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The Internet as Social-Spiritual Space

Heidi Campbell

The Internet means different things to different people. According to Annette Markham (1998), individuals can conceive of the Internet as a tool, a place or a state of mind. This spectrum of conceptions provides a helpful starting point to describe ways the Internet is seen and used by individuals. It also encapsulates the diversity of approaches in Computer-mediated Communications (CMC) research in the past two decades. CMC, according to John December (1997), is 'a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in particular contexts, engaging in processes to shape media for a variety of purposes'. It is an interdisciplinary area of study considering questions related to psychology, communications, sociology and even philosophy. In the 1990s, studies of the social side of computers began to emerge such as investigating how the Internet influences personal identity and social structures. This raised awareness that the Internet is not simply used for utilitarian or information-based pursuits. By the mid-1990s, research began to show the Internet was being integrated into numerous social and even religious pursuits. The Internet increasingly functions as a social and spiritual place for many people, as information technology

intersects with awakened postmodern spiritual desires and a search for meaning in an information age.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight and explore social and spiritual facets of the Internet. This is done by investigating how this conception and perspective of study has emerged in CMC research in the past decade. First, the Internet is contextualised by considering specific aspects of its roots and history. Then several conceptions of the Internet are outlined, presenting the different facets of how the Internet has been conceived and utilised. Next, how the Internet can function as a social-spiritual space is outlined through describing 'The Internet as sacramental space'. This conception unpacks how and why the Internet is being employed in a variety of spiritual pursuits.

Contextualising the Internet

In order to understand how the Internet is conceived of as a new social-spiritual space, it is important to highlight the roots of this information technology. The beliefs that underlie the Internet's history have affected how and why this technology has been used for distinct purposes.

Through a historical analysis of the emergence of the Internet² two key themes emerge which characterised this technology: fear and promise. Beginning in the 1960s cold war's culture of suspicion, Internet technology and ARPANET were created in response to the fear of looming devastation produced by the advent of nuclear technology (Sardar 1996). Created to sustain communication in the midst of catastrophe, the Internet from its inception came out of an underlying current of alarm and mistrust. Yet, the Internet's development and expansion in the 1980s and 1990s also illustrate the belief in a positive view of progress, universal rights to access and promotion of freedom of information. The Internet was presented as a new land of opportunity and a 'wonderful pluralistic world' opening

society up to new potential ways of governing, relating and being (Dyson et al. 1996: 28).

This tension between fear and promise within computer and Internet technology is also seen when exploring the idea of cyberspace and its roots in science fiction. Cyberspace is a metaphoric image of an imaginary world existing beyond the computer screen.² In science fiction, cyberspace illustrates a desire for humans and technology to merge. It is a virtual space offering the opportunity to create a new reality, where the virtual world presents escape from the real world. Yet, cyberspace also presents a dichotomy. Technology is portrayed as offering both hope for the future and a dark dystopia, as the technological world oppresses and exerts control over humanity. Many advocates and critics of the technology have used this dichotomy to support claims that the Internet is either utopia or dystopia (Wellman 1997b). The roots and rhetoric of the Internet highlight the possible extreme responses towards this technology. The Internet is either criticised as potentially destructive or lauded as potential saviour. It is presented as a tool or place that creates a distinctly helpful or harmful technological environment.

Yet the Internet is not a medium that can be branded as simply good or evil. When studying the Internet as a social phenomenon, increasing numbers of people engaging in social interaction on-line, we find both strengths and weakness manifest in the technology. Here the Internet blurs the boundaries of what is real and virtual, as technology which both unifies and alienates. Therefore, a different and more balanced approach is necessary to understanding the complexity of the Internet. Nardi and O'Day use the label of 'critical friend' as an alternative response for evaluating technology and investigating its outcomes (Nardi and O'Day 1999: 27). Emerging somewhere between technophobe and technophile perspectives, critical friends consider both positive and

negative effects of the Internet. They focus on identifying how a given technology operates and suggest individuals embrace technology with caution. This is characterised by the Technorealist Manifesto <www.technorealism.org> which seeks 'neither to champion nor dismiss technology, but rather to understand it, and apply it in a manner more consistent with basic human values'.

The critical friend is similar to the position of 'prophetic resistance' promoted by Clifford Christians in *Responsible Technology* as a Christian-based response to the 'technicistic worldview'. Prophetic resistance advocates revealing weaknesses of other positions and resisting oversimplified prejudices, while not rejecting outright the technology itself. Therefore the prophet does not rail against the existence of the technology. Technology only becomes a problem when it becomes sacralised or when it seduces our language and being. To bring 'prophetic witness into the existing technological order' Christians claims it must first be raised in the Christian community and then brought to the larger human community. As the prophetic witness addresses the human tendency to allow technology to serve the interest of power, 'our technological activity can be freed at last and inspired to follow the biblical path of loving God above all and our neighbour as ourselves' (Christians et al. 1986: 221). Identifying this perspective is important as a religious or spiritual response to technology extends this evaluation to consider how Internet technology affects and shapes the soul. The history of and reaction towards the Internet are laden with distinct beliefs about the technology of Internet choices. These underlying assumptions inform how people approach the Internet and to what ends they use it.

Conceptions of the Internet

There are many different approaches to the Internet. Along with Markham, one of the first attempts to describe how

individuals operate on-line was presented by Phil Agre in his article 'The Internet and Public Discourse' (Agre 1998). In it he presents several conceptions of the Internet and ways they influence life on-line. He describes the Internet as a communications medium, a computer system, a discourse and a set of standards. While Agre's models are helpful, and will be noted in this section, essentially they do a better job of addressing legal and political concerns than looking at the Internet as a social phenomenon. Markham – who characterised the Internet as a tool, a place or a state of mind – sought to describe general user approaches to the Internet (Markham 1998). By combining the ideas of Markham and Agre with reflection based on a recently completed study of on-line communities, several other models or conceptions emerge that seek to highlight a particular use and study of the on-line context. Here the Internet will be identified as: information space, a common mental geography, an 'identity workshop', a social space and a sacramental space. These descriptions seek to capture people's perceived and actual use of the Internet. This spectrum shows the Internet can be seen as being utilitarian, conceptual, experimental, social or even spiritual by users. Discussing these particular conceptions also helps to introduce various trends in CMC research relevant to these discussions of the Internet.

The Internet as Information Space

The Internet as information space highlights information exchange occurring on-line. The Internet allows individuals to utilise a variety of software and technologies to interact with data. Here the Internet is often referred to as the realm of pure information and the World Wide Web is seen as its holding house. The Internet exists for the utilitarian purpose of transferring messages or data. Individuals use the Internet as a tool to locate their desired data.

One of the unique aspects of the Internet is that it allows each netizen simultaneously to be 'a publisher as well as a consumer of information' (Rheingold 1993: 97). With minimal resources, in comparison to public access television or pirate radio, individuals can publish their own website or start an email list on their preferred topic. Thus, people on-line often focus on generating and discovering information of personal interest. Internet technology is valued for its ability to retrieve and store data.

The CMC studies began by focusing on users' interactions on texts. These studies can be traced to the 1970s, when CMC focused primarily on the technological capabilities of computers by exploring how particular technical, economic and ergonomic characteristics of computers affected organisational efficiency and effectiveness (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire 1984). In the early 1980s, while research grew into the context of computer interaction, it still had an informational focus on organisational communication on-line, and how individuals exchanged information and developed informational networks. Studying the net as an information space is still prevalent within discussion of copyright, navigation of information spaces and cyber-law.

According to Spears and Lea, 'CMC reflects a shift of the attentional focus to the content and context of the message' (1992: 40). The attention is on the message over the producer, the textual creation instead of the text creator. These texts focus individuals on representations of reality. Importance is placed on conceptions of what they are interacting with on-line, over what is behind the words. Nunes argues in the virtual world of the Internet, 'our words are our bodies' (Nunes 1995: 326), where people become known by their words or their taglines. The texts presented become the defining factor of who one is in cyberspace and what one does. Through text, readers construct mental images of the other. Information space

dictates that individuals become known as data producers. Texts produced are seen as representing the totality of the particular producer, limiting interpersonal engagement with them at a deeper level. Information becomes abstracted from its author or creator; the focus becomes gathering data.

This conception highlights a negative tendency towards de-personalising those who generate the text. Roszak in *The Cult of Information* argues that this occurs as those in the information society mistake access to information for knowledge. He states that society is now based on an 'information economy'; those who control information are the new power brokers (Roszak 1986: 91). This is often central to debates on the 'Digital Divide' where discussion of the Internet is framed in terms of the 'information rich' versus the 'information poor'. The focus is utilitarian, promoting the most access to the most information for the most people.

The Internet as Common Mental Geography

The Internet as common mental geography³ views the Internet as providing more than a tool for communication, but a structure for individuals to construct a common world-view. Computers are meant to supply standardised methods of processing data. These processes are meant to link computer operators to a common platform of language and interactions.

This platform provides a common mental geography, a way to describe how the real world functions using computer-ese and technological imagery; the machine is used to understand humanity. This can be associated with 'technobabble', where the 'human condition is frequently explained in terms of technological metaphors' (Barry 1993: xiii). Technobabble involves using mechanistic language to describe human processes. This has connotations outside the

realms of computing as individuals use anthropomorphic ideas, attributing human characteristics to material objects, to describe computers and their processes.

By merging technobabble with cyber-philosophy the Internet becomes a distinct way of viewing reality, the physical world interpreted through the screen. Research such as the work of Sherry Turkle on hacker culture at MIT (Turkle 1985) and philosophical writings in the early 1990s, such as Michael Benedikt in *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1992), characterised investigations of this sort. This ran alongside studies of CMC in the areas of: group norms and social identity, social identity within communities of users (Lea 1992). Developments in digital art and cyber-literature also utilise the Internet as a new space for creativity. Cyberspace creates a digital canvas for new artistic and technological expressions, from interactive poetry to 3-D game imaging. Merging technology and human creativity has also spawned dialogue on cyborg philosophy and posthuman discourses, which encourage a new philosophical framework, and language has been used to describe and frame the innovations of cyberspace (Haraway 1991).

This conception brings together elements of science fiction fantasy with computer networking images. Cyberspace can be seen as an environment shaped as much by story and myth as it is by networked computers. Here cyberspace can be seen as a real place, the place where people see themselves while 'surfing the net'. Yet cyberspace is a simulated territory; it is a metaphor and media image that does not truly represent the actual computer network architecture of computer connections and telephone lines. However, some users chose to let fantasy inform their reality. This extreme can be seen in the lives of computer hackers. Turkle describes hackers as individuals obsessed with their computers whose chief aim is to engage the world through computers and technology. As one hacker, whom Turkle

quotes, commented, 'I have assimilated the process to the point that the computer is like an extension of my mind ... Once I know in my mind exactly what I want to do, I can express it on a computer without much further effort' (Turkle 1985: 218).

A common mental geography can evoke a mystical image of the Internet facilitating a global consciousness. In writing about the projected potential of Virtual Reality (VR) to share its 'created reality with the physical world De Kerckhove states this as 'VR technology would allow many minds to collectively process a kind of "group consciousness"' (De Kerckhove 1995: 47). Seeing the Internet as common mental geography supplies those who create computer technology, as well as users, with a common system of communication and a new meta-narrative to be used to make sense of the world. If kept in balance, it can provide cohesion and a sense of social support for like-minded netizens. Internet users see the on-line environment as a place to build utopia or pursue a 'better' reality.

The Internet as Identity Workshop

The Internet as 'identity workshop'⁴ enables people to see the on-line context as a place to learn and test social skills. (Parks and Floyd 1996: 83). The Internet is characterised as a space of freedom and experimentation. Individuals are able to 're-present' themselves by either highlighting certain attributes or hiding others, or by creating new persona for themselves. The focus here is on personalised use, as the Internet 'has provided a forum in which users can re-create themselves' (Block 1996: 5). Changing one's identity on-line can be done easily as electronic communication is essentially blind. The Internet erases social cues so status, power and prestige are not communicated contextually or dynamically (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire 1984: 125). What

is seen are words on a screen with which individuals can construct both themselves and the 'bodies' or presence of others with whom they are communicating.

One discussion area in CMC research attempts to distinguish real from the virtual identity on-line by exploring the question of 'embodiment', what the body is in cyberspace. How Internet users identify their body on-line can influence how they see themselves and communicate with other net users. This perspective was the focus of much CMC research in the mid-1990s as focus turned to various facets of on-line communities, ranging from describing patterns of life found on MUDs or MOOs such as described by Bruckman and Resnick (1995) and Mnookin (1996), to the development of community on Usenet and IRC systems done by individuals such as Reid (1995). Many researchers were drawn to investigate these groups because they included a unique mixing of aspects of the 'real' social world with a computer-created 'virtual' world. This intersection creates what some have referred to as an 'identity workshop' (Parks and Floyd 1996: 83), an opportunity for individuals to create new personas and relationships utilising options often unavailable to them in their embodied social context.

In cyberspace, people are seen as 'disembodied', detached or freed from the constraints of the physical. On-line bodies are constructed through words. People present their bodies by the words they select. The Internet gives individuals the ability to recreate their personal identities. Some see the Internet as a mecca of 'multi-personality possibilities' where the Internet unties the mind from the body offering new ways of expression and opportunities for equality. This not only allows for experimentation, such as gender swapping, but also creates a space in which prejudices can be eliminated (Stone 1995). People are judged on the basis of their text response, not their status or appearance.

For example, on email lists individuals receive all postings made by other members of that group. They select a message and open it, coming face-to-screen with a piece of text, most likely generated by an individual they have never met. Typically they have no access to a visual image of the individual. Social and non-verbal cues for the most part are absent. In email, individuals are portrayed as standardised computer block letters, the type-written word; it is up to the reader to construct the body of the persona they are communicating with. Also, individuals who are primarily written rather than oral communicators often thrive in interactions on-line, finding it a medium conducive to their communication style (Myers 1987).

While options for anonymity and the absence of social cues on-line allow individuals a sense of freedom, they also create some unpleasant by-products. The dissolution of boundaries can result in de-individualisation where there is a 'loss of identity and weakening of social norms and constraints associated with submergence in a group or a crowd' (Spears and Lea 1992: 38). Thus, the on-line anonymity, which promotes equal participation within a group, can also lead to reduced self-regulation and promote uninhibited behaviour.

Disembodiment creating freedom on-line can also lead individuals to confusion, dishonesty and deception. This is expressed by Dibble's classic account of 'A Rape in Cyberspace' where a character in a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) hacked into another character's person to 'virtually' assault her. The incident received significant media attention and showed how involvement in a fantasy-based on-line environment can have real world psychological and sociological effects on participants (Dibble 1996). Positively, it centres on freedom and potential, wherein people are not bound by social class or physical appearance. Negatively, it creates a very egocentric view of the Internet,

where individual choice dominates and undesirable social behaviour can surface.

The Internet as Social Network

The Internet as social network portrays the on-line context as a social space where making connections with people is the primary goal. This inter-personal focus highlights relationships formed on-line; individuals see their central reason for being on-line as to connect with others. The Internet is a place of unlimited connections, where through a few clicks of a mouse or punches of a keyboard people find themselves in communication with others, and not just information.

The 1990s saw the pioneering and establishment of social CMC research. This was particularly noted in the emergence of virtual or on-line community studies pioneered by the likes of Rheingold (1993) and Wellman (1997a). Questions of communication of social information, group meanings and identities, forms of relationship and social negotiation were explored. As Paccagnella states, 'Cyberspace constitutes a wonderful example of how people can build relationships and social norms that are absolutely real and meaningful even in the absence of physical, touchable matter' (Paccagnella 1997).

Referring to the Internet as a social sphere has become a significant trend in CMC research. Jones focuses much of his work around this idea and in 'The Internet as a Social Landscape' describes the Internet as a 'human constructed' sphere: 'Cyberspace is promoted as social space because it is made by people and thus as the 'new public space' it cojoins traditional mythic narratives of progress with the strong modern impulses towards self-fulfilment and personal development' (Jones 1997: 22).

Much has been written on the social nature of the Internet. Studies have found that people use email and other forms

of CMC to socialise, maintain relationships, play games and receive emotional support (Parks and Floyd 1996: 83). While some see on-line relationships as shallow and impersonal illusions, others argue that the Internet liberates inter-personal relations and creates communities. As Parks and Floyd wrote, 'one vision is of relationships lost, while the other is of relationships liberated and found' (1996: 81).

The Internet as social network has a communal orientation. It involves not just creating individual social connections, but a social web. Research into the social nature of the Net often focuses on on-line communities which 'embody a new kind of social interaction that no one had predicted' (National Research Council 1994: 30).

On-line communities allow individuals to select their neighbours and seek out new friends with common interests. Borders are erased as the person in the next room or on the next continent is only an email away. Rushkoff states that the Internet has become a metaphor for a new model of human social interaction: 'It allows for communication without limitations of time or space, personality or body, religion or nationality ... a fractal approach to human consciousness' (1994: 57).

Yet the Internet as social space does have its problems. on-line, the veil of the screen separates individuals from each other. With freedom come complications as 'communicators must imagine their audience, for at a terminal it almost seems as though the computer itself is the audience' (Kiesler et al. 1984: 125). If individuals wish to move past this veiled interaction, they must reach beyond the screen. This is often a disappointing move (Katz and Aspden 1997).

The Internet as Sacramental Space

The Internet as sacramental space acknowledges technology's ability to alter individual and communal religious

practice as it is brought on-line. Using the Internet as a sacramental space involves the adaptation of symbols, rituals and practices as technology is used in spiritual pursuits. While contemporary society often feels isolated and disconnected, the Internet has come to represent an other-worldly space allowing people to re-engage with issues of spirituality. Margaret Wertheim, in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, argues that cyberspace allows people once again to engage spiritual yearnings, silenced in a world where science has dominated religion:

The 'spiritual' appeal of cyberspace lies precisely in this paradox: It is a repackaging of the old idea of Heaven, but in a secular, technologically sanctioned format. The perfect realm awaits us, we are told, not behind the pearly gates but the electronic gateways labelled .com and .net. and .edu. (Wertheim 1999: 21)

Locating themselves in the seemingly timeless, boundless realm of computers, a new breed of spiritual pilgrim has emerged. Some choose to seek out traditional forms of religious expression from the 20 million religious websites said to exist on-line. On their own terms and in the privacy of their own homes, they can visit cyber-cathedrals or temples. Others experiment with newer forms of religious expression: combinations of ancient beliefs altered and adapted for this technologically mediated environment (Brasher 2001).

As in the off-line world, there is no unified spiritual belief on-line. The Internet functions as a marketplace of religions. Every major ideology and religious system existing in the real world is likely to be represented on some website or discussion group. From Islam (Bunt 2000) and Christianity (Veith and Stamper 2000) to Zoroastrianism (Chama 1996), most traditional religions have some form of representation in cyberspace (Zaleski 1997). Also new religions unique to the Internet such as Technopaganism,

neo-paganism adapted and celebrated in a technological context, have also been birthed on-line (Davis 1998). While different schools of spiritual thought can be found in the digital world, all have one thing in common – digital technology is seen to provide tools allowing the user to engage in spiritual activities on-line in a variety of ways.

Cyber-religion also allows spiritual seekers the opportunity to explore diverse religions with variable ease. Brenda Brasher surveys a spectrum of new religious expressions on-line from cyber-pilgrimages through virtual shrines to cyber-seders helping people reconnect with their Jewish faith. By invigorating concepts of sacred time, presence and spiritual experience cyber-religion is 'a crucial contemporary cultural outlet for our meaning heritage from the past' and can 'make a unique contribution to global fellowship' and inter-religious understanding (Brasher 2001: 6).

Exploring the characterisation of the Internet as sacramental space is central to this study. It highlights this new uses of the Internet and the fact that it can creates space for spiritual reflection. The idea of taking religious practice on-line challenges many people's conceptions of religion and religious ritual, as well as what religious community should look like. The Internet as sacramental space involves both social interactions between people of faith and spiritual engagement through technology. Therefore understanding the Internet as a social sphere that can encourage religious networking and spiritual engagement needs to be further unpacked.

The Internet as a Social-Spiritual Network

For many signing on to the Internet is a transformative act. In their eyes the web is more than just a global tapestry of personal computers. It is a vast cathedral of the mind, a place where ideas about God and religion can resonate,

where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit.
(Chama 1996: 57)

While contemporary society often feels isolated and disconnected, the Internet has come to represent a place of connection enabling the forging of relationships, as well as an other-worldly space allowing people to re-engage with spiritual pursuits.

How the Internet can be perceived as a new model of human social interaction has been addressed. Internet technology allows humans to transcend boundaries of time, space and the body to form communicative relationships with others. In the past decade many CMC researchers have focused on studying this new social sphere. Cyberspace or the Internet studied as primarily a social space allows people to see on-line relationships in new and innovative ways. The rise of social network analysis research acknowledges that in modern society people are not wrapped in traditionally densely knit, tightly bound communities, but are floating in sparse, loosely bound, frequently changing networks. Community ties are seen as narrow, specialised relationships. Relations and emerging patterns become the focus of study. This understanding of community as social network has been readily applied to the study of on-line social relationships. As Wellman states,

When a computer network connects people it is a social network. Just as a computer network is a set of machines connected by a set of cables, a social network is a set of people (or organisation or other social networks) connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships. (Wellman 1997a: 179)

Studying computer-mediated communication as a social technology means recognising that these social networks are not simply 'virtual' but are also embedded in the real

world. On-line and off-line community cannot be neatly separated from each other. People's engagement in face-to-face communities is often linked to their participation in on-line communities. Katz and Rice's Synoptia Project found being an Internet user involved in on-line social interaction was positively associated with being a member of a community or religious organisation (Katz and Rice 2002: 155). Pew's study of religious use of the Internet too affirmed that most active religious surfers are also off-line participants in their faith (Larsen 2001). While the technology may force the communities, especially religious ones, to restructure their forms of interaction they often represent consciously imported off-line styles of interaction or interest on-line (Campbell 2001).

While religion is one area that has readily been imported on-line, trying to summarise and categorise cyber-spirituality can be challenging. Michael Bauwens identifies three conceptions of spiritual engagement on-line. He describes these as the 'Electric Gaia' where technology is seen 'as a necessary adjunct to make improvements in consciousness possible', 'The God Project' in which technology becomes a 'crude substitute for spiritual powers' or enables a search for a literal 'Machine-God, Deus Ex Machina' and 'Sacramental Cyberspace' in which the Internet is seen as a place to further the aims of various religions or even to serve as a tool for 'transmission of spiritual energy' (Bauwens 1996). Christopher Helland also provides two helpful classifications of how people use the Internet for spiritual purposes: religion on-line and on-line religion (Helland 2000: 214-20). Religion on-line occurs when religion transports traditional forms of communication of a one-to-many fashion into the on-line environment, such as through establishing a religious organisational website. On-line religion refers to how religion adapts itself to create new forms of communication through many-to-many networked interaction, such as on-line prayer or

worship services. Both Bauwens and Helland agree that on-line religion gives religious practitioners the ability to re-present their beliefs and practices on-line leading either to religious innovation or repackaging.

In the mid-1990s, a focused exploration of religious aspects of CMC began to emerge. Research that investigated the Internet as a spiritual space has taken many different approaches. These include looking at the general phenomenon of cyber-religion (Brasher 2001), religious ethics and VR (Houston 1998), how technology reconnects people with spiritual beliefs (Cobb 1998; and Wertheim 1999), adaptations of traditional religious practices on-line (Bunt 2000; and Zaleski 1997) and new religious expression (Davis 1998). A range of Christian critiques of the Internet has been produced from strong critiques (Brooke 1997) and enthusiastic advocacy (Dixon 1997; and Wilson 2000) to a critically friendly approach of addressing both the benefits and weaknesses of Internet technology (Schultze 2002). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, religious CMC research has begun to be considered as a serious field of inquiry. J. K. Hadden and D. E. Cowan's *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promise* (2000) was the first noteworthy academic attempt to survey and address different theoretical approaches to studying religion on-line. Focused investigations of issues such as identity, community and social consequences of religious use of the Internet are increasing and raising the profile of the religious use of the Internet for both practitioners and academic researchers (Campbell 2003). Other recent research such as Dawson and Cowan's *Religion Online* (2004) continues to probe the myriad religious rituals and expressions appearing on-line as well as the general phenomenon.

While information-gathering is a prime motivator for many using the net, this does not devalue the Internet's potential for facilitating other forms of interaction. Exploring the Internet as sacramental space demonstrates

how this technology offers both social and spiritual dimensions. In this respect, the Internet can be a place where social relations are cultivated, as well as spiritual encounters pursued or enhanced. Social network analysis offers a viable way of understanding relationships formed through on-line interaction. This approach presents an image of an underlying network of loosely bounded relationships which encourages fluid interactions. This dynamic structure translates well into a spiritual context, where encounters with meaning and transcendence are also seen as malleable and experiential. Social network analysis combined with a sacramental view of the Internet opens up new possibilities as the Internet is recognised as a social-spiritual network.

The Internet can be seen as both a humanly constructed, social space and a spiritual space capable of facilitating transcendent engagement. As a public sphere, the Internet is a gathering place for people and their stories. In the process of seeking connections with like minds, people can be drawn into communities of faith, spaces of religious interaction and even spiritual encounters on-line. Investigating the Internet as sacramental space argues that cyberspace can aid humanity's spiritual progression, described as an 'important way station' on humanity's journey towards a greater spiritual evolution (Cobb 1998: 97). While more study needs to be given to the implications and effects of on-line spirituality and socialisation within a networked society, this chapter has sought to outline current discussions concerning social and spiritual dimensions of the Internet. It also offers a framework for categorising and evaluating other forms of Internet use and engagement.

Notes

1. An ideological and historical analysis of the Internet is best summarised by Roy Rosenzweig, 'Wizards, Bureaucrats, Warriors and Hackers: Writing the History of the Internet', *American Historical Review*, 103(5) (December 1998), pp. 1530-52.
2. For an introduction to the concept of cyberspace, see William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Book, 1984). For discussion of science fiction and virtual reality and their intersection with the Internet, see Rushkoff (1994).
3. Metaphoric image taken from Benedikt (1992), p. 2.
4. Terminology attributed to Amy Bruckman's study 'Identity Workshop: Emergent social and psychological phenomena in text-based virtual reality' found at: <http://media.mit.edu/pub/MediaMOO/Chapters/identity-workshop/> (accessed June 1998).

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