation on bulletin board increases sense of belonging to QS**

Of the respondents, 61 percent ( $n = 61$ ) said their participation in the bulletin board had increased their sense of belonging to the Queer Sisters, but even more, 69 percent ( $n = 70$ ), said their sense of belonging to the lesbian/queer community had increased. This suggests that the sense of belonging to the online community extends to the offline group, but the extension may be hampered by the different set of goals and norms between the online and offline communities.

The increase in a sense of belonging to the Queer Sisters is accompanied by an increase in participation. Among those whose sense of belonging to

the Queer Sisters increased, participation in the offline group was 43 percent ( $n = 26$ ), higher than board participants in general (34 percent,  $n = 34$ ). However even among these people most did not participate in the offline group. Reasons cited for non-participation included the fear of 'coming out', personality, scheduling problems, not living in Hong Kong and disappointment about the group's organization (author's interviews, 16, 19, 20, 28 October, 24 November, 1 December 2000). It is clear that online and offline participation is governed by different logic – despite the seeming affinity between the board and the group.

The study found that the bulletin board community pursued goals and held norms very different from those of the Queer Sisters. Participation on the bulletin board increased the sense of belonging to and participation in the Queer Sisters, but the increase is affected by differences in goals and norms between the two communities and differences in logic of action between the two realms.

### **Autonomy of online community contingent upon technology and other conditions**

To understand the autonomy of the bulletin board, I conducted further interviews<sup>12</sup> and observation, and found that its autonomy from the Queer Sisters resulted from the effects of the technology, which the Queer Sisters allowed full play because of their purpose and because of resource considerations.

#### *Technology shapes communication environment on bulletin board*

Interconnectivity, the characteristic of the Internet, comes to the fore on the bulletin board, which is easily accessible to any web user, as explained below. But the fact that anyone can enter the bulletin board and participate does not mean that anyone does. Upon encountering the Queer Sisters 'home page' Introduction a process of self-selection filters participants, first, to those who differ from the majority in sexual orientation and second, geographically as most of the participants live in Hong Kong. The affinity between the bulletin board and the Queer Sisters supports previous studies that have found geographic and cultural connections between online groups and their offline counterparts (Elkins, 1997; Lozada Jr, 1998; Mitra, 1996; Sapienza, 1999). Within this ambit, however, participants were free to use the board for their purposes. The only limit to this freedom came from the powers exercised by the Queer Sisters over the board.

The software provided by the free service on the web that the Queer Sisters used to create the board did not give them any control over who

visited the board. Any user of the web can access and post on the bulletin board without registration or charge. The only powers that the Queer Sisters had were to delete messages and to post in the headers on the board. The organizer who started the bulletin board and who subsequently left the Queer Sisters said that in the early days she did try to arouse discussion on the board by posting related news reports along with her comments. But she found that other participants of the board were less interested in discussion of issues than in sharing private emotions (author's interview, 12 July 2000). In the sample period, discussion messages made up only 3 percent ( $n = 20$ ) of all messages. Information messages that contained news reports related to lesbian, women's and gay rights were observed from time to time but they did not draw much discussion. One organizer acknowledged that many who participated on the board did not agree with the aims and objectives of the Queer Sisters, and so the board was not a good venue for discussion of issues (author's interview, 10 November 2000). Dominated by visitors who pursued goals and norms different from those of the Queer Sisters, only 5 out of 7 organizers of the Queer Sisters visited the bulletin board, and then only infrequently. The exception among them was Eunice, who acted as the board's quasi-moderator (author's interviews, 3 and 10 November 2000).

The broadcast mode of message distribution made the bulletin board one virtual public place, thus facilitating interaction and community formation among participants. The archive feature of the bulletin board enhanced community formation by fixing a shared memory in a visible, physical display (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999). For the purpose of sharing and expression, the anonymity enjoyed by the participants encouraged participation, and while asynchronous distribution of messages does not give immediate feedback to communications, in this case it actually facilitated community formation. The size of the potential community of the bulletin board was too small for synchronous distribution, as evidenced by the failure of real-time chat rooms experimented with on the Queer Sisters web site in June 2000.

### *Non-instrumental purpose of creating bulletin board*

The choice of technology for the online space is dependent on the purpose behind creating the online space and the resources of the offline group. Had the Queer Sisters intended the online space as a tool for disseminating information to its offline participants, for example, most likely they would have chosen a communication application that allows them to restrict access and confines the power of posting to the administrators. In such a case, posting news items on its web site, rather than creating an interactive space, might have been the most suitable choice. However, the Queer

Sisters set up the bulletin board in response to a suggestion made at a monthly meeting to provide a space for free exchange and expression (author's interview, 12 July 2000) and the board was maintained more as a service than as an instrument of the group.

Consistent with this purpose, the Queer Sisters in fact encouraged greater access to the bulletin board by registering its web site with 17 search engines. Indeed, 75 percent ( $n = 76$ ) of participants on the bulletin board discovered the bulletin board through online means, which included people they knew online, hyperlinks and web searches. Only 10 percent ( $n = 10$ ) found the board through offline channels related to the Queer Sisters.

### *Limited resources of offline group*

For the Queer Sisters, which has no membership income and lives on sporadic funding, choosing a free service for creating a bulletin board was most logical. But the choice delimits the group's power of control over the board. Scarce resources also partly accounted for the limited intervention of the quasi-moderator in the goings-on of the board. Observation and interviews found that the quasi-moderator perceived her role as smoothing over tension that might disrupt the friendly atmosphere of the bulletin board rather than enforcing the norms of the Queer Sisters (author's interview, 21 September 1999). This allowed board participants great freedom to use the board for their own purposes.

### **Understanding autonomy of online space by medium theory**

The aggregation of people who were not connected to the Queer Sisters around the QS bulletin board testifies to the effect of the interconnectivity of the Internet. The formation of a community on the bulletin board provides evidence of the effects of the interactivity, broadcast distribution, archive and asynchronous messaging through the bulletin board. The case of the Queer Sisters' bulletin board gives support to medium theory that the communication medium serves as an environment for interactions, relationships and communities to emerge and develop.

The above position by no means implies that technology creates the community on the bulletin board, nor is this what medium theory would claim, despite the often-made criticism that it takes a technologically deterministic position. It is true that medium theorists have not built into their theorizations the interplay of media technology with social and other conditions, yet their theoretical positions do allow this. For instance, McLuhan's work contains examples of different uses arising from the same medium in different cultures (1962, 1964). He observes: 'The English



dislike the telephone so much that they substitute numerous mail deliveries for it. The Russians use the telephone for a status symbol' (1964: 214). McLuhan also recognizes the possibility of reducing the social effects of technology through collective effort. 'There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening' (McLuhan and Fiore 1967: 25). Technology is best seen as a context in which communication takes place (Altheide, 1995).

The case chosen for my study is a lesbian/queer group, but there is no reason to believe that the nature of the case prevents generalization of the study's understanding to other groups. The fact that the bulletin board was created by the Queer Sisters creates an intrinsically close connection between the two, so – these circumstances notwithstanding – if the online community of the bulletin board is found to become relatively autonomous of the offline community of the Queer Sisters, the findings can be expected to apply even more to other online spaces where the connection to offline communities is less direct.

Some may argue that the oppression of lesbians/queers accentuates their need for sharing and identity building, and contributed to the formation of the autonomous community on the bulletin board, but that may not apply to other groups. The formation of thousands of communities online, however, testifies to the need to form communities that cuts across boundaries of existing offline communities. This is confirmed by previous studies on civic networks, reported above, which found new communities formed on the electronic networks built to connect the offline geographic communities.

Could the lack of alternative sharing communities have encouraged the formation of a lesbian community on the Queer Sisters bulletin board? Maybe so, but this point would apply to any other online community, and while there are not dozens of online spaces specially catering for lesbians in Hong Kong, the Queer Sisters' board is not the only online space in Hong Kong for lesbians. Participants choose the Queer Sisters' board because they find something in it that is absent from other online spaces. It seems to be the case that different participants give different meanings to their participation without expecting the bulletin board to match their interests or beliefs hand and glove. The meanings they give to their participation may or may not relate to the goals or norms of the Queer Sisters group, but this can be expected to be true in other online communities.

## Notes

1. The term 'online community' is used in contrast to 'offline community' to denote what some call 'virtual community' and 'real-life community'.

Whether online communities qualify as genuine communities is an issue of disagreement. Instead of going into arguments, it is more important to recognize the existence of the new forms of human association on the Internet. One may also

take advice from Marcia Effrat (1974), who concluded that it is not necessary to judge whether something is or is not a community, but rather the degree to which something is a community.

2. The number of organizers and volunteers varies as some leave and others are invited to join. In September 1999, there were four organizers and nine volunteers (author's interview, 21 September 2000), and in December 2000, there were seven in the core group and 18 volunteers (statistics provided by Queer Sisters organizer, 28 December 2000).

3. The record was automatically provided by the free 'Pollit.com web service' ([www.pollit.com](http://www.pollit.com)), which was used in the survey.

4. The Cantonese dialect differs from standard Chinese in certain vocabularies and sentence structures.

5. All visitors to the bulletin board were targeted in the online survey. On 1 August 2000, I posted identical messages in Chinese and English on the bulletin board to invite responses to the questionnaire, the Chinese and English versions of which were lodged on two web sites and accessible by clicking on the links given in my messages. Response to the questionnaire was monitored and invitation messages were posted from time to time. When response to the questionnaire declined to a very low level, I posted a message on 13 September 2000 announcing that the survey had finished. One hundred and two valid responses were received.

6. Following McLaughlin et al.'s (1997) block sampling strategy, my content analysis used two blocks of messages: 1–28 September 1999 and 1–28 July 2000. Whether a message is posted for people known offline or online is judged by reading the content of the message, informed by my knowledge of the social networks in the QS group.

7. Respondents could give multiple answers to that question.

8. After the survey period, I conducted individual interviews with willing board participants until the data yielded were saturated. Altogether, 11 interviews were conducted.

9. With agreement from the Queer Sisters organizers, I announced at their monthly gathering on 29 August 1999 that I would study their use of the Internet. In the months that followed, I read the texts posted on the bulletin board as an unobtrusive observer until the end of the online survey. I also observed through participation in offline activities of the Queer Sisters.

10. *Tongzhi* is a transcription from the Chinese term for 'comrade', which communists often use to refer to people who share the same ideals and commitments. The term *tongzhi* was appropriated by members of the gay community in Hong Kong before the 1997 political hand-over to Communist China to refer to members in their community. The meaning of the term has since expanded to include at least lesbians as well.

11. As explained below, the bulletin board was accessible to any web user. Who comes through the open door is a separate research question.

12. Five core organizers and two volunteers of the Queer Sisters were interviewed, some more than once.

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