

Philipp Budka

How “real life” issues affect the social life of online networked communities

Internet media technologies

The internet¹ has never been a monolithic media technology. On the contrary, it is a technology that allows the integration of different kinds of media, which can be practised in various ways. The World Wide Web (WWW) serves as a kind of graphical interface to the internet allowing the implementation of multi media and the (hyper)linking of documents. Thus, the WWW has facilitated access to the internet and has decisively contributed to its distribution across large parts of the world. This distribution is far from even and has resulted in what is called the “digital divide”. Whereas about 70 percent of the population in North America can access the internet, only 5 percent of Africa’s population is able to use this media technology (URL 1).

Older than the WWW, which was developed in 1990 at the CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire, today: European Organisation for Nuclear Research) in Switzerland, are e-mail and Usenet newsgroups.² E-mail technology – or to be more precise the exchange of text messages – was continuously developed over the last 40 years and was finally integrated into the internet in the early 1980s to become the most popular application of the “net” (e.g. Kollock & Smith 1999, Wellman et al. 2002). The Usenet, developed in 1979 at the University of North Carolina, today consists of thousands of newsgroups that are, hierarchically structured, covering all kinds of topics.³ Within these newsgroups people post, discuss, and exchange messages with other members of their group. Whereas the WWW allows for visual communication and interaction, e-mail and Usenet are media being used by people to communicate primarily in textual form.

This paper shall take a closer look into the “life” of an e-mail based mailing list and a newsgroup by analysing the relation between offline or “real life” issues and the communication within these two online social groups. How do events and issues happening in “real life” affect the social life, meaning particularly communication patterns and discourse structures, of these “virtual” groups? Participant observation in combination with ethnographic text and discourse analysis was deployed to answer this question. Within the scope of this cyberanthropological and cyberethnographic project respectively, these methods proved to be well fitting for fluctuating media technologies such as mailing lists and newsgroups.⁴ The mailing list was investigated over a period of ten months. The Usenet newsgroup was analysed intensively about one month, but observed over more than a year.

¹ To indicate “our increasing familiarity” with internet media technologies and the manifold ways to access and practices them, “internet” is written in lower case (Woolgar 2002: 12).

² The Internet Society provides a handy collection of hyperlink lists and online documents about the history of the internet (URL 2).

³ A brief history of the Usenet can be found online (URL 3).

⁴ The relatively new social anthropology research branches of cyberanthropology and cyberethnography, their specifications, history, and fields are being discussed in Budka & Kremser (2004).

In addition this paper introduces two social groups on the internet by analysing and documenting a particular stage in their existence, providing thus a little insight into the social history of the world's largest computer network.

Community or network?

The first widely publicised book on the ability of internet media to create communities online was Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* in 1993. As an early member of the WELL⁵, a collection of different conference systems, Rheingold used an "Americanised" notion of "community" to describe his experiences in this computer network.⁶ In a revised edition of the book in 2000, he reviewed a selection of then "classical" literature about the socio-cultural aspects of cyberspace, taking a more critical look at different concepts of community and their usefulness to describe social interaction on the internet. Rheingold (2000: 359) concludes "if I had encountered sociologist Barry Wellman and learned about social network analysis when I first wrote about cyberspace cultures, I could have saved us all a decade by calling them "online social networks" instead of "virtual communities"."

The above-mentioned Barry Wellman has written extensively about social networks in relation to internet media (e.g. Wellman 1997, Wellman & Gulia 1999, Wellman 2001, Wellman et al. 2002). He, together with scholars like Manuel Castells (2000, 2001), argues that communities and even societies in the developed world have been changing towards "networked individualism" (Wellman et al. 2002). In these networked societies, "computer networks and social networks resonate with one another" (ibid: 160). With Wellman (2001), this paper argues that mailing lists and Usenet newsgroups, which build and rely on computer networks, are also social networks linking people, organisations, and knowledge. Is, therefore, "community" an unfitting concept to understand and analyse what people are doing on the internet? I don't think so. The numerous community concepts provide excellent frameworks to understand the motivation of people to get together on the internet, forming social networks.

Throughout the centuries "community" has been a concept of "always positive evaluation and evocation, whose usage expresses and elicits a social group and a social environment to which people would expect, advocate or wish to belong" (Rapport 1998: 117). But as the world is changing through different processes subsumed as "globalisation", so do the understanding, meaning, and construction of community (e.g. Amit 2002, Amit & Rapport 2002). Even though the pace of these transnational processes speeded up within the last decades, thus, becoming hot topics for mass media and researchers alike, they were not "invented" within this very short period of time. People, goods, information, and ideas always travelled across the known and into the unknown world to establish all kinds of different connections and networks (e.g. Wolf 1997). The diffusion of media technologies (printing press) and products (newspapers), for instance, contributed decisively to the creation of what Benedict Anderson (1991) has called the "imagined communities" of nation states.

In the context of computer mediated communication, Nancy Baym (1998) identifies five sources of influence that affect the development of and the communication in online communities: external contexts, temporal structures, system infrastructure, group purpose,

⁵ Online: URL 4.

⁶ The catchy subtitle of the book – "homesteading on the electronic frontier" – illustrates quite nicely the metaphor of the unknown and unoccupied cyberspace, so popular at the beginning of the 1990s particularly in the USA.

and participant and group characteristics. In the analyses of our two case studies, I will particularly concentrate on external contexts, such as nationality/ethnicity and language (usage), and the group purpose, which includes possible tasks and topics of the constructed community. But first both online social groups are shortly introduced by illustrating their temporal structures, system infrastructure, and basic participant and group characteristics.

The mailing list World's Indigenous People describes itself as “a network of International Indigenous people. Indigenous controlled and maintained, this mailing list provides an opportunity to communicate freely.”⁷ The list is hosted by Yahoo!Groups allowing access to the group and its messages via the WWW. Established in 1999, the list has become a forum for its 384 members (Dec. 2005) to exchange all kinds of information, particularly in English language, about indigenous peoples and issues worldwide (cf. Budka 2002).⁸

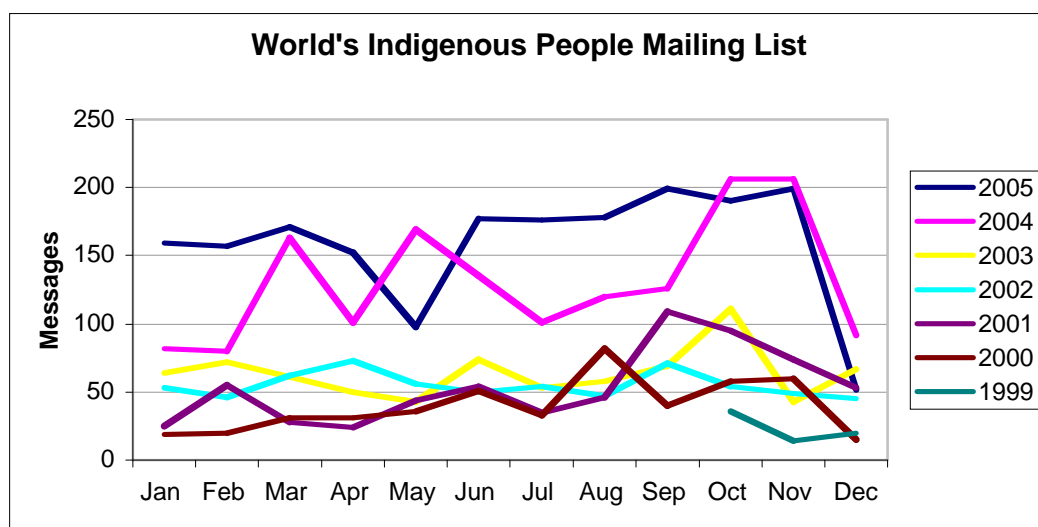


Fig.1: Monthly number of messages in the World's Indigenous People mailing list (1999-2005)

In an e-mail, the founder of the mailing list explains her intention to set up the group:

I'm (...) just one blackfulla trying to make a dent in the Indigenous psyche, working on the premise as follows: *information = informed decisions = knowledge = power* (...) that's truly the basis of me starting up the e-group (...) (personal communication 2002, italics added)

Internet technologies such as mailing lists hold the possibility to provide and distribute information and to create knowledge, that is, according to the founder of the list, fundamental to the empowerment of people, in our case indigenous people. Back in 2002 the group described itself, from a pure technological perspective only as “mailing list” (cf. Budka 2002). This self-definition recently changed to the notion of “network”, which implies the social aspects of internet connectivity in a much better way.

The second online group analysed in this paper is soc.cultural.austria, a Usenet newsgroup dedicated to the discussion of the socio-cultural life in Austria and of Austrians respectively. The name of a newsgroup consists of a sequential addition of Usenet categories: “General categories like “comp” (computers), “rec” (recreation) and “soc” (social) identify the generic

⁷ Online: URL 5.

⁸ In 2002, the mailing list had 238 subscribed members (Budka 2002).

topic of the group. More specific terms are added until a complete newsgroup name is created” (Burkhalter 1999: 63). During the month-long period of investigation, 289 people posted more than 1000 messages to the newsgroup. To access and contribute to this group, a so-called “newsreader” is needed, which today is integrated in most e-mail software programs. In addition, the Web service provider Google has started to offer access to Usenet newsgroups and their postings via the WWW (URL 6).

What are the similarities and what are the differences between these two online groups? On a technological level, mailing lists and e-mails are “push” media; “messages are sent to people without them necessarily doing anything” (Kollock & Smith 1999: 6). The usage of Usenet newsgroups, on the contrary, requires the active selection and request of messages. Newsgroups, therefore, can be described as “pull” media. Both are asynchronous communication media, allowing discussions between group participants in different time zones. Control of and access to the groups is another indicator for the different characters of these two internet media. Whereas mailing lists allow the controlled access to the list through a single person – a moderator – newsgroups mostly don’t have such a mechanism. This of course has immediate effects on communication and power structures within the respective group. And whilst the mailing list is a network of individuals having more or less regular social contact via electronic text messages, the newsgroup builds on the communication of people who are more or less anonymously posting messages. The intensity of personal contact depends, of course, also on the size of the group. What holds mailing list as well as newsgroup together is the thematic priority of the group and the topics being discussed by its members. So what are these issues and how do they affect the social lives of these online networked communities? In the following sections I will demonstrate the effects, two very different offline issues had on the social life of two online groups.

“Real life” issues and their effects on online networked communities

On the 4th of February 2000, the Austrian president swore in a new Austrian coalition government. The Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), third after the elections in October 1999, and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), under the leadership of far-right populist Jörg Haider, formed this controversial coalition. Shortly thereafter, the national and international media were widely reporting about this right-wing government and the potential impact on Europe’s political landscape (e.g. BBC News⁹). Most European governments strongly rejected the participation of a far-right party in a coalition government of a European Union member state. Consequently, the EU isolated the new Austrian government for about six months. Finally, Jörg Haider stepped down as party leader at the end of 2000. But he remained the most influential FPÖ party member until he founded a new political party in 2005. From 2005 till 2007 this new party, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), was the junior partner of the ÖVP in the coalition government, without even being elected by the Austrian people. New elections in 2006 resulted in a win of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), which since 2007 is working in a coalition government with the ÖVP.¹⁰

This section will first take a look at the newsgroup soc.culture.austria and how this political event, which also became a massive media issue, affected the life of this online group. The most obvious indicator for a change in the communication structure of the newsgroup was the number of posted messages.

⁹ Online: URL 7.

¹⁰ The influence of neo-nationalistic parties and movements on the reconfiguration of Europe is being discussed from a social anthropological perspective and with a focus on the Austrian case by Andre Gingrich (2006).

Month	Messages	People
January 2000	231	94
February 2000	1.965	437
March 2000	1.139	287

Tab.1: Number of messages and people in soc.culture.austria, Jan.-Mar. 2000
(Source: Netscan URL 8)

The messages' subjects indicated that most of the messages sent in January, February and March 2000 were referring to the political situation in Austria. After the official appointment of the new coalition government at the beginning of February 2000, the number of messages increased by 751 percent.¹¹ From January to February 2000, the number of people posting messages to the group increased by 365 percent. Still the Austrian group was rather small, in comparison to other newsgroups in the soc.culture. hierarchy, which comprised of up to 10.000 messages in March 2000 (cf. Netscan URL 8).

50 of the 1.139 messages in the month of March were selected due to their subject and analysed (Budka 2000). Generally, the selected messages varied in length, style and quality. Some messages, like an "Open plea to the EU" started a so-called "thread": "chains of responses and counter-responses on a particular topic" (Burkhalter 1999: 63). In his appeal the author characterises himself as Austrian opponent to the new government and he asks the "Members of the European Union" to let the Austrian people sort things out by themselves:

(...)

Give us the time to sort things out, free of emotions, on democratic grounds and in good reason. Trust the Austrian People!

With best regards

(name)¹²

The author uses the online forum and its potential publicity to speak up and make his point in a very formal way, as subject and address indicate. The potentially large audience is, according to James et al. (1995, cited in Rössler 1998), one of the main reasons to participate in newsgroups. To reach an international audience, the plea is written in English, and it was "cross-posted" to other newsgroups discussing the same issue.¹³

Language and the choice of language are important factors for the communication structure and the discursive character of a newsgroup. Even though the analysed newsgroup is part of an international hierarchy using English as *lingua franca*, the language within soc.culture.austria sometimes changed to German during the period of investigation. This was done mainly because of two reasons: first, to ease communication between German speaking participants and second to exclude non-German speakers from the discourses. One response to the above plea is written in German:

¹¹ The software tool Netscan, developed by Marc Smith (1999), was used to gather statistical data about the newsgroup (URL 8). Interestingly, the indicated number of messages posted to the newsgroup in March 2000 varies: a search in May 2000 identified 1042 messages, a re-search in December 2005 resulted in 1139 messages.

¹² Messages of the analysed newsgroup and mailing list are portrayed without changes to the orthography and in anonymised form.

¹³ Smith (1999: 207), for instance, discusses the social activity of cross-posting that interconnects various newsgroups to form "neighbourhoods of interrelated topics".

(...)

Du mußt aber gut verstehen, daß wir nicht die Österreicher bekämpfen, aber die FPÖ. Wir fürchten um der Sicherheit Europas.

(...)

(name)

The author ask for understanding that “they”, probably he means the EU or the European peoples, don’t fight the Austrians but the Freedom Party, because they fear for the security of Europe. The grammatical errors in this relatively short message suggest that the author is not a native German speaker. But choosing the assumed native language of the first author, even though the initial message was written in English, indicates the urge to be understood, the need to remove all ambiguities. Some messages were also written in Austrian dialect to demonstrate an even closer connection to the Austrian point of view in these discussions.

What was found is that with the increase of the length and complexity of these threads, the (neo-)nationalistic and chauvinistic tendencies of the messages were also increasing (cf. Budka 2000). A search into the archive of the newsgroup soc.culture.austria showed that the group was and still is heavily used to distribute anti-Semitic messages and propaganda. Surprisingly, these radical messages only rarely resulted in so called “flame wars” between discussion participants. The few flame wars, meaning the systematic exchange of insults, that appeared in the newsgroup, were mostly used to “change the grounds of the debate or to stop discussing the matter completely” (Hine 2000).

Even though the newsgroup soc.culture.austria is no small homogenous group and its members are not all like-minded, attributes usually given to a “community”, some characteristics can be identified that proof that the group can be considered an online networked community. First, people share a common interest to access the newsgroup. Most of them want to communicate about topics and issues related to Austria and its people. In our specific case newsgroup participants discussed the relation of Austria to its European neighbours and the consequences a governmental change has had to Austria and Europe. Participants to so.culture.austria are therefore creating what is called a “community of interest”. In doing so, individual ways of communicating and arguing could be observed, from open pleas to insults. Second, participants of Usenet newsgroups in general share almost the same vocabulary (e.g. “emoticons”), knowledge of technology, and ways of interacting with each other (e.g. “flame wars”). Language, on the other hand, was used in the newsgroup to establish linguistic demarcations by forming new groups within the community. In the field of sociolinguistics these discrete groups are referred to as “communities of speech” or “speech-communities” (e.g. Gumperz & Hymes 1972, Labov 1991). To identify and analyse these linguistic characteristics in more detail, intensive (participant) observation is necessary.

After looking at the effects, a controversial governmental change can have to a newsgroup; we are now turning to a completely different “real life” issue and how it influenced the social life of an indigenous mailing list.

On the 14th of February 2004, the 17-year-old Aborigine Thomas “TJ” Hickey died after loosing control over his bicycle in the Redfern suburb of Sydney, Australia. Relatives and friends were blaming the police for causing this fatal accident by chasing Hickey. After people gathered around the place of accident to mourn, the scene turned violent resulting in clashes between mainly indigenous residents of the Redfern “Block” and the police. The

death of Hickey and the following riots sparked fresh debates in all kinds of media about the overall situation of indigenous Australians under the conservative government of John Howard (e.g. The Sydney Morning Herald, Sydney Indymedia)¹⁴.

Indigenous and human rights activists used particularly alternative media such as websites, weblogs and mailing lists to inform and mobilize “the public”. One of these media channels that were heavily used for presenting and discussing not only the tragic event, but also the overall situation of indigenous peoples in Australia on a global scale was the World’s Indigenous People (WIP) mailing list. It is important to note that most of the messages and discussions in the WIP mailing list following Thomas Hickey’s tragic death were taken over from the regional ACT indigenous network mailing list.¹⁵ It can be assumed that this was mainly done to “globalise” the issue and the discussion about it. The messages used for this analysis derive from both mailing lists, but only the WIP list’s discursive structure will be discussed.

The influence of this event and issue on the social life of the online network can be, on the one hand, demonstrated by the pure increase of messages posted to the list. From February to March 2004 the number of messages on the WIP mailing list increased from 80 to 163, declining again in April to 101 e-mails. This reduction of messages in the month of April presumably correlates with the decline of coverage of the issue in the mainstream media.

2004:	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
No.:	82	80	163	101	169	135	101	120	199	190	199	52

Tab.2: Number of messages to the WIP mailing list in 2004

On the other hand, the topics, content, and structures of discourses on the mailing list changed because of the events in Redfern. Thus, the posting of messages originally from the ACT mailing list interrupted the ongoing discussions on the WIP discussion group. Following a heatedly debate about the riots in Redfern on the ACT network, one contributor called for the return to the initial “issue” that caused the riots in a dramatic appeal:

The issue is we do have another death. The issue is not the Blackfellas in Redfern are rioting but another DEATH. Another death that is Police related our Mob are dying slowly each day whether that is from police, poor health and/or government policies it is another death that shouldn't have happened.
(...)
(name)

A couple of hours later the author of this message and other supporters were ready to bring their outrage about the incidents in Redfern onto the streets of Australia’s capital Canberra. Again, the mailing list was used to organise and coordinate:

¹⁴ Online: URL 9 and URL 10.

¹⁵ ACT stands for Australian Capital Territory and describes the area around Canberra (URL 11).

To the Mob

A Rally of support will take place on Friday 20th February 04 at 10:00am.

The Rally to meet at the Tent Embassy and MARCH to Parliament House seek a FULL inquiry into the death Of YET another one of our people at the hands of POLICE!!!!!!!!!!!!

I NEED HELP TO ORGANISE THIS MARCH

(name)

Mailing list members who were not able to attend the demonstration, were looking for electronic ways to show their sympathies for the family of Thomas Hickey and Indigenous Australians in general, e.g. by sending e-mails of protest to politicians. Others provided their websites and web space for supporting the protests, such as the Block Redfern website¹⁶.

Not all participants to the mailing list agreed on the immediate actions taken by some list members and were calling for the need of more information about what happened in Redfern before taking any concrete actions. Some feared that street protests could even widen the divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians:

(...) The idea is to win broad Australian support for our cause. Which means giving them something they can understand and take to there hearts. Not alienate them from the cause because they think we are stupid or that what is happening does not affect them. (...)

(name)

Most messages written in reaction to this proposal were denying the mainstream mass media and the police any capability to contribute to the finding of the true circumstances of Hickey's death. So for the clear majority of mailing list members there was no other way than taking the protests as soon as possible out on the streets and this way in the mass media. After the rally was over, one of the organisers thanked all who supported the protests in manifold ways via the mailing list:

(...)

Thanks to all the Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people from all over the country and world who have e-mailed, called, faxed and protested

Your support and unity is much recognised

Yours in Unity & sovereignty

(name)

Aboriginal people once again showed their support for Hickey and his family on the day of his funeral with a memorial march, which also included the handing over of a petition to the Redfern police demanding full inquiry into Thomas "TJ" Hickey's tragic death. Official inquiries were closed a couple of months later after the police was found not guilty for causing the teenager's death. The protests and demands for justice that started through mailings lists soon found their place on dedicated websites and discussion forums demanding the re-opening of the inquiry.

¹⁶ Online: URL 12.

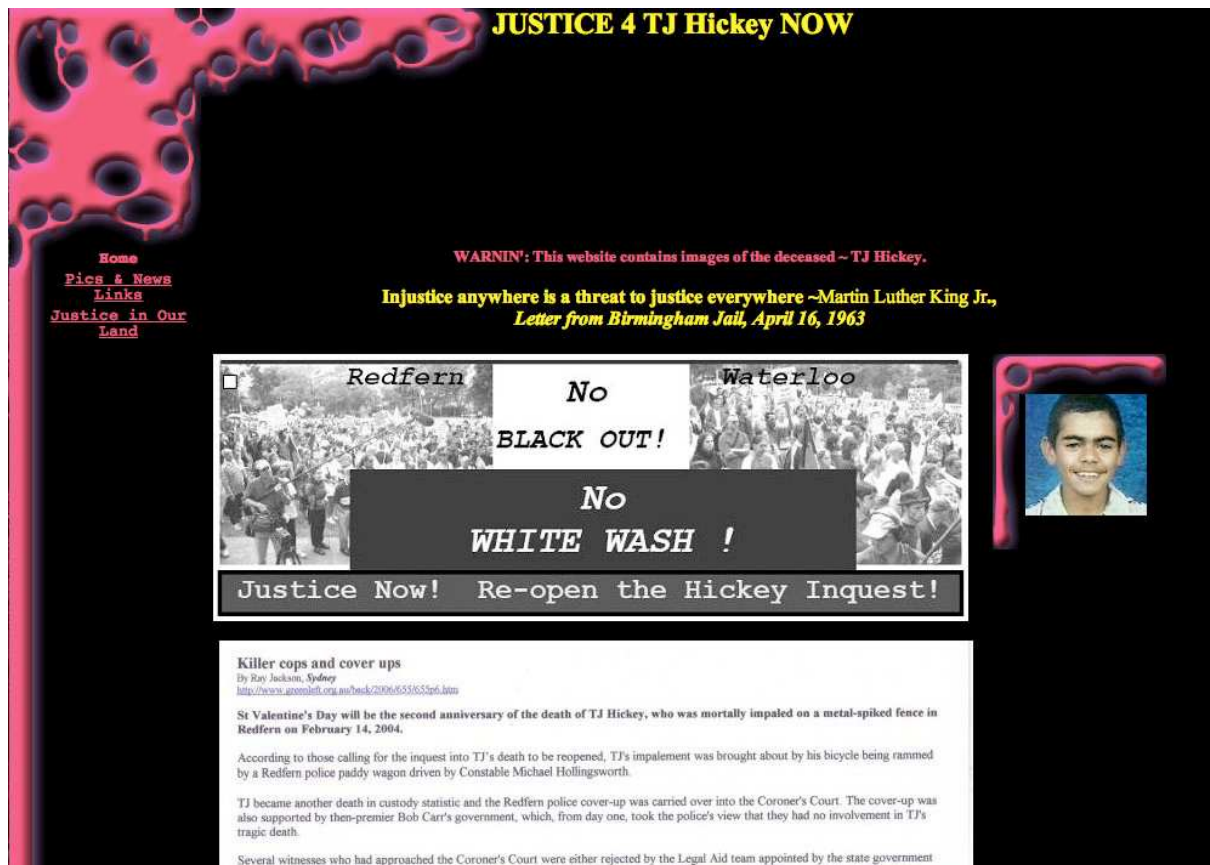


Fig.2: Screenshot of the Justice 4 TJ Hickey website (URL 13)

The investigated mailing list's social life is dominated by a relatively small group of people who have more or less regular contact with each other. Concerning the discursive structure of the group, the phenomenon of the "lurker" becomes evident. Only few people actively participated in the discussions on Hickey's death and the resulting riots. The vast majority of the subscribers remained silent, including me as observing researcher (c.f. Rutter and Smith 2005). Within the discussions and interactions in this mailing list, the cultural and ethnic identities of its members – a majority of the participants to the list describe themselves as indigenous – are the dominant factor. The mailing list can thus be considered an online networked community linking indigenous people from all around the predominately English-speaking world.

Conclusion

In investigating the effects "real life" issues, such as a governmental election and the tragic death of an Aboriginal teenager, can have on the online social life of electronic groups, it seems that interaction and discussion concerning these issues are some kind of reaction to the ways issues and events are being created and discussed in the mainstream mass media. Mailing lists and Usenet newsgroups are alternative media technologies allowing the discussion of issues outside of the strictly regulated discursive main stream (e.g. McCaughey & Ayers 2003). Can this be considered a shift of power from mainstream mass media to alternative and "individualised" media? If we look for instance at the blogosphere, where hundreds of thousand bloggers produce, process, and distribute information each and every day, it looks a little bit like that. But since the issues and agendas, which are discussed in the public are still mainly set up and selected by the mainstream media in interaction and

cooperation with other social agents, such as politics and economy, power will remain in the hands of the mass media.¹⁷ What the above case studies illustrate is that the people practicing alternative media are modifying and changing the nature of the mass media issues by appropriating them to the discursive structures of these new media technologies.

Even though the term “networked online communities” is used within this paper, mainly due to the self-description of the analysed social groups, it still remains evident that societal concepts such as “network” and “community” need to be clarified and discussed in greater detail within the context of internet media technologies. John Postill (2008) provides us here with an alternative way of understanding online socialities by moving “beyond the community/network paradigm by broadening our analytical lexicon”. He argues that the field theories developed by Pierre Bourdieu and the Manchester School of social anthropology are well suited concepts to frame, understand, and analyse social (inter)action on the internet.

“Real life” issues are the food for online networked communities. People bring to their online interactions their cultural and ethnic background, gender, age, language, working background, personal networks as well as topics and issues they are daily confronted with (Wellman & Gulia 1999). To understand how people are practising internet technologies and media, it is, therefore, important to overcome the artificial dichotomy of “the virtual” and “the real” by applying a holistic perspective on these social phenomena.

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¹⁷ The theoretical concept of “agenda setting” through the mass media might be a useful analytical tool in this respect. I am grateful to Nelly Elias for this hint.

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Internet:

URL 1

World Internet Users and Population Stats: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.
Zugriff: 05. 01. 2008.

URL 2

Internet Society – History of the Internet: <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/>. Zugriff: 05. 01. 2008.

URL 3

Usenet Software – History and Sources: <http://www.faqs.org/faqs/usenet/software/part1/>.
Zugriff: 05. 01. 2008.

URL 4

The Well: <http://www.well.com/>. Zugriff: 05. 01. 2008.

URL 5

World's Indigenous Peoples Network: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/worlds-indigenous-people/>. Zugriff: 05. 01. 2008.

URL 6

soc.culture.austria: <http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.austria/about>. Zugriff: 05. 01. 2008.

URL 7

BBC News – Austria's far right enters government:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/630846.stm>. Zugriff: 01. 12. 2005.

URL 8

Netscan: <http://netscan.research.microsoft.com/>. Zugriff: 01. 04. 2000.

URL 9

The Sidney Morning Herald – Redfern Special:
<http://www.smh.com.au/specials/redfern/index.html>. Zugriff: 01. 03. 2006.

URL 10

Sidney Indymedia: <http://sydney.indymedia.org/node/35169>. Zugriff: 01. 03. 2006.

URL 11

ACT Indigenous Network: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/actindnetwork/>. Zugriff: 05. 01. 2008.

URL 12

<http://www.isis.aust.com/theblock/tj.htm>. Zugriff: 01. 03. 2006.

URL 13

Justice 4 TJ Hickey Website: <http://tjhickey.tripod.com/>. Zugriff: 01. 03. 2006.