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Abstract
As the numbers of internet users worldwide continue to grow, the internet is becoming ‘more local’. This article addresses the epistemological challenge posed by this global process of internet localization by examining some of the conceptual tools at the disposal of internet researchers. It argues that progress has been hampered by an overdependence on the problematic notions of community and network whose paradigmatic status has yet to be questioned by internet scholars. The article seeks to broaden the conceptual space of internet localization studies through a ground-up conceptualization exercise that draws inspiration from the field theories of both Pierre Bourdieu and the Manchester School of Anthropology, and is based on recent fieldwork in suburban Malaysia. This exploration demonstrates that a more nuanced understanding of the plural forms that residential sociality can take is needed in order to move beyond existing binaries such as ‘network sociality’ versus ‘community sociality’.

Key words
banal activism • community • field theory • internet localization • Malaysia • network • residential sociality • suburbia

INTRODUCTION
Until the mid-1990s the number of internet users worldwide was small and most users could not help but communicate with others at great
distances. However, as numbers continue to grow, the internet is gradually becoming ‘more local’ (Davies and Crabtree, 2004). This global process of internet localization poses a set of logistic, methodological and conceptual challenges to researchers. Logistically, it demands that they spend sufficient time in a local setting in order to get to know, both online and offline, those who live, work and/or play there. Methodologically, it renders the very distinction of online versus offline social domains even more problematic than it has been hitherto (Hine, 2000), more so as internet and mobile technologies continue to converge. Conceptually, the challenge is how to keep track of the fast pace of technological change while avoiding the default position whereby a seemingly stationary ‘local community’ (or local college, local council, etc.) is assumed to be impacted upon by ‘global’ technologies.

This article concentrates on the third challenge. How can we conceptualize the relationship between technological and social change at the local level? More specifically, what conceptual tools do we have at our disposal to study the emergence of new internet-related forms of local sociality? To address these questions, first this article reviews the existing literature on internet localization, suggesting that the progress of this research area has been hampered by an overdependence on two key notions: community and network. Both notions have had uneven careers as social scientific terms, careers that are yet to be critically debated in the internet literature, and which are outlined below. However, more important than their strengths and limitations is the unrivalled paradigmatic status that these paired notions currently enjoy among scholars of internet localization. This article suggests the need to think beyond the community/network paradigm by broadening our analytical lexicon to do some justice to the plethora of forms of sociality that anthropologists and sociologists have identified down the decades.

This article carries out this conceptual broadening through ethnographic examples from recent fieldwork in suburban Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It explores the potential uses of concepts that lie outside the community/network paradigm (e.g. field, arena, forum) by means of a fine-grained analysis of emergent forms of residential sociality, arguing that this kind of ground-up conceptualization reveals the inadequacies of overly general notions such as ‘community sociality’ or ‘network sociality’ (Wittel, 2001). It closes with a discussion of the wider theoretical implications of this investigation for the study of internet localization and with suggestions for further research.

THE COMMUNITY NETWORK PARADIGM
Two approaches to the study of internet localization stand out in the existing literature, both hinging on the notions of community and network. First, there is the ‘community informatics’ approach, in which researchers study a ‘local community’ and assess its specific technological needs.¹
Researchers of this persuasion regard local communities as ‘the bedrock of human development’ (Gurstein, 2004). To withstand the onslaught of capitalism and become empowered, they suggest, local communities must take control of the very networked technologies that threaten their survival (Gurstein et al., 2003).

Second, there is the ‘networked individualism’ approach led by the Toronto network analyst Barry Wellman. Wellman has denounced the smuggling of obsolete notions of community from an earlier period of North-American community studies into internet localization studies. Where the old communities had ‘streets and alleys’, internet researchers are now imagining communities bound ‘by bits and bytes’ (Hampton and Wellman, 2003). For Wellman, this is an analytical cul-de-sac, for the crucible of North-American sociality has long ceased to be the local neighbourhood (Wellman and Leighton, 1979). However, as Wellman insists, this does not mean that communities have disappeared; rather, they have survived in the form of geographically dispersed personal communities, i.e. personal networks (Pahl, 2005). The internet merely reinforces a global trend towards networked individualism that was already well underway (Castells, 2001; Wellman et al., 2003).

Despite their differences, both perspectives on internet localization share a heavy reliance on the inseparable notions of community and network. Although ever popular among internet scholars, policymakers and activists, both terms have had troubled careers as theoretical concepts. These conceptual difficulties, it is suggested, demand closer attention if we intend to further our understanding of how the internet is becoming ‘more local’. Here these will be merely sketched out, beginning with the notion of community.

The anthropologist Vered Amit (2002) has reviewed ‘the trouble with community’ as a theoretical concept. Amit argues that the term’s strong emotional resonance makes it an ideal choice in public rhetoric, even though its empirical referent is seldom specified or, indeed, specifiable. Amit cautions that expressions of community always ‘require sceptical investigation rather than providing a ready-made social unit upon which to hang analysis’ (2002: 14). Relying on emotionally-charged, bounded notions such as community (or diaspora, nation, ethnic group, etc.) is unwise, she adds, for there are numerous sets of social relations that cannot be brought under these banners. Such sets include neighbours, co-workers and leisure partners – people who nevertheless may share ‘a sense of contextual fellowship’ that can be ‘partial, ephemeral, specific to and dependent on particular contexts and activities’ (Rapport and Amit, 2002: 5). Countering the often heard idea that community remains a valid term because it is a notion dear to millions of people around the world, Amit urges us not to conflate cultural categories with actual social groups.
This point has strong implications for the study of internet activism and other forms of social mobilization, since ‘the assignation of membership in a particular cultural category does not tell us, in itself, which categories will actually be drawn on for the mobilization of social relations’ (Amit, 2002: 18). For example, members of a local organizing committee may assure a researcher that all revellers at a street party are one ‘community’. It does not follow that the same set of people will mobilize against the building of an airport in their vicinity. In sum, community merits attention as a polymorphous folk notion widely used both online and offline, but as an analytical concept with an identifiable empirical referent it is of little use. As one internet researcher aptly put it during a recent discussion on the ontological status of community: ‘Fears of goblins do not goblins make’ (Godard, 2006).

Turning now to ‘network’, in the 1950s and 1960s this notion appeared to offer anthropologists a way out of the entrapments of structural functionalism (Sanjek, 1996). By following individuals across social fields they hoped to be able to capture the open-ended nature of social life, particularly in the urban settings where numerous anthropologists were now finding themselves (Amit, 2007; Mitchell, 1969). However, they came to an impasse as they pursued ever more systematic ‘morphological calculations’ within increasingly small units of analysis (Amit, 2007). Consequently, social network analysis was all but abandoned by social anthropologists by the 1970s (Sanjek, 1996).

Interestingly it was precisely in the 1970s, as computers became more widely available, that social network analysis became popular with other social scientists (Freeman, 2007). One milestone was Granovetter’s (1973) ‘strength of weak ties’ thesis, in which he showed that jobseekers in Boston found their ‘weak’ connections (e.g. with friends of friends) to be more useful in the job market than the ‘strong’ bonds of close friendship and kinship. This work helped to popularize social network analysis among North-American sociologists and economists (Knox et al., 2006). Today, social network analysis is used in a vast range of research areas, including mental illness, the spread of diseases and information, the sociology of organizations and internet studies (Freeman, 2007).

In recent years we have seen renewed anthropological interest in social networks, but anthropologists are still wary of this concept. Thus, in a recent review article, Knox et al. (2006) warn about the lack of critical reflection on key social network analysis notions such as ‘whole network’. While whole populations are extremely difficult to research, drawing an arbitrary boundary around the network to be investigated in order to overcome this problem (e.g. by limiting the study to children in a few school classes) contradicts the fundamental idea of networks being unbounded and cutting across enduring groupings and organizations. In a similar vein, Amit (2007)
urges us to reclaim the original promise of network as a notion that offers researchers the freedom to explore interpersonal links without any prior assumptions about what kinds of links or collectivities are more worthy of study (Hannerz, 1980).

However, this article is concerned here not with the limitations or potentialities of community and network as theoretical concepts, rather with their unchallenged dominance in the local internet studies literature. This paradigmatic dominance blinkers our view of the ongoing adoption of internet technologies by local authorities, companies and residents around the globe. It argues that one effective way to loosen the hold of community and network is to broaden our sociality lexicon. In the sections that follow, such broadening is carried out in two directions. First, by introducing a set of field theoretical notions such as ‘social field’, ‘social drama’, ‘field law’ and ‘arena’; and second, by conceiving of sociality as being inherently plural and context-dependent (Amit and Rapport, 2002; Jean-Klein, 2003), rather than in the overly general terms that we find in the existing new media literature, e.g. ‘community sociality’ versus ‘network sociality’ (Wittel, 2001, see below).

FIELD, NETWORK AND INTERACTION

One available exit from the community/network bottleneck is the Habermasian concept of ‘public sphere’. Holub defines the public sphere as:

An arena, independent of government [and market] … which is dedicated to rational debate and which is both accessible to entry and open to inspection by the citizenry. It is here … that public opinion is formed. (Holub, in Webster, 1995: 101–2)

Despite Habermas’ insistence that the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) was a phase in European history, not a universal phenomenon, most new media scholars have used it as a normative, democratic ideal that all modern societies should aspire towards (Benson, 2007; Chadwick, 2006). Thus, Dahlberg (2001) has evaluated the citizen-led initiative Minnesota e-Democracy, built around an email list forum, against five predefined public sphere criteria: autonomy from state and market, reciprocal critique, reflexivity, sincerity and discursive inclusion. The problem with Dahlberg’s strategy is that it prescribes what counts as a domain worthy of investigation. As with community, public sphere is used both as a ‘rhetorical token’ (Benson, 2007: 3) and a normative notion that guides research away from what is and towards what ought to be. A further difficulty with this concept is that its advocates, starting with Habermas (1989), have failed to explore how public spheres are internally differentiated (Peters, 2002, following Benson, 2007).
[W]hatever its qualities, any public sphere is necessarily a socially organised field, with characteristic lines of division, relationships of force, and other constitutive features. (Calhoun, 1992, quoted in Benson, 2007: 4)

In view of these difficulties with public sphere, this article wishes to propose instead the concept of ‘social field’ as one possible way of overcoming the community/network impasse. Put simply, a social field is a domain of practice in which social agents compete and cooperate over the same public rewards and prizes (Martin, 2003). One advantage of ‘field’ is that it is a neutral, technical term lacking the normative idealism of both public sphere and community. Field theorists have developed a sophisticated vocabulary that is being recruited increasingly to the study of media (Benson, 2007; Benson and Neveu, 2005; Couldry, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Peterson, 2003). More pertinent to the case at hand, field theory offers us a framework with which to analyse the internet-mediated relations between local authorities and residents by treating these two parties not as discrete entities, but relationally, as two sectors of a porous, conflict-prone ‘field of residential affairs’ (see Epstein, 1958; Venkatesh, 2003).

Today we associate field theory with Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 1996), yet this theory has a far longer history originating in physics and Gestalt psychology (Martin, 2003). Bourdieu was critical of social network analysis for what he regarded as its naive commitment to interaction as the basis of human life, developing his field theory in opposition to social network analysis. He argued that by concentrating on people’s visible interactions and ties, social network analysis practitioners fail to grasp the invisible network of objective relations binding human agents within a common cultural space (e.g. France) and its fields of practice (art, sociology, photography, etc.). For Bourdieu, social network analysis conflates structure with interaction, exaggerating the importance of ‘social capital’, i.e. the capital that accrues from social connections, while neglecting other species of capital such as cultural and symbolic capital (Knox et al., 2006). For example, two Parisian artists who have never met may possess similar amounts of symbolic capital (prestige, renown, etc.) and occupy neighbouring positions within the field of art. In Bourdieu’s field theory, it is the agents’ relative positions and amounts of field-specific capital that matter, not with whom they interact.

Although this article draws partly on Bourdieu’s field lexicon, it finds his dismissal of interaction unhelpful on two accounts. First, it is hard to envisage how one could study the internet without considering its interactivity, e.g. the ease with which mailing list users can reply to posts (on media and interaction, see Thompson, 1995). Second, Bourdieu’s opposition to the interactionism of social network analysis conceals the fact that within the social network analysis tradition there has always existed a tension between its interactionist (or connectionist) and its structural (or field) strands. While
network analysts who adopt a contact approach indeed do map interactions and ties onto ‘sociograms’ (e.g. de Nooy, 2003), field-oriented social network analysis practitioners are more interested in ‘structural relations usually opaque to actors’ (Knox et al., 2006: 117).

In fact, a number of scholars have managed to graft successfully the notion of interaction onto their field analyses. Wouter de Nooy (2003: 323) has shown how the interactions of literary critics and female authors in the 1970s helped to establish and naturalize the category of ‘feminist literature’ within the Dutch literary field. For this theorist, a field of practice is shaped by objective power relations ‘insofar as they influence the interaction within the field’ (de Nooy, 2003: 323). Similarly, Victor Turner’s (1974) reconstruction of a failed uprising in colonial Mexico, the Hidalgo Insurrection, tracks the interactions that took place in a series of ‘arenas’ over a period of six months. Turner understands the Insurrection to have been a ‘social drama’ unfolding across a rapidly shifting political field made up of the people, institutions and other resources mobilized to assist or thwart the rebellion (cf. Zald and McCarthy, 1988).

SUBURBAN FRONTIERS
Victor Turner was a leading exponent of the Manchester School of Anthropology whose members were keenly interested in social change, particularly in the urbanizing regions of Central and Southern Africa during decolonization (Evens and Handelman, 2006). The situation there was curiously analogous to that faced today by suburbanites in many parts of the world. As with rural migrants in the booming urban areas of post-war Africa (Epstein, 1958), many present-day suburbanites find themselves in densely populated settlements with inadequate social and public facilities. The result is the mushrooming of ad hoc initiatives seeking to resolve the more pressing problems.

Newly-built suburbs are ideal settings in which to rethink our current dependency on community and network as the paradigmatic sociality notions in the study of internet localization. These are frontiers where newly-arrived people, technologies and ideas shape one another in unforeseeable ways. Over time new forms of residential sociality arise out of this flux as residents, private companies, local authorities and other human agents strive to ‘produce locality’ (Appadurai, 1996). In such unsettled conditions, any attempt at positing an existing ‘local community’ as impacted upon by a globalizing ‘network logic’ is doomed. New suburbs are particularly well suited to the study of emerging forms of residential sociality linked to ‘banal activism’ – the activism of seemingly mundane issues such as traffic congestion, waste disposal and petty crime. Banal activism has been neglected by internet scholars, particularly in East and South-East Asia, where attention has centred on the
‘serious’ cyberactivism of the intelligentsia and the actual and potential uses of new digital technologies for political reform at the national level (e.g. Abbott, 2001, 2004; Gan et al., 2004; George, 2003; Hachigian, 2002; Hill and Sen, 2000; Holmes and Grieco, 2001; Loo, 2003; Nain, 2004; Rafael, 2003; Uimonen, 2003).

To date, the two main suburban internet studies to discuss residential sociality and banal activism provide useful entry points but are marred by their adherence to the community/network paradigm. The better-known study was conducted by Keith Hampton in the Toronto suburb of ‘Netville’ (a pseudonym) in 1997–9. Hampton combined survey research with participant observation in this new ‘wired-up’ locality to study the impact of the internet on ‘local community’ (Hampton and Wellman, 2003). He found that the internet helped Netville’s settlers to make new friends and acquaintances both in their own immediate neighbourhoods and across the suburb, as well as being able to maintain older ties with geographically-dispersed friends and relatives. Residents with the most online contacts also tended to have the most offline contacts in the suburb. In accordance with Granovetter’s ‘strength of weak ties’ dictum, local residents drew on their new contacts to make further contacts for information, socializing, mutual aid, etc., in the process increasing their local social capital. The web of social ties thus created also had important political implications, for it allowed residents to mobilize effectively when the developers attempted to withdraw the very technologies that had facilitated the collective production of sociality (Hampton, 2003; Hampton and Wellman, 2003).

A more recent study was conducted by Yael Levanon in the Tel Aviv suburbs of Ramat Beit-Shemesh and Modiin: the former settled by orthodox Jews, the latter by both religious and secular families. Levanon’s starting point was, like Hampton’s, the North-American literature on the reported decline in community social capital (Putnam, 1995; see also Putnam, 2000). Her aim was to study ‘community networking’ and its effect on local ties. On the basis of a questionnaire delivered to users of two local mailing lists, Mesch and Levanon (2003) argue that the internet allowed residents to find like-minded others across their suburb with whom to exchange information, socialize and cooperate — a finding echoing the Netville study. Another similarity was the use of the internet for banal activism: in the Israeli case, to oppose the building of a new shopping mall that would open on Saturdays and offer non-kosher food. Yet in contrast to their North-American counterparts, the Tel Aviv settlers had little need for the internet at the immediate neighbourhood level, for in Israel the neighbourhood remains a fulcrum of sociality.

These two studies further our understanding of internet localization in suburban settings in a number of ways. First, they point at cross-cultural similarities as well as contrasts in the internet-shaped making of suburban
socialities. In both countries, suburban families with young children and dual-career parents are driven by the imperative to find and maintain a social environment conducive to family-building and class reproduction (see Miller, 1995); an imperative that shapes their use of internet technologies. However, the specific ‘banal’ issues that matter to residents can vary greatly from one locale to another, even within the same country. For example, plans to build a non-kosher restaurant were resisted by orthodox, not secular, Jews in suburban Tel Aviv. Second, the two studies demonstrate the continued usefulness of Granovetter’s theory of weak ties in contexts other than Boston’s 1970s job market (see also Amit, 2007; Haythornthwaite, 1998), enabling their authors to correct the overemphasis on strong, affective ties found in the community informatics literature (Hampton, 2003). Third, these studies shed light on the critical importance of two specific ‘internet affordances’ (Wellman et al., 2003), namely its interactivity and asynchronicity, to suburban residents who are able to engage with local issues despite their work and childcare commitments.

However, these studies are not without their shortcomings. First, they are both examples of the connectionist strand of social network analysis discussed earlier. This weakens their explanatory power when it comes to structural or ‘field’ questions. Murali Venkatesh (2003: 344) has broached such field-related questions with reference to Hampton’s Netville research and suggested, following Melucci (1996), that collective action is always tethered to relational structures (or fields) that constrain action, although ‘breakthrough social agency is always possible’. However, this relational line of inquiry is not pursued in Hampton’s own work. Furthermore, both studies are caught up in the community/network semantic tangle, for example, by making contradictory use of the term ‘community’. Thus, in Mesch and Levanon’s (2003) analysis, community is used in places to refer to a pre-existing, unspecified collectivity (‘the local community’), and in others to the future outcome of an ongoing effort (‘community-building’), yet still in others to the suburb in its entirety (‘the extended community’) as opposed to the neighbourhood. As was argued earlier, community is a vague notion favoured in public rhetoric, not a sharp analytical tool with an identifiable empirical object. Amit puts it well:

Invocations of community … do not present analysts with clear-cut groupings so much as signal fields of complex processes through which sociality is sought, rejected, argued over, realized, interpreted, exploited or enforced. (2002: 14; emphasis added)

This article turns now to an examination of such a ‘field of complex processes’ and its internet-related socialities by drawing on ethnographic research in suburban Malaysia.
A FIELD OF RESIDENTIAL AFFAIRS

Subang Jaya and its twin township, USJ, form a largely middle-income suburb of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In 1998 the Subang Jaya municipality as a whole had an official population of 480,000, consisting of some 60 percent Chinese, 25 percent Malays and 15 percent Indians and ‘Others’ – predominantly immigrant workers from poorer Asian countries. The local Creole is Malaysian English (see Nair-Venugopal, 2001).

Anthropological fieldwork in Subang Jaya (mostly in USJ) was conducted for 12 months in 2003 to 2004, followed by intermittent online research since the present author’s return to Britain. The aim was to study whether the internet was making any significant difference to the governance of this multiethnic locality. Subang Jaya-USJ is renowned in Malaysian information and communication technology (ICT) policy circles for its rich diversity of ‘e-community’ initiatives, ranging from a federally-funded ‘smart township’ project to a municipal ‘cybermosque’ and multimedia libraries to a self-funded residents’ web forum, among numerous other projects. It was this vibrant internet scene that attracted this author to the locality.

Following the same suburban imperative that drove the Tel Aviv and Toronto suburban settlers described in the previous section, most Subang Jaya residents arrived in the 1990s in search of a green, safe environment to raise their young families while pursuing careers in the private sector. The omens were auspicious for the award-winning township dotted with small neighbourhood parks (padang). Yet as the decade drew to a close, familiar urban problems that incomers thought they had left behind began to surface, including traffic congestion, petty crime, degraded civic amenities and a shortage of Chinese schools. As a result of growing discontent, a manner of banal activism emerged around these issues in the late 1990s, one in which the internet played an important part.

It would be entirely possible to discuss Subang Jaya’s residential activism in its own right, as its own ‘field of striving’ (Martin, 2003), but it is perhaps more productive to cast the net wider so as to encompass the local authorities and their grass roots initiatives (see Epstein, 1958). This is because the activities of local residents, politicians and municipal staff are inextricably entwined. To this end, this article will examine Subang Jaya’s ‘field of residential affairs’: that is, the field of organized striving in which residents, politicians, municipal staff, journalists and other social agents compete and cooperate over matters of concern to local residents, often by means of the internet. In addition to bringing under one analytical umbrella both residents and local authorities, the coined phrase ‘residential affairs’ has the virtue of avoiding the sort of tacit normative commitment to a cohesive ‘community’ found in formulations such as ‘community building’.
An invisible line divides Subang Jaya’s field of residential affairs into two main sectors: a non-governmental sector led by internet activists, and a governmental sector led by the local authorities. The ‘fundamental laws’ (Bourdieu, 1991) of the field differ from one sector to the other. Thus, residents wishing to amass symbolic capital are expected to volunteer their valuable time freely for the greater good of ‘the community’. This ‘interest in disinterestedness’ (Bourdieu, 1993, 1998) can be described as the unwritten law of selfless volunteerism. In contrast, agents from the governmental field sector must abide by a different fundamental law, *turun padang* – Malay for ‘to go down to the ground’. To solve local issues, however banal they may seem to an outsider, local politicians and civil servants must first go down to the ground. It is only by doing this, the belief goes, that powerful outsiders will be able to resolve concrete issues, thereby gaining residents’ trust and support.

FIELD SOCIALITIES
Fields of striving do not necessarily exhibit a homogenous ‘field sociality’. This is certainly the case with Subang Jaya’s field of residential affairs, where a plurality of socialities has arisen over time. The perils of reducing sociality to totalizing categories such as ‘field sociality’ or ‘community sociality’ are apparent in Andreas Wittel’s (2001) discussion of the new media industry in London. Wittel distinguishes two broad kinds of sociality: community versus network sociality. Community sociality is the pre-modern, sluggish sociality of physically-localized collectivities. By contrast, network sociality is fast-paced and based on fleeting, instrumental encounters (e.g. speed dating) with a large set of ‘contacts’. Young urban professionals working in new media industries epitomize this latter form of sociality, which Wittel (following Castells, 1996) regards as the defining sociality of our era.

Wittel’s notion of network sociality glosses over notable differences in how people interact with one another within the same field of practice, e.g. the new media industry in London. Surely the quality of a social interaction within a speed-dating session differs markedly from that in the office canteen or in a board meeting? How do media industry workers in London navigate these different micro-social settings while pursuing their goals (advancing their careers, socializing, mating, etc.)? These questions cannot be answered unless we develop a more nuanced understanding of sociality.

This section unpacks the notion of sociality ethnographically, suggesting that it cannot be reduced to a community/network binary. Instead, it suggests that researchers need to approach this question with an open mind, with the expectation that sociality may take on plural forms even within a single universe of practice. The three distinct forms of field sociality to be discussed...
are committee sociality, patrol sociality and web forum sociality (other emergent forms that cannot be discussed here would include ritual sociality, street party sociality and sporting sociality). It will outline their specificities in terms of the type of interaction, mode of discourse and field articulations. It is suggested that it is only through these fine-grained distinctions derived from empirical research on the ground that we can begin to theorize the elusive relationship between internet usage and the emergence of new forms of residential sociality.

Committee sociality

Despite the prominence of committees within social and political activism worldwide, ‘the sociality of committees themselves has remained a largely unseen ethnographic object’ (Jean-Klein, 2003: 557). The account of committee sociality presented here is based on participant observation at a number of meetings in Subang Jaya and USJ. The Jawatankuasa Penduduk (JKP; residents’ committees system) was launched in February 2001 by the municipal council. The then council president, Ahmad Fuad, linked the pioneering scheme to Local Agenda 21, a United Nations programme aimed at improving local governance around the globe. Fuad used the public rhetoric of community to call on ‘the involvement of the community as a whole’ in the new initiative. In practice, however, most committee members are political appointees drawn from the subfield of residential activism. Wishing to ‘delegate some authority to the people’, Fuad launched a plan to allocate RM100,000 (US$29,000) annually to each of the 24 committees ‘for small and immediate projects’ such as drain repairs or tree-cutting (Yeoh, 2005).

The residents’ committee sociality is the co-present, synchronous sociality of monthly meetings devoted to discussing local issues (cf. Jean-Klein, 2003). Meetings are held at night in airconditioned rooms and attendance is restricted to committee members and their guests. The bodily orientation is primarily face-to-face, although this depends, of course, on interlocutors’ seating positions relative to one another (Pink, nd). Food and drinks are usually provided and consumed in the room during the break. These ‘ephemeral items … live on in the form of the social relations that they produce, and which are in turn responsible for reproducing the comestibles’ (Gell, 1986: 112). The discourse is oral, polylogical and gesturally rich but also mediated by texts (e.g. agenda, emails, letters, websites, etc.), that is, meetings are ‘literacy events’ (Street, 2000). Albeit a largely sedentary activity, attendants undertake a metaphorical journey whose itinerary is the agenda. It is the task of the chair to ‘bring to order’ participants who stray too far from this discursive itinerary (Pink, nd). These sessions are deliberative in that participants aim to reach consensual decisions (see http://www.thefreedictionary.com/deliberate). Even though meetings are held behind closed doors, minutes are in principle open to all local residents for inspection.
As regards the committees’ articulation with the rest of the field of residential affairs, these hybrid organizations are located on the border between the field’s governmental and non-governmental sectors. This ambiguous location is a perennial source of friction. The predominant mood at these sessions is neither one of open conflict nor of fellowship. Instead, there prevails an atmosphere of frustration with the council’s apparent inability to solve but a fraction of the myriad issues brought to the table. As one chair put it once: ‘But what is it we’re doing? We cannot just come to meetings!’

Patrol sociality
This form of USJ sociality springs from a deep-seated fear of crime in the severely underpoliced suburb. In 1999, a neighbourhood watch committee was formed in the precinct of USJ18. Each member was entrusted with organizing night patrols for a single street. In its heyday, the scheme boasted 330 volunteer patrollers – virtually all of them middle-aged men – guarding the precinct’s 536 houses. Night patrol sociality is the side-by-side (not face-to-face), outdoors sociability of the night beat, when volunteer patrollers take time out to walk the streets in pairs. Patrollers carry torches, whistles, batons or long sticks, mobile phones, pen and paper (Pengawasan Seijiran Neighbourhood Watch, nd). The discourse is oral, informal and agenda-free as well as gesturally poor on account of patrollers’ collateral bodily orientation and the nocturnal conditions. Because of the physical and cognitive constraints of verbal discourse (Hutchins, 1995), the two partners take it in turns to carry forth the single conversational thread. In keeping with the dyadic nature of patrols, the discourse is dialogical rather than polylogical (see Mulkay, 1985). Unlike the discourse of committees, patrol discourse is non-deliberative, unrecorded and private.

Regarding its field articulations, patrolling is a result of the collaboration between local residents, the police and the National IT Council, which seed-funded a neighbourhood watch web portal under an e-community scheme. Despite this governmental connection, patrolling itself is largely free from the political tensions and frustrations that beset committee meetings. The mood is one of camaraderie and fellowship – the shoulder-to-shoulder fellowship of the beat. While committee members live off meagre extrinsic rewards (i.e. the occasional resolution of a pending issue), patrolling is both a rewarding activity in its own right as well as epitomizing the fundamental field law of selfless volunteerism (on the rewards of practice, see Warde, 2005).

Web forum sociality
A unique quality of social intercourse has evolved on Subang Jaya’s thriving web portal, USJ.com.my. Founded in 1999, this portal is proudly independent
from the government. At the time of writing, the USJ.com.my forums had clocked close to 15,000 threads (topics of discussion), 232,000 posts and had some 13,000 registered members. The main forum is devoted ostensibly to ‘issues related to USJ Subang Jaya Community’, although in practice it is open to any topic so long as participants tread carefully on ‘sensitive’ subjects such as Islam. Thread starters compete to attract posters to their own threads by choosing topical issues. In contrast to the gesturally-rich committee meetings, web forum sociality relies on emoticons and avatars to compensate for the reduced bodily cues of online communication. As noted in connection to the Israeli mailing lists, the asynchronicity of most internet communication allows busy suburbanites to participate at their own leisure. The discourse is polylogical, non-deliberative, recorded and public.

How does web forum sociality articulate with Subang Jaya’s field of residential affairs? First, its independence from the state places the forum firmly in the non-governmental sector of the field. However, it is important, once again, not to conflate our folk and technical terms. If during calm periods the forum lives up to its name as a cordial informational market, the collective mood can change very rapidly from one of conviviality to another of confrontation and inflammatory language (‘flaming’), sometimes leading to collective action. At such times the forum morphs into an arena. In Victor Turner’s field theory, an arena is a ‘bounded spatial unit in which precise, visible antagonists, individual or corporate, contend with one another for prizes and/or honour’ (1974: 132–3). Arenas are ‘explicit frames’ in which ‘nothing is left merely implied’ and major decisions are taken in public view (1974: 134). With his notion of arena, Turner was distancing himself from game theory and other rational actor models which had dominated political anthropology since the 1960s. Turner emphasized that an arena is neither a marketplace nor a forum, although both can become an arena ‘under appropriate field conditions’ (1974: 134). These conditions have arisen a number of times throughout USJ.com.my’s short history, for example, residents have been pitted against the local authorities over an issue of general concern.

CONCLUSION

The field of local internet studies appears to suffer from semantic agoraphobia – a fear of open semantic spaces. Yet researching local settings should not necessarily limit one’s conceptual space to one or two familiar notions, especially if these are of questionable sociological value, as is the case with community. This is particularly noticeable in suburban studies, where a reliance on community and network is strangely at odds with a frontier-like scenario in which people, technologies and other cultural artefacts are co-producing new forms of residential sociality in unpredictable ways.
By drawing on the field theory lexicon of both Bourdieu and the Manchester School, this study was able to bring a set of concepts that lie partly outside the community/network paradigm (field, interaction, sociality, arena, etc.) to bear on the ethnographic analysis. Like Eric Klinenberg (2005) in his study of US youth media, it has found field theory to be ‘a useful way of seeing patterns within a messy domain of social action’ (Couldry, 2007: 211) – in the case presented here, the domain of local governance in a Malaysian suburb. This ground-up theoretical exploration (Hesmondhalgh and Toynbee, 2006) revealed not a homogenous ‘field sociality’, rather an internally differentiated field of striving with various forms of sociality distinguished by the nature of their interactions, discursive practices and field articulations. Subang Jaya residents and local authorities are not appropriating the internet wholesale. In common with countless people around the globe, they are appropriating internet technologies selectively for specific purposes (Miller and Slater, 2000) and within fields of self-organized striving. The present analysis suggests that the internet technologies which are adopted will depend not only on their cost and technical affordances (Wellman et al., 2003) but also on the adopting field’s inner differentiation. Thus, all three initiatives analysed above have sought to foster online discourse and conviviality through web forums, but only USJ.com.my has succeeded. Such success can be attributed in part to this portal’s symbolic location at the heart of the non-governmental field sector (a location that attracts civic-minded residents), and in part to the virtual lack of thematic restrictions, which gives it an edge over the neighbourhood watch forum, with its narrow crime remit. The analysis also showed that certain field socialities are more prone than others to fluctuations in their ‘moods’. Careful diachronic attention to these mood swings can teach us about a field’s uneven patterns of sociotechnological change and continuity, with some field niches enjoying better insulation from external pressures than others (Bourdieu, 1996; Epstein, 1958).

There was much ground that could not be covered in this brief discussion, including questions about internet localization and social identity, other internet technologies besides web forums, or the ongoing convergence of internet and mobile technologies. Further empirical research and ground-up theorization is needed on these matters, particularly in new suburban settlements, where internet-related socialities can be studied as they emerge and compared with analogous processes unfolding in other suburbs. Other approaches besides field theory may prove fruitful as well (e.g. actor–network theory, structuration theory and material culture studies), especially if they are undertaken in the spirit of openness towards new forms of sociality that is the hallmark of all frontiers.
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Notes
1 For reviews of this literature see Loader and Keeble (2004), Pigg and Crank (2004) and Taylor (2004).
2 A variant of field theory is being used as the theoretical thrust by a media research group at Goldsmiths College, University of London, see http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-research-programme/
3 Personal communication from Alexander T. Smith, 22 May 2006, who independently coined the term ‘banal activism’ after anthropological fieldwork among Conservative Party activists in Scotland.

References


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