Online among Us
Experiences of Virtuality in Everyday Life

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As argued by Joshua Meyrowitz, in his acclaimed book entitled *No sense of place*, media change the situational geographies of social life (Meyrowitz 1985). Meyrowitz claims that social roles and hierarchies are changing because the media provide options to transcend the boundaries of physical settings, thus making these boundaries more permeable. Meyrowitz's discussion (written before and anticipating the emergence of the Internet and mobile technology in people's everyday lives) points out relevant shifts such as the weakening of the relation between social situations and physical places and the blurring of the boundaries between public and private. This argument is illuminated in a discussion by David Morley (2000) on new media technology, namely the Internet, that connects private homes to public worlds and thus transgresses the boundaries of the private. The Internet has moved private activities such as television viewing, gardening, cooking, crafts and art work, which usually take place at home, into public discussion forums and various fan sites. This transformation has enabled people to meet and discuss across distances with others who share their passions, thus illustrating the deterritorialized nature of virtual space (Appadurai 1991, 192).

However, as Meyrowitz (1985, 308) ends up describing our world as relatively placeless, this argument is met with criticism: Instead of weakening the place, scholars such as Couldry (2003), Scannel (1996) and Moores (2004) point out the emergence of media spaces that overlay the physical locations of media users. Thus we should consider place as having been pluralized rather than lost. This does not mean, however, that space becomes less hierarchical or structured. The spatial dimensions of online forums also nurture different mechanisms of distinction, policing the boundaries of communities and people's everyday lives. While the media actively shape the experience of space, they also reorganize the social relations within a space (cf. Moores 2004; Andersson 2008).

Reshaping the Boundaries of Public and Private

What, then, are the implications of such pluralizing or doubling of the place? How does the online world shape our everyday life? What does it mean when we talk about the expansion of the local? I introduce two case studies related to Internet use. First, I

discuss my empirical research on online sex talk to highlight the ways in which virtual realities shape day-to-day lives and relationships (Nikunen 2007).

I have analysed discussions on the Finnish *Cosmopolitan* sex forum and three threads in particular ('Blow job', 'Boyfriend and Pornography' and 'Porn and Effect') consisting of a total of 313 messages selected in June 2006 and September 2009. The members of the forum are presumably young adults: information gathered from questionnaires and discussions indicates that most of them are between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five with sexual identities marked as female. The members present themselves as sexually active, and they are clearly interested in gathering more knowledge on the subject. Their relatively young age may also contribute to their eagerness to learn more, find out about new techniques and gain more experience. An online forum where you may ask almost anything about sex seems to serve such purposes well. Sharing intimate experiences with others and asking straightforward questions about sex are rarely possible in the context of everyday life, family and friends. The possibility and necessity of concealing personal data guarantee the popularity of the forum.

While one might be tempted to regard the words shared in the virtual world as proof of reality, they should be equally regarded as public performances that tell about the ways in which pornography is being discussed (rather than sex and sexuality per se). These discussions illuminate certain practices of everyday life through their rules of discourse and, in doing so, they also point to the cultural norms and definitions that shape the practices in question.

I highlight one particular discussion that concerned mixed feelings about pornography: When introduced as a problem, pornography usually has something to do with a boyfriend. Cosmo users repeatedly describe having caught their boyfriends viewing porn or finding porn on their computer. Members describe their anguish over the 'discovery' and ask for advice on what to do.

> *One of the problems is my boyfriend watching porn. He watches porn almost daily, on the Internet or on TV. I also know what kind of women he chooses from the selection of the porn sites. What makes things even more complicated, is that I resent the ways in which adult entertainment stereotypes and classifies women (horny stewardesses etc.) and how you can choose women from different nationalities, it's just disgusting. This is exactly what my boyfriend does and I just can't understand it.* Posted 24.2. 2006

Internet porn is felt to be a disturbing and uncomfortable essence that enters into and defines the relationship. Women have difficulties understanding the habit of watching porn and feel that categorizations of porn concern them as well. Unable to remove porn from their relationships, women accuse themselves of not having enough self-confidence to accept their partners' hobby.

> *I know exactly how you feel. I have suffered from low self-esteem and I still don't think of myself as attractive. I myself made the mistake of denying my husband porn. Or I didn't exactly deny him of it, I just told him how I felt about it and that I felt offended by it.*
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> *He promised to stop but every now and then I would find something I didn't want to find on the computer. And each time I would just freak out and I felt really 'not*

*enough' for him. By accident I noticed some time ago that there was some porn
again on the computer. Now I try to think that well he can watch it when I'm not
at home or if I'm not in the mood.* Posted 25.2. 2006

In practice, then, experiences of porn may be awkward and disturbing, yet the women
feel the need to accept it despite their discomfort. Some of the discomfort seems to be
caused by the knowledge – or assumption – that porn caters to male desires.

Another example illuminates the blurring lines of the virtual and material in every-
day life and the ways in which boundaries of intimacy are re-drawn. One of the more
recent discussions concerned virtual sex: whether or not it is cheating. Members defined
Internet sex (through webcam or chatting) as cheating. Some felt that domestic amateur
sites were also disturbing, because they came close to the spaces of everyday life.

*I would be offended if my baby would watch amateur videos made by Finnish
women, especially since they might include someone I know. For some reason I
accept American porn that's made for bigger audiences and watched by every-
body.* Posted 2.9.2009

The interactive aspect of virtual encounters is regarded as cheating, whereas merely
watching images or porn sites is something else. The scale of interactivity and nearness
defines the boundaries of the sexual act and whether it is considered 'real'. This illu-
minates the contextual nature of the Internet. It is a space that is organized according
to a complex array of nearness and distance, local and global structures that vary from
user to user.

Thus, Internet porn does not merely add spice to one's sex life (although it is in-
troduced as such), but it seems to influence and constitute understandings of sexual
practices, their limits and possibilities and, in doing so, contest the boundaries of and
power relations within relationships. At the same time, Internet communities, such as the
Cosmo forum, offer spaces for sharing experiences and constructing identities beyond
local boundaries.

Thus in the example above, online worlds are intertwined and that shape social
relationships on various levels. First of all, online pornography enters into the relation-
ship as a problem to be solved. This is the 'outside material' that enters from the public
sphere of the Internet into the private realm of the intimate relationship. However, after
encountering this problem, women turn to the semi-public realm of virtual communi-
ties to discuss their problems and to seek advice from others on how to deal with such
a situation. In this case, then, the boundaries of the local are once again exceeded and
opened for the virtual community.

Individualization of Public Sphere

The example above highlights profound shifts that shape the boundaries of the public
and the private. With the proliferation of various personal websites, the disclosure of
personal information in the public sphere is easier than ever before. This means that
individual voices in public are more accessible. These shifts call for a reconsideration
of the notion of the public sphere, as argued by Youngs (2009). Youngs maintains that
the concept of the public sphere has implicitly relied on territorially bounded ideas of
space and mirrored the ways in which societies are organized politically and economi-

cally along national and local lines. However, "the inherently anarchic and boundary crossing nature of new media necessitates expanded thinking about the public sphere (Youngs 2009: 129)."

This new individualistic turn of the public sphere (Youngs 2009) is identified also by Lasen and Gomez-Cruz (2009), who approach the question from the private side. Their study on Internet self-portraits reveals how practices and discourses associated with digital images challenge the modern view of sexuality and the body as the ultimate private domain. Thus it points to the transformations of the boundaries of the private and the concept of intimacy. They recognize the emergence of a shared intimacy that changes the relations between privacy and intimacy. Intimacy seems to move from the "passion for privacy" of the nineteenth century to the "empowering exhibitionism" of the Internet (Koskela 2009).

The notion of empowering exhibitionism refers to the political dimensions of sharing intimacy. Intimate stories and self-portraits distributed to global audiences challenge the idea of the power of watching. These performances then push against traditional understanding of the boundaries of public and private (Koskela 2009). While Lasen and Gomez-Cruz (2009) and Koskela (2009) discuss empowerment in the context of digital images and webcams, it can be recognized in the Cosmopolitan sex discussions as well. Sharing intimate details of one's sex life in order to acquire more knowledge or to solve problems in a relationship illuminates the empowering aspect of such practice. This connects with Michael Warner's discussion of the growing visibility of sexualities that may challenge the notion of normal or ideal sex as private, monogamous and heterosexual (2000: 177). At the same time, however, widely distributed mainstream Internet porn seems to work in the opposite direction. It narrowly defines sexual identities and shapes the understanding of sex in private relationships, causing anxiety rather than a sense of liberty. As Lasen and Gomez-Cruz (2009) point out, sharing intimacy is not boundary-free but defined and bounded by audience expectations and practices as well as technological formats and commercial interests. Mainstream Internet porn is an example of such commodification. Likewise, Cosmopolitan forum is very much defined by its framework of Cosmopolitan ideology (cf. Machin & Thornborrow 2003; Radner 1993) and the sense of taken-for-granted heterosexuality.

The case of the Cosmopolitan website illuminates the numerous ways in which new media engagements challenge the boundaries of public and private and enhance the individualization of the public sphere. I will now turn to another example that demonstrates the way online engagements challenge not only the boundaries of public and private but also the boundaries of local and global and how, in certain contexts, this has important political implications.

Crossing Distances

Being part of Internet communities is an increasingly prominent mode of creating and maintaining social relationships. As there has been concern over these virtual relationships especially with regard to young children and teenagers, it is important to point out that elements of familiarity and locality organize these connections perhaps even more than do elements of unfamiliarity, novelty and distance. To highlight this point, I introduce another case study concerning uses of transnational diasporic websites. This study

relates to my ongoing empirical research among migrant teenagers (Nikunen 2008).

The group of immigrant adolescents under study used the Internet in similar ways as their age group in general does. They chatted with each other everyday after school, thus strengthening existing local social relations. However, because the teenagers in this group had transnational backgrounds, their use of the Internet was also transnational in certain ways. Most of them connected with friends and family living in a different countries everyday through the Internet.

> We usually meet once a week on a certain date from seven to nine. There's six of us and we discuss things that have happened during the week. They are all in Turkey and I am the only one here. They can meet at a café but I can't. But they meet me on the net and we talk. We also call our grandparents in Turkey through the Internet because it's so much cheaper. (Female 16 years, Turkish background)

This use of the Internet illustrates the process of deterritorialization, namely the way in which specific territorial boundaries and identities are transcended (Appadurai 1996). Hanafi (2005), among others, points out the separation of social relations from local contexts of interaction in relation to the PALESTA network. According to Hanafi, in the era of globalization and the Internet, geography has not come to an end, rather it has been reshaped by the new media technologies.

It must be noted that the media spaces used by migrant teenagers do not necessarily represent their 'former homelands', instead they draw from the different cultures that form the new multicultural space. Media then offer possibilities to overcome national borders and engage with global and transnational media cultures, while also providing possibilities to maintain and strengthen relations with local, existing communities. These possibilities are important, because due to immigration, young people are often faced with the loss of cultural and social networks. This happens at the age when identity formation is intense and critical (cf. Ajrouch, 2004). As Hanafi aptly argues, new media may broaden the ontological question 'Who am I?' with a kind of topographical identity question: 'Where am I?'(2005: 597).

Many of the informants were part of diasporic or transnational Internet communities reflecting their backgrounds: Ethiopian diasporic groups, Islamic communities, Kurdish communities, etc. One of the informants, an 18-year-old Muslim girl with a Somalian background, uses the Internet daily to take part in various discussion forums to discuss issues surrounding Islam. Her favourite site is TurnToIslam.com, which includes focused discussions on Islam ('Islamic discussions'), general discussions on 'anything' (Turntoislam Lounge) as well as discussions on news and politics (News and Current affairs).

Although the informant in question was not the most active discussant on this website due to some language difficulties, she enjoys reading sophisticated arguments and debates. She took part enthusiastically in various international sites, but visited Finnish websites only occasionally, as the level and liveliness of discussion were not as high as on the international sites. To her, participating in and following discussions online was about intellectual challenge and argumentation. It was also about voicing her own opinion and standing up for her own religion. Moreover, the case suggested that instead of seeking a harmonious, unified community that draws on tradition, it was the contested space of conflicting and challenging ideas that articulated her position.

Living in a predominantly Lutheran Christian society, Islamic websites formed a space where she could debate religious issues and define her identity as a Muslim. The political climate after 9/11, and in the case of the Nordic countries after the Mohammed cartoon crisis, has been particularly tense, resulting in increased public debates over Islam (cf. Siapera 2006; Phillips, Eide & Kunelius 2007). As Peter Mandaville (2003) argues, the Internet provides spaces where Muslims, who find themselves marginalized in Western communities, may share experiences with other Muslims.

In Finland, the right-wing conservative party *Perussuomalaiset (True Finns)* gained unexpected support in the 2008 elections with its anti-immigrant agenda. Issues of immigration and Islam are tied together in Finnish public discussion. Thus on many websites concerning Islam, issues related to immigration policy also are raised.

The public discussion is heated at the moment, containing criticism towards multicultural politics, that there is too much or not enough of it. Racist attacks are not uncommon: one blog was closed because the identity of the woman writing it was disclosed and she did not wish to continue. The most aggressive discussions in Finland are going on in the realm of the Internet. Particular discussion forums are known for their anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim agenda. This illuminates the backlash of the individualization of the public sphere. While everyone may be able to voice his/her opinions, it is clear that all of these voices are not necessarily benevolent, rational or constructive. The individualistic turn of the public sphere, then, also challenges the ideal of the public sphere as rational and equal and points to theorizations of the public sphere as plural and polemic (cf. Fraser 1992; 2007).

However, at the same time the Internet offers the possibility to ignore such 'local' forums and to be engaged with those that are more supportive of one's own agenda. This option of virtual choice illuminates another trend, namely the fragmentation of the public sphere in relation to the individualization process.

Through such selective uses of the Internet, then, it is possible to exceed the limits of the local and in some cases exceed the sense of marginalization experienced in local situations. In a similar way, Hamid Naficy (1999: 4) argues that an Internet website can actually be an attractive method for becoming discursively emplaced. This idea of being emplaced is also discussed in terms of being virtually reterritorialized (Shohat, 1999: 227). The desire to find spaces of emplacement and the need to go beyond local sites and situations connect with the sense of non-belonging in everyday life. The experience of non-belonging may be manifold and drawn from institutional address as well as individual notions and everyday encounters. In this respect, the way people are being addressed and invited to be part of the public sphere in their new homelands becomes central. Such invitations are related to media representations of diasporic groups, participation in and access to public discussions and debates as well as a range of issues considered topical within the public sphere of the new homeland (Morley 2000: 118-127; Stevenson 2003: 44-47).

Conclusions

Growing engagements with the Internet in people's everyday lives point to the individualization of the public sphere. This individualization has various implications. First of all it challenges the boundaries of the public and the private and changes the situational

geographies of everyday life. In this process, the national public spheres are being stretched beyond the traditional "geospatial" (territorially bounded) configuration via the "sociospatial" (virtual space online) (Youngs 2009).

The blurring boundaries of the public and the private cause various challenges to relationships and identities, while also offering space to transcend the sometimes confining boundaries of the local and the national. So while individualization of the public sphere entails empowering dimensions, it also points to processes of alienation. However, these aspects are not created in the vacuum by the media, but in congruence with everyday life and its power struggles. In this respect, it might be useful to look at the connections between uses of the Internet and local situations and experiences. As pointed out in previous research, uses of the Internet should not be regarded as separate from the material and local situations, but rather as a continuance of them. The media reorganize social relations in various ways, creating hierarchies and boundaries but also helping to transcend the boundaries of the local. These power relations may be related to gender and sexuality, as in the first case study, or to ethnic identities and nationalities, as in the second case, and extend from the very micro-level of intimate relations to the macro-level of nation-making.

I have tried to point out that uses of the Internet are not distant from or foreign to, but profoundly connected and intertwined with, the everyday life, power relations and hierarchies of everyday lives. Thus, to understand the meanings and workings of online engagements, it is necessary to expand the research standpoint from 'the wonder of the Internet' towards more intermedial and intersocial perspectives and to examine the various connections and paths that cross in people's engagements on- and offline.

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