

## THE PORTABILITY OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

“I love the feeling of being free and connected at the same time,” a young woman confided to me via email late one night. “I can go about my business online, but still have access to all the relationships I maintain in person—family, friends, business. I see no downside to being this connected to my ‘peoples.’”<sup>1</sup>

Although I have been researching online and mobile social connectedness for over ten years, people’s willingness to share their feelings about the social connections they make technologically still sometimes strikes me as surprising. They tend to relate very personal feelings and experiences, often without ever having met me, in emails, instant messages, text messages. But, of course, as someone who researches this phenomenon, I shouldn’t be surprised. My first book, *Connecting: How We Form Social Bonds and Communities in the Internet Age*, argues that it is both easy and common for us to form all kinds of social bonds and communities with people we have never met.<sup>2</sup> We each make hundreds of social connections with distant, even absent, others—connections that can be vivid, strong, reciprocal, and intimate.<sup>3</sup> In short, we form *real, consequential* social bonds with people we have never met face-to-face—and in this world of wireless computers and mobile devices we can do it nearly all the time, everywhere we go.

Since the publication of *Connecting*, people often tell me their stories of feeling bonded to distant, absent others—from faraway or dead family members to famous authors and historical (even fictional) figures, and, certainly, people on the other end of the radio, TV, telephone, or internet.<sup>4</sup> They often describe a strong sense of connection to these faraway others and punctuate their descriptions with comments like, “I’ve never told anybody about this” and “I thought I was the only one who felt this way!”—expressing a sense of relief, even catharsis, at the opportunity to talk of something usually kept private. But more often than not, after telling

me their stories, they pause, and add something to the effect of, “Don’t you think it’s sort of strange that I feel this way?”—which is really their way of saying, Are you sure I’m not just a little bit crazy?

Of course, they—*we*—are anything but crazy. Very little is stronger than our desire to form social bonds and groupings—a social culture—with one another. We routinely form connections with people from whom we are separated by space or even by time, and we will use almost any means at our disposal to do so. Print and electronic mass media, phones, computers, and all kinds of communication devices provide us with highly effective means of “getting to know one another,” even across great distances. At the same time, these technologies assist us in expressing ourselves, in extending and revealing ourselves to one another, and in creating our societies.

We appropriate technology to create vibrant and complex social worlds that are very much a part of our lives. Online and mobile technologies are used to share thoughts, ideas, photos, music, audio, video—anything that can be transmitted technologically—in increasingly creative, sociable ways. These technologies are “bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter,” says journalist Lev Grossman, who wrote the article in which *Time* magazine named the Person of the Year for 2006,

You . . . [who] made Facebook profiles and Second Life avatars and reviewed books at Amazon and recorded podcasts . . . blogged about our candidates losing and wrote songs about getting dumped . . . camcordered bombing runs and built open-source software . . . who actually sits down after a long day at work and says . . . I’m going to blog about my state of mind or the state of the nation or the *steak-frites* at the new bistro down the street . . .<sup>5</sup>

Online and mobile technologies are now truly pervasive, assisting us in creating and sharing and connecting with others in previously unimaginable ways. And even those of us who do not (yet?) keep blogs, create avatars, and record podcasts and the like (definitions follow later in the chapter) are probably more enmeshed in the participatory nature of online life than we think. To live in a modern technological society is to use the technologies at one’s disposal and with which one is comfortable (which may be as simple as using email, visiting websites, reading blogs, or using mobile phones) to express one’s self and to reach out to others. In the process, we form social connections and bonds and networks and communities that can have real resonance and importance for us. More frequently, more easily, more *portably* than ever before, we form undeniable, if often subtle and invisible, social connections with one another.

As wireless technology has become more widely available and affordable, social connectedness has become, literally, untethered. Mobile and “smart” phones and devices, handheld personal data assistants (PDAs), MP3 players, and even notebook and handheld computers are small and lightweight enough to take with us nearly everywhere. Now, technology can be carried with us—even *on* us—all the time. It can accompany us in the car, the bathroom, the classroom, even in bed if we so desire (and, apparently, many of us do).<sup>6</sup> This means we now have access to hundreds, even thousands, of other people, at any time—to a whole host of groups and communities that are almost constantly available to us, even as we ourselves are on the move. Social bonds and communities are now easily made mobile and can be built, sustained, and accessed from practically anywhere at any time, or, in a word that I think covers all this more precisely and evocatively, they have become *portable*. This shift in the development and use of these technologies inspired what was to become my next big project, the one you will read about in this book—the *portability of social connectedness*.

As a sociologist with a background in communication and psychology, there is little here I do not think is interesting or important. The dynamics in and around these social connections are rich and distinctive and paint a colorful picture of modern life. Cognitive connections, emotionality, intimacy, playfulness, and social networking all emerge—often simultaneously—when social connectedness is technologically mediated. Shifts and changes in our behaviors and norms occur now at breakneck speed. And along the way, we—our selves, our relationships, our societies—are all changed. These dynamics of life in a society teeming with technological connectedness will be examined here, both theoretically and empirically, along with literature from the fields of sociology, communication, psychology, media and cultural studies, computer and information science, and many others; additional analysis from a number of experts in these fields; and my own original research—in particular, the 87 in-depth, open-ended electronic interviews conducted specifically for this book and referenced throughout (see appendix 1 for a more detailed discussion of the methodology). Though my source materials come from numerous and diverse domains, all but three of my interviewees are American; I would consider this, therefore, a study that best describes contemporary American life, with potential application to all technological societies.

“I blog, text, IM, email, and I don’t like to ever be without my cell phone or have to shut it off—even in a theater,” the woman referenced at the beginning of this chapter told me (I’m calling her SocialNetworking1—see appendix 2 for her profile and for those of all the individuals I interviewed). “Let’s put it this way, my ‘connections’ are more important than whatever I’m doing that might force me to shut my cell phone off.” The dozens of people who shared their thoughts and experiences with me

will give shape and voice here to a timely set of issues—the construction, experience, and *meaning* of portable communities, to their members and to our societies.



Sociologists are experts in the study of life lived in social groupings. *Groups* are clusters or networks of individuals who share specific interests, ways of behaving, a common identity, and interpersonal interaction (among at least some members of the group).<sup>7</sup> They can be very small (even two or three people have been termed a group) or very large.<sup>8</sup> Whether this interaction takes place face-to-face or is mediated by some technology, something important, new, and almost indefinable happens when a group comes together: it develops an energy, a “charge,” all its own—one that transcends, somehow, the sum of its parts. Sociologist Emile Durkheim writes of how a clan is “able to awaken within its members the idea that outside of them there exist forces which dominate them and at the same time sustain them” such that “a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting . . . (an) effervescence.”<sup>9</sup> Groups “effervesce”—they have an “electricity,” a power, that is all their own.

A *community* is a set of people who share a special kind of identity and culture and regular, patterned social interaction.<sup>10</sup> Ever since sociological theorist Ferdinand Tönnies declared community to be an essential condition for the development of close, primary social bonds (*Gemeinschaft*, which has become an enduring synonym for the traditional, indeed premodern, kind of community), sociologists have not been able to agree on how, or whether, definitions of community should be updated.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars even suggest that we discontinue our use of the concept altogether.<sup>12</sup> But I find it indispensable in describing many of the groupings that my interviewees (among others) identified and that will be examined here.

The very word “community” conjures up an image that matches quite well what many describe as their experience in online and mobile groupings. “Community” evokes a sense of neighborhood and neighborliness, of warmth and support and belonging, of close personal ties, of *Gemeinschaft* bonding. This idea is partly a misnomer, of course: not even the prototypical small town is *always* supportive and neighborly; its citizens are never *all* closely and warmly bonded. But it is a vivid, persistent image nonetheless, and useful for these purposes, for in examining online and mobile life, the first thing we must do is to make the invisible visible.

And if the small town metaphor is partly a misnomer, it is also more than a little accurate. There is much about the way that we form social

ties and groups in the use of technology that is, for lack of a better word, communal. It is not quite the charmingly idealized small town, of course, but then, neither is that town itself—whether visited on foot or online. And yet technologically mediated communities are often much closer, more supportive, even more neighborly than might be supposed upon first glance. They generally consist of numerous criss-crossing *social networks*—sets of linked individuals whose patterns of connectedness form channels through which information, influence, emotional intensity, and sociability can flow (and even be measured and charted). Traveling these networks, members can derive *social capital*—resources and contacts that can enhance their status in society, sometimes dramatically. They can develop a *collective identity*, a specific, often strong, sense of themselves as a social unit. They can share a meaningful purpose and commitment. And within these social units, a wide range of social ties and linkages can be created. These can be primary or secondary in nature, local or extra-local, strong or weak (or something in between), and direct (that is, between people who actually contact one another) or indirect (between those who do not contact one another and whose knowledge of one another is only made possible via the mediation of some third party or technology).<sup>13</sup>

The use of such a visually accessible concept—the depiction of groupings of people connected by online and mobile technologies as actual *communities*, if technologically mediated and therefore potentially *portable*—gives us something we can all, mentally, “glance” at together, a common point of reference. Many find it an intuitively appropriate metaphor and use it casually to describe online and mobile life, as did nearly all of my interviewees:

I feel I am part of a tight-knit community that cares about one another. (MusicLover1)

IMing really feels like a community because everyone you know is online. (InstantMessaging4)

You can definitely feel the community on the board and how it changes. (WorkGroup5)

[My group] is an extremely tightly bonded community that simply cannot be found in normal daily life and that would do just about anything for each other—I sometimes describe my listserv as an electronic equivalent to the French Foreign Legion. (SupportGroup3)

Not a single one of my interview subjects questioned what I meant by “community”: they used it comfortably, spontaneously, and similarly.

*Portable communities*, then, are groupings that use small, wireless, easily transportable technologies of communication (*portable technologies*) to facilitate interpersonal connectedness and to make and share a collective identity and culture. The term has also been used to refer to groups of people who physically move from place to place, assembling and reassembling periodically (as might groups of migrant workers, or fans who follow their favorite musicians to various concerts or festivals, in the manner of Grateful Dead fans or bluegrass fans and musicians).<sup>14</sup> This usage provides another apt metaphor for the kind of technologically generated communities we will examine here. Even when communities physically relocate, their spatially separated members must use some form of technology, whether portable (mobile phones and the internet) or more primitive (flyers or landline phones), to coordinate their efforts. In the portable communities examined in this book, technologies are used to bring people into contact with one another, though this may or may not eventually result in a face-to-face gathering. For our purposes, then, *portable communities* will refer to groups whose members connect via online and mobile technologies, whether they meet face-to-face frequently, occasionally, or never.

As with all kinds of groups, portable communities can be very small (a family, a group of friends) or very large (Benedict Anderson describes even the nation, or an entire culture, as a community)<sup>15</sup>—or, of course, something in between. They comprise the whole spectrum of online and mobile connectedness. Two-person units (called *dyads*) can regularly and easily email, instant message (IM), text message (text), and talk to one another via portable device. Small groups can communicate in online chat rooms or mobile text chat, discussion or message boards, in email or IM or text “round robins” or “text circles.” They may connect on websites or *social networking sites* (websites specially constructed to help us connect through interactive profiles or pages we design and update—examples include MySpace and Facebook) and weblogs (most often now called *blogs*—online journals and/or sets of links that generally invite reader response and dialogue). Larger groupings of people can gather together on the most well-known blogs and websites including social networking sites, discussion boards and electronic mailing lists, and *wikis* (sites where content can be produced and changed by those who visit, like the online user-created encyclopedia Wikipedia). In these spaces, identities, sometimes represented by *avatars* and icons (depictions of a person that take the form of some kind of graphic) can be developed, and such media as photos, video, and audio (perhaps in the form of *vidcasts*, *vodcasts*, and *podcasts*—video or

audio files that can be downloaded to a portable device) can be shared.<sup>16</sup> Portable communities are created when people use these kinds of technologies in any or all of these ways, separately or in combination, to develop a shared identity and culture.

In this book I focus less on particular qualities of each of these technologies—less on the differences among portable technologies—and more on the ways in which they, collectively, bring people together, wherever those people may be. Technologies such as computers, mobile phones, and PDAs (many of which double as phones, and may be called computer phones, smart devices, handheld computers, or some term yet to be popularized at this writing) are considered here similarly, and for the most part equivalently, as facilitators of portable social connectedness. For they are increasingly used in combination and in tandem with one another, and are even becoming interchangeable, performing multiple overlapping functions. Web applications can be accessed via mobile phones and PDAs, phone calls can be made via computer, photos and video can be taken with portable devices and easily exchanged.<sup>17</sup> And someday we will be connected by newer, smaller, even more ingenious technologies, yet to be mass produced, yet even to be invented, but certain to spark our collective interest, as technologies that facilitate an easy and portable sense of community tend to do.

Differences in the ways that these technologies may facilitate connectedness, then, are for the most part not relevant to this study. This book focuses more on the *experience* and *effects* of social connectedness as it is mediated by portable technology, and less on the attributes of the technologies and applications per se that bring it about. Therefore, when I refer to online and mobile technology in this book, I refer in a general sense to *any* and *all* of the technologies that can help us gather together in portable community. I will sometimes shorten the modifier to simply *online*, which increasingly refers to the accessing of web-based applications that facilitate emailing, instant messaging, text messaging, web surfing, blogging, chatting, photo-sharing, or any of a number of similar activities, from anywhere, using any technology that will do the job. I will sometimes refer to particular technologies and applications, but will more often reference the portability of social connectedness as it is facilitated by these technologies in general.

Even when we do something as simple as sending an email or text message, or talking to friends or family on a mobile phone, we can be establishing and strengthening community. This is because portable technologies tend to inspire strong user involvement. Online and mobile sites, requiring plenty of writing and reading (and sometimes speaking and

moving about, as in internet radio shows, podcasts, vodcasts, and video sites like YouTube), enable and encourage interactive participation. As we access them, we can easily become involved: adding content, commenting, providing feedback or ratings, maybe even commenting on one another's comments. In the process, a network, a community, is formed. Sometimes such sites are built with the explicit objective of forming a network or community, as in an online class, an issue-oriented discussion board, or a support group. Sometimes the objective is more grand: to start a social movement, to influence a national debate, to set an agenda as to what is newsworthy. At other times, it is smaller, as when a social networking site or a blog is utilized to reach out to a very few others. But regardless of the scale and purpose of engaging in online and mobile behavior, when we use technology to interact and create a culture and a collective identity, online and mobile communities can spring up. Then, they can be linked to one another. It can be startling, in fact, how rapidly a sense of neighborhood and community can emerge, and how strongly people can feel about the experience of inhabiting these social spaces.<sup>18</sup>

Technologically mediated connections and communities are often referred to as *virtual*. When Howard Rheingold coined the term *virtual community* in his 1993 book of the same name, people hungry for an explanation of the then-new and rather mysterious phenomenon gobbled up his term *and* his thoughtful analysis.<sup>19</sup> Both have “stuck.” Over time, “virtual” has become an almost universal descriptor for online phenomena, with one less-than-optimal consequence: “virtual” implies that whatever it describes is almost, or not quite, or “not really” real. It implies that something about it is illusory, imaginary, “less than.”<sup>20</sup> Though subtle and often unintended, this is ultimately, I maintain, a damaging message. Online and mobile communities are absolutely and unequivocally real—as are many things (like radio airwaves, or love!) that can not be seen or touched. As I discuss further in chapter 2, the reality of something can not be measured by its physicality, but by the reality of its consequences (to paraphrase the famous sociological theorem of W. I. Thomas)—that is, the extent to which it has a real and genuine effect on something else.<sup>21</sup>

In my work, I favor the term *sociomental* over “virtual.”<sup>22</sup> Any social exchange or environment in which people derive a sense of togetherness by being mentally oriented toward and engaged with one another can be described as sociomental. Two or more people must be involved in the exchange, which makes it *social*, and some degree of technological mediation is required to facilitate the connection and give us the opportunity to know of one another, which is the *mental* aspect. By using this term, we sidestep the misleading connotations of “virtual” and also describe more



precisely the nature of a bond, community, or environment (in particular, those that are technologically mediated), placing the emphasis, appropriately, on the cognitive center or “core” of the relationship (for more on this idea as well, see chapter 2).

Sociomental connections and portable communities are sometimes (often, in fact) manifest in literal space. That is, they can be face-to-face as well as sociomental. There are *no* face-to-face communities (except the special, rare case of conjoined twins) in which all members are *continuously* in physical contact with one another. All communities, then, are sociomental at their “core.” To be sure, some of them are “physicalized”—with at least some of their members meeting in physical space—from time to time. Such communities may be considered face-to-face as well as sociomental. But some communities are *purely sociomental*. Their members will never meet in physical space (elsewhere, I have described them as *communities of the mind*).<sup>23</sup> A group of people that encounter one another at least in part via portable technology, then, may become a portable community, regardless of the specific technology they may use (mobile phone, computer, PDA), the mode of communication or specific application employed (whether it be one-to-one or one-to-many; whether it occurs via texting, emailing, photo-sharing, electronic mailing list, etc.), and whether or not the people involved sometimes gather together in literal space. Indeed, it may be more useful to think of communities (and relationships) in general as existing along a continuum, with the sociomental at one end and the physically copresent (or face-to-face) at the other, and to use the continuum to consider the “degree of physicality” that the community or relationship may possess.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, research indicates that the use of online and mobile technologies tends to prompt, rather than hinder, face-to-face meetings. We often IM and text message one another to make dates to get together, email or talk on mobile phones to keep long-distance relationships viable, and gather on social networking spaces to stay updated on one another’s doings. All of this makes impending face-to-face get-togethers more, rather than less, likely. More people use the internet to make new local connections, or to supplement existing connections between themselves and people they already know, than to engage in far-flung activities or global enterprise.<sup>25</sup> As sociologist Jeffrey Boase and his coauthors explain: “Contrary to fears that email would reduce other forms of contact, there is ‘media multiplexity’: the more contact by email the more phone and in-person contact. As a result, Americans are probably more in contact with members of their communities and social networks than before the advent of the Internet.”<sup>26</sup> My interview subjects bear this out:

With instant messaging I make plans to meet up with friends or decide what we will do that night, or catch up with friends and family that I may or may not talk with frequently . . . (InstantMessaging1)

With mobile connecting, you keep in touch with your friends and even if you are somewhere and you can't call them . . . the text message makes it easier to communicate with them. (MusicLover2)

I feel closer to my family and significant other due to constant mobile phone communication on a daily basis. I must speak to my bf at least 4-5 times a day and my kids usually once a day. I feel that due to this our relationships have stronger bonds, are deeper, and that we work out challenges quicker. The downside is I feel guilty when I turn the phone off . . . of course, this is very rare. (MobileUser1)

And then there is this funny (or sad, depending on your perspective) story:

My wife and I each have our own computers, since we've recently moved in together and used to live on our own. My computer is on the main floor and hers is in the basement. Both have internet access, so if we are each on our computers and I need to speak with her, I'll IM her rather than talk to her. It's mainly for two reasons: (1) I have a powerful computer . . . it's kind of loud, and (2) I don't feel like screaming. But even though I guess I have a legitimate reason for IM'ing my wife when she's just downstairs, I find it kind of pitiful. (TVFan1)

As we shall see, the ways in which we use these technologies are as varied and diverse and intriguing as we are.

And the social ramifications of the use of portable technology are, if possible, even more intriguing. New forms of social arrangement are taking root: love affairs between people who might never have given one another a second glance if they had first met offline; friendship circles in which members do not even know one another's race or gender; groups consisting of hundreds, even thousands of people who have never met but who regularly and reliably provide one another with information, goods, services, or heartfelt support. In what cofounder of *Wired* magazine Kevin Kelly calls an "electricity of participation," portable technology

unleashes involvement and interactivity at levels once thought unfashionable or impossible. It transforms reading into navigating and enlarges small actions into powerful forces . . . [It] nudges ordinary folks to invest huge hunks of energy and time into making free encyclopedias, creating public tutorials for changing a flat tire, or cataloging the votes in the Senate. . . . The deep enthusiasm for making things, for interacting more deeply than just choosing options, is the great force not reckoned ten years ago.<sup>27</sup>

Though the web has supported interpersonal interaction since its inception, it would have been difficult to predict the kinds of participatory activities in which people now routinely engage and the kinds of linkages that are now possible. We can now create more, and more kinds of, shared culture than ever before, and can do so with people we have never met and may never meet.

As these connections and communities become more plentiful in our lives, it becomes ever more important to probe their social dynamics and implications. With this in mind, this book looks at portable communities from several different angles. It explores the *internal dynamics* of the communities themselves—the nature of the interactions within the groupings and the experiences people report as a consequence. These dynamics are cognitive (chapter 2), emotional (chapter 3), playful (chapter 4), practical, convenient, and sociable (chapter 5). The book also spotlights some of the *external dynamics* in effect—the ways that portable communities resonate with and in the larger society. It considers the impact on us, as individuals and as a society, when we are constantly available to one another (chapter 6), learn to control or “harness” our social interactions (chapter 7), discover new modes of self-development and expression (chapter 8), and grapple with the social problems and inequalities that result (chapter 9). It also takes a peek into the future, at a social landscape increasingly shaped by portable technologies (chapter 9). In sum, we examine here the experience and meaning of portable communities: how we create and sustain and are affected by them, sometimes in ways that threaten and hurt us, and sometimes in ways that help and heal us.