Introduction: What is "Internet Studies"?

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The project of saying what something *is* may helpfully begin by saying what it is *not*. In our case, "Internet studies" as used here is *not* primarily a study of the technologies constituting the ever-growing, ever-changing networks of computers (including mobile devices such as Internet-enabled mobile phones, netbooks, and other devices) linked together by a single TCP/IP protocol. Certainly, Internet studies in this sense is relevant – in part historically, as these technologies required two decades of development before they became so widely diffused as to justify and compel serious academic attention. That is, we can trace the origins of the Internet to the first efforts in 1973 by Vincent Cerf and Robert E. Kahn to develop the internetworking protocol that later evolved into TCP/IP (cf. Abbate, 2000, pp. 127–33). By contrast, we and our colleagues seek to study the distinctive sorts of human communication and interaction facilitated by the Internet. These begin to emerge on a large scale only in the late 1980s and early 1990s as within the US, ARPANET and its successor, NSFNET (an academic, research-oriented network sponsored by the United States National Science Foundation) opened up to proprietary networks such as *CompuServe* and others (Abbate, 2000, pp. 191–209). NSFNET simultaneously fostered connections with networks outside the US built up in the 1970s and 1980s: 250 such networks were connected to NSFNET by January 1990, "more than 20 percent of the total number of networks" – and then doubled (to more than 40 percent) by 1995 (Abbate, 2000, p. 210). Following close behind the resulting explosion of Internet access, as Barry Wellman details in our opening chapter, Internet studies may be traced to the early 1990s.

As Susan Herring reminds us, prior to this activity there were computers, networks, and networked communication – studied as computer-mediated communication (CMC), beginning in the late 1970s with Hiltz and Turoff's *The Network Nation* (1978: Herring, 2008, p. xxxv). Nonetheless, if we define Internet studies to include CMC as facilitated through the Internet, Internet studies is still barely two decades old. On the one hand, the rapid pace of technological development and the rapid global diffusion of these technologies (at the time of this writing, over 26 percent of the world's population have access to the Internet in one form or another [Internet World Stats, 2010]) would suggest that two decades is a

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very long time. On the other hand, scholars, researchers, and others interested in what happens as human beings (and, eventually, automated agents) learn how to communicate and interact with one another via the Internet are not simply faced with the challenge of pinpointing a rapidly changing and moving target. Our task is further complicated by complexities that almost always require approaches drawn from the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of many disciplines – a multi-disciplinarity or interdisciplinarity that is itself constantly in flux. Moreover, as the Internet grew beyond the US in the late 1990s,[1] it became clear that culturally variable dimensions, including communicative preferences and foundational norms, values, practices, and beliefs, further complicated pictures we might develop of the diverse interactions facilitated through the Internet (e.g., Ess, 2001, 2007; Ess & Sudweeks, 2005). Finally, while initial activity on the Internet was mostly text-based, we now navigate a sea of images, videos, games, sound, and graphics online, often all at once. Given these complexities, two decades to build a new academic field is not much time at all.

Nonetheless, when we began work on this volume in 2007, we were convinced that Internet studies had emerged as a relatively stable field of academic study – one constituted by an extensive body of research that defines and depends upon multiple methodologies and approaches that have demonstrated their usefulness in distilling the multiple interactions made possible via the Internet. These knowledges[2] appear in many now well-established journals (in many languages), including *New Media & Society* (established 1990), the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (1995), and *Information, Communication, & Society* (1998). Such activity is fostered by both individual scholars and researchers across the range of academic disciplines (humanities, social sciences, and computer science), as well as diverse centers and institutes around the globe.

The first purpose of our *Handbook*, then, is to provide both new students and seasoned scholars with an initial orientation to many (though not all) of the most significant foci and *topoi* that define and constitute this field. To begin with, our contributors were charged with providing a comprehensive overview of relevant scholarship in their specific domains, conjoined with their best understandings of important future directions for research. Each chapter thus stands as a snapshot of the state of scholarship and research within a specific domain. To be sure, no one would claim finality, in light of the constantly changing technologies in play. Nonetheless, each chapter provides one of the most authoritative and comprehensive accounts of a given aspect of Internet studies as can be asked for – and thereby our contributors demarcate and document in fine detail many of the most significant domains or subfields of Internet studies.

Internet Studies: Emerging Domains, Terrains, Commonalities

We originally organized our chapters into three parts. These constitute a general structure that offers an initial taxonomy and orientation. Part I collects historical

overviews of Internet studies, including web archiving, methodologies, and ethics, that serve as a primer for Internet studies *per se* and as the introduction to the following sections. The chapters constituting Part II examine eight distinctive domains: language, policy, democratization and political discourse, international development, health services, religion, indigenous peoples, and sexuality. Part III approaches "culture" in terms of online community, virtual worlds, the cultures of children and young people, games, social networking sites (SNSs), media most broadly, pornography, music, and the social life of teenagers online.

Moreover, we found that our contributors, independently of one another, contributed to a larger picture – one of shared insights and conceptual coherencies that add substantial structure and content to the map of Internet studies initially demarcated by these three parts.

One of the first commonalities to emerge is an interesting agreement between sociologist Barry Wellman and religion scholar Heidi Campbell. For Wellman, we are in the third age of Internet studies; Campbell similarly characterizes studies of religion and the Internet as now in their third wave. Wellman describes two distinct trends of this third age. First, Internet research is increasingly incorporated into "the mainstream conferences and journals" of given disciplines, so as to bring "the more developed theories, methods, and substantive lore of the disciplines into play" (this volume, chapter 1). Second is "the development of 'Internet studies' as a field in its own right, bringing together scholars from the social sciences, humanities, and computer sciences" (ibid.). For Wellman, a key focus of this third age is *community*, specifically as "community ties . . . [are] thriving, with online connectivity intertwined with offline relationships" (ibid.). In parallel, Campbell notes that the third wave of Internet research is marked by a shift towards "more collaborative, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary explorations of religion online," along with the development of increasingly sophisticated theoretical frameworks for examining online religious communities (this volume, chapter 11).

Where Are We Now – And Where Are We Going?

Our contributors highlight two further commonalities that articulate a significant current perspective of Internet studies, and point towards an important direction for research in Internet studies.

First, several contributors note that Internet studies are no longer constrained by certain dualisms prevailing in the 1990s – specifically, strong dichotomies presumed to hold between such *relata*[3] as the offline and the online in parallel with "the real" and "the virtual," and, most fundamentally from a philosophical perspective, between a material body and a radically distinct, disembodied mind. These dualisms appear in the highly influential science-fiction novel *Neuromancer* (Gibson, 1984). The resulting emphasis on opposition between these *relata* is at work in the central literatures of hypermedia and hypertext, much of the early (pre-1995) work on virtual communities, postmodernist celebrations of identity play and exploration in (early) MUDs and MOOs (most famously Turkle, 1995),

and influential punditry regarding "liberation in cyberspace" for disembodied minds radically freed from "meatspace" (e.g., Barlow, 1996). Of course, such dualisms were questioned as early as 1991 by Allucquére Roseanne Stone (1991) and more forcefully into the 1990s. In 1996, for example, Susan Herring demonstrated that, *contra* postmodernist dreams, our gender is hard to disguise online in even exclusively text-based CMC. By 1999, Katherine Hayles could characterize "the posthuman" as involving the clear rejection of such dualism in favor of notions of embodiment that rather emphasize the inextricable interconnections between body and self/identity (p. 288; cf. Ess, in press).

The shift away from such dualisms is consistently documented by our contributors, including Nancy Baym, whose early studies of fan communities highlighted important ways that offline identities and practices were interwoven with online interactions (1995; this volume, chapter 18). Similarly, Janne Bromseth and Jenny Sundén point to the work of Beth Kolko and Elizabeth Reid (1998), which highlights the importance of a coherent and reasonably accurate self-representation in online communities (cited in Bromseth and Sundén, this volume, chapter 13). In a volume appropriately titled *The Internet in Everyday Life*, by 2002, Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite could document how "networked individuals" seamlessly interweave their online and offline lives. That same year, Lori Kendall reiterated Herring's findings in her study of the BlueSky online community (2002; see Kendall, this volume, chapter 14).

Barring some important exceptions (e.g., venues dedicated explicitly to exploration of multiple and otherwise marginalized sexualities or identities, etc.), the earlier distinctions between the real and the virtual, the offline and the online no longer seem accurate or analytically useful. This means that the character of research is likewise changing. As Kendall observes, "In recent research on community and the Internet, the emphasis is shifting from ethnographic studies of virtual communities, to studies of people's blending of offline and online contacts" (this volume, chapter 14). More broadly, Klaus Bruhn Jensen makes the point that, *contra* 1990s' celebrations of the imminent death of the book, "Old media rarely die, and humans remain the reference point and prototype for technologically mediated communication" (this volume, chapter 3).

Second, several of our contributors point towards a shared set of issues emerging alongside this shift. As Maria Bakardjieva observes, Internet studies has long involved what she characterizes as "the critical stream of studies," defined by the central question: "Is the Internet helping users achieve higher degrees of emancipation and equity, build capacity, and take control over their lives as individuals and citizens?" (this volume, chapter 4). While some of our contributors can provide positive examples and responses to this question (e.g., Lorna Heaton and Laurel Dyson), all caution us not to fall (back) into the cyber-utopianism characteristic of the previous decade. So, Deborah Wheeler summarizes her review of Internet-based development projects this way: "some development challenges are too big for the Internet. When people need food, safe drinking-water, medicine, and shelter, Internet connectivity does little to provide for these basic necessities" (this volume, chapter 9).

Others raise similar concerns. Janne Bromseth and Jenny Sundén note that the restoration of the embodied person – in contrast with an ostensibly disembodied mind divorced from an embodied person and identity – means that such a user "brings to the table of his/her interactions the whole world of interrelations that body means with larger communities, environments, their histories, cultures, traditions, practices, beliefs, etc." (this volume, chapter 13). But this implicates in turn central matters of gender, sexuality, and *power*: "Online communities are embedded in larger sociopolitical structures and cultural hegemonies, with a growing amount of empirical research slowly dissolving the image of a power-free and democratic Internet" (ibid.). Bromseth and Sundén refer to the work of Leslie Regan Shade (2004) who called attention to the commercial roots and foci of these powers: "*online communities are today deeply embedded in a commercialized Internet culture, creating specific frames for how community, gender, and – we will add – sexuality are constructed on the Internet* (ibid.; our emphasis, MC, CE).

This commercialized culture, Marika Lüders points out, has long been recognized as problematic: "online content and service providers have developed a commercial logic where they offer their material for free in return for users giving away personal information (Shapiro, 1999)" (Lüders, this volume, chapter 22). But especially for young people in the now seemingly ubiquitous and ever-growing SNSs such as Facebook, as Sonia Livingstone explains, their emerging and/or shifting identities are increasingly shaped by a culture of consumerism built around sites offering targeted advertising and marketing. In these venues,

> the development of "taste" and lifestyle is shaped significantly by powerful commercial interests in the fashion and music industries online as offline. [. . .] the user is encouraged to define their identity through consumer preferences (music, movies, fandom). Indeed, the user is themselves commodified insofar as a social networking profile in particular can be neatly managed, exchanged, or organized in various ways by others precisely because it is fixed, formatted, and context-free. (Livingstone, this volume, chapter 16)

But finally, these concerns are compelling not only for those seeking to explore alternative understandings and sensibilities regarding gender and sexuality, nor simply for young people. Rather, SNSs increasingly attract the participation and engagement of ever-more diverse demographics – leading to Nancy Baym's eloquent appeal for further research and critical analysis:

> *What are the practical and ethical implications of the move from socializing in not-for-profit spaces to proprietary profit-driven environments?* [. . .] *As SNSs become practical necessities for many in sustaining their social lives, we become increasingly beholden to corporate entities whose primary responsibility is to their shareholders, not their users.* Their incentive is not to help us foster meaningful and rewarding personal connections, but to deliver eyeballs to advertisers and influence purchasing decisions. [. . .] *Questions are also raised about the lines between just reward for the content users provide and exploitation of users through free labor.* (Baym, this volume, chapter 18; our emphasis, MC, CE)

No one is arguing that we are witnessing an inevitable slide into an inescapable, *Matrix*-like reality driven by greed and little regard for human beings as anything other than commodified cogs in a consumer machine. Echoing Stromer-Galley and Wichowski's cautious optimism (chapter 8) regarding deliberative democracy online, Baym continues here:

> At the same time, users are not without influence. When Facebook implemented their Beacon system tracking user purchases and other activities across the Internet and announcing them to their friends, a user backlash forced them to change their plans. The power struggles between owners/staffs and users are complex and thus far all but ignored in scholarship. (Ibid.)

Certainly, one way to foster the critical attention and research Baym calls for here is to endorse the call made by Bromseth and Sundén, who point out that "During the mid-1990s, the Internet was central for theoretical debates in feminist theory. Today, Internet studies needs to reconnect with central debates concerning the relationship between gender and sexuality, as well as between feminist and queer theory" (this volume, chapter 13). Joining these two large commonalities together: as the Internet and its multitude of communication and interaction possibilities continue to expand and interweave with our everyday lives, these concerns promise to become all the more extensive – and thereby, critical research and reflection on their impacts and meanings for our lives, not simply as users and consumers, but as human beings and citizens, become all the more important to pursue.

Postlude

As editors, we have been privileged to discover how the individual chapters constituting this *Handbook* only become richer and more fruitful with each return visit. In addition, as we hope these examples of larger commonalities make clear, careful and repeated reading in this *Handbook* will unveil still other important insights and conceptual coherencies across diverse chapters – thereby further articulating and demarcating the maps and guides to Internet studies offered here.

Notes

1 As late as 1998, ca. 84% of all users of the Internet were located in North America (GVU, 1998). As of this writing, North American users constitute 14.4% of users worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2010).

2 "Knowledges," a literal translation of the German *Erkenntnisse*, is used to denote the plurality of ways of knowing and shaping knowledge defining both the diverse academic disciplines represented in this volume, along with non-academic modalities of knowing that are legitimate and significant in their own right. Cf. van der Velden, 2010.

3 "*Relata*" is the plural Latin term referring to the two (or more) components that stand in some form of relationship with one another, whether oppositional, complementary, analogical, etc. It thus serves as a shorthand term to refer to virtual/real, online/offline, mind/body, and other *relata* without having to repeatedly name each of these.

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