The Absent Identity

Community isolation in an age of information overload

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Abstract. Identity is becoming increasingly important as technology advances expand information choices for individuals. Such advances can alter the balance between local communities and their citizens by allowing a transient workforce a virtual escape path and reducing the desire for community participation. Important also are changing conceptions of identity in local communities and the individuals who reside there. In this light there is a risk of the dissolution of small communities in both real and virtual worlds.

1   Identity construction in remote communities

Identity requires information for its creation. Without information as input to the mind there can be no 'us', 'me', 'other' or choice. This is indisputable. Identity is the way we see ourselves and others. Without information there is no distinguishing between items or characteristics. Without information on such things as environment or social norms there can be no distinguishing characteristics of identity. The combination of information is processed individually to form, as Taylor [1] suggests, an identity that is essentially defined by the way things have significance for 'me' including social space, family, moral orientations, plus reference to a defining community. Communities are affected by the individual identities of their population but likewise those communities also provide information to allow the formation of personal identities. This symbiosis is often overlooked yet it is the cornerstone of survival in small communities. In a global society of constantly increasing information sources the negative effect of too many choices must be explored. Ife [2] sees that various critiques of information technology explain that we are so excited about the advantages that we miss the negatives of computer technology: the devaluing of any human 'knowledge' or 'experience' that cannot be reduced to digital impulses, the retreat into cyberspace, and redefining of dominant culture. Whilst this article stops short of identifying all the complex attributes associated with Australian identity include gender, age and education, it does eneavour to provide an insight into some of the dilemmas posed by the manufacture of modern identity as experienced by one element of community development policy in a remote

environment. It is therefore not meant to be an all-encompassing study but a start to opening up alternate ways of understanding identity creation and its impact.

In this context it is possible to examine how information transmission is moulded and delivered to the remote community of Laverton[1]. Historically it has been through word of mouth that the majority people have received information about the experiences and lives of their geographic neighbors. The basic principles of community came primarily from local network systems of workplace, and common geographical location. The bonds established in isolated geographical communities can also be extrapolated to include the self-identity and unity concepts of nation-building as a tool to create imagined links inside continents. Personal and social identity is shaped into notions of beliefs and symbolisms representing a given attitude, place or value.

With the advent of mass communication a direct pathway to individuals has been established which bypasses geographic community networks and traditional forms of identity formation. Social contracts are arranged online with individuals thousands of kilometres away. Television and the internet have allowed information input in the privacy of a home in even the most remote part of the world. Rather than physical contact with fellow human beings, information is being delivered via electrons in a one-way data stream where individuals choose their identity based upon the influx of information. The main players in identity formation are reduced to individuals, governments, and mass media exploiting new mass media technology. This article will focus on the increasingly absent identity of transient Australians from their geographic location and in part reflect upon my own experience in remote Western Australia and in part form an analysis of the negative effects that increased technology can have on a small community.

Three technology advances (television, pay-television and internet) can be seen as part of natural development and progression in the information age. Toffler [3] however suggests that we are racing too fast towards an uncertain future with the multiplication of both our material and social choices. From this view remote communities are facing a threat as transients stay for a couple of years but maintain identities in social choices from around the world. This has been recognised by Cock [4] who notes that technology is necessary for communication, getting together, finding a place and maintaining links yet emphasises that high mobility in urban communities has limited their members' ability to establish and sustain community bonding and boundaries. This belief is supported by Mackay [5] who understands that shared data is no substitute for the sense of shared identity. These realisations help us to perceive at least one of the developing dilemmas faced by local governments and remote communities.

The prime dilemma stems from remote communities becoming primarily dependent upon transient populations whose individual identity is in a location 1000 kilometres away down an electronic cable. Previous communication difficulties have ensured transients interacted with residents however the new age technologies have helped to reduce this through establishing a link between transients and their pre-existing identities. The internet brings hourly updates from home and around the world as a diversion from community involvement. Beyond this conflict technology

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[1] See below for a summary of Laverton

now allows the imparting of any identity, from anyone, to anywhere in the world. Oppenheimer [6] sees no problem when she explains that both an allegiance to community and allegiance to country are combined to form identity. However one allegiance must take precedence and that is the one that an individual will call their prime identity. This three-way power struggle is won by the entity with the greatest resources. In the modern era technology and information are the greatest resources and it is these same tools that shape identity and dissolve the bonds of remote communities. Local governments do not have the ability to influence large populations as effectively as a national system nor as ruthlessly as the anonymous data streams of the internet. New technologies are less controlled by governments than they are by corporations and powerful media moguls and rogue internet gurus. Mackay [5] explains that through relationships a clearer sense of tribal identity is achieved; an understanding of where I fit in to the community. An influx of information reduces relationships with real people in real locations, association with community, and the sense of tribal (or perhaps basic) identity. Such is the case with Laverton.

2   Laverton Geography and Demographics

Laverton is a town in the remote Western desert region of Western Australia. 'Town' is an imaginative use of the word for there are fewer than two hundred people living in the townsite and around[2] 2,000 in a Local Government area covering 300,000square kilometers[3]. It is 124 kilometres to the closest town, with the nearest point of civilisation (McDonald's, cinemas, and a population of 30,000) located only 356 kilometres southwards. The last town in Western Australia, it is a merging point of black and white cultures. The summer temperatures regularly cross 45C, winter temperature drops below zero, and rainfall is rare. Laverton is the heart of the Australian Outback. Life in these conditions takes a special type of person. The Western Desert can be considered hell on earth yet people often retreat to this landscape to find out who they really are. Many also find they are not who they hoped to be. Taylor [1] suggests identity is defined by "the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which 'I' can try to determine...the horizon within which 'I' am capable of taking a stand". Laverton's horizon is unlimited and the framework not identifiable for most people. Transients often realise this and undertake whatever means necessary to escape from geographic reality and immerse themselves in identities based upon a different set of choices that are provided in the city or from around the world.

The population in Laverton is small yet diverse with little binding people other than geographical location. There is an Aboriginal population called Wongatha numbering three quarters of the Laverton Shire population. Several retirees live in Laverton for the lifestyle and can be defined as 'locals'. With contractors who have established monopolies these three groups make up the residents of Laverton: those

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[2] Mine workers are not included in the town statistics yet have an impact on town life.

[3] Norway covers an area of 324,220 square kilometres

who are not going to move in a hurry and whose social welfare is guided by human relationships and group participation.

It is the transient population that is of most interest to identity creation in the information age as they impact heavily on the residents through both their presence and absence. Transients primarily consist of the five mines in the area with two thousand workers on a FIFO basis[4]. The second largest group of transients form half the town and are service providers. These are the administrative group of Shire staff, police, hospital workers, some trades people, and teachers. As a transient population few allegiances are created in the Laverton community. Preferring to perform their job and go home most employees socialise with workmates before retreating to the safety of their temporary houses. Transients' identities are embedded in distant locations from Perth to Sweden. Laverton is a place of work where too much contact with residents can cause friction and conflict. Time in Laverton is seen as a duty by transients who often send false smiles to residents as they dream of a geographically absent life.

Bauman [7] understands that one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs and when one needs to know how to act so that both sides know how to go on in each others presence. In Laverton residents know where they belong while transients do their job and retreat to the variety of information inputs that are now accessible. As we build our ideas about what is real and natural with the cultural materials available [8] the advances in technology allow an influx of information to create local community as an artificial entity and the absent world becomes reachable through new media. While some see identity building as a restless self-activity which replaces tradition and custom [9], in Laverton it is a construction of 'otherness' that reinforces dominant cultural structures through the use of technology to allow or deny participation and experience in geographically absent rituals.

3   "I'd rather play football than watch the game on TV"

Sport is one factor which has been used to unite people around the world and watching football on the weekend is more than a passion, with many Australians suggesting that AFL is a religion and not sport. Not every person is passionate about participation when community events conflict with the expanding information stream as was shown in 2006 when the town chose to watch the television screen the West Coast Eagles in the preliminary final. This sacrificing of community spirit for national passion is not unique to Laverton but it has severe implications for small communities. There is no common geographic identity if minds and hearts are located in front of the television watching a Perth based team play in Melbourne. Anderson [10] explains the concept that the nation is an invented community while Cope and Kalantzis [11], Brabazon [12], and Tsokhas [13] explain how Australia's national identity was created in juxtaposition to the English empire. Bulbeck has realised that, more than knowing one must also participate in rituals by which one

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[4] Fly-In-Fly-Out (FIFO): The basic work shift is either two weeks at work and one week off, or nine days at work and five off. 'Off' means living at home in Perth. They are rarely allowed to visit Laverton

comes to belong to this Australian 'imagined community' [14]. For many Australians' football is the ultimate ritual that helps stabilise the imagined national community but often disbands any local community which relies on participation for its identity. It is the technology of television that assists this breakdown.

Laverton's population is too small and remote to maintain a regular football team and many residents are too old to participate, preferring to watching the game. In a city with a population of 80,000 it is easy to find 800 people to watch a Boltic game, however in a town of 200 to be able to play a game of football requires 50. Consider that ratio: 0.1% of the Karlstad population as spectators compared to one quarter of Laverton needed just to play a game. Television, as the most popular leisure activity in Australia [14], provides ample opportunity to participate in national rituals and the TV guide clearly shows why. With sixteen teams in the national football competition all eight games are screened on either pay-TV or free-to-air. Australians unite in a national identity to imagine 20 million other Australians watching AFL with them, in the privacy of homes. The advance of television has reduced participation by players and spectators and increased the isolation of passive viewing at home to the detriment of small communities. Prior to television participation in the local community was the only way to become involved in national rituals. Lynch and Veal [14] have identified that TV has reorganised leisure in Australia so much that now Mackay [5] can see that "people don't listen to each other because they have grown accustomed to the voice of the machine". Television unites Australians through the mass transmission of national traditions, customs and rituals for private participation and negates community bonding by creating an absent identity in both mind and body. With Laverton transients not sharing a common identity ([see 14]) upon which to build a localised geographic identity the individual is able to subscribe to a national identity and worship a team of choice rather than participate in the community they inhabit. If we are shaped by the subcults with which we choose to identify and attach ourselves to [2] then the national identity is the greatest tribe and the Australian Football League (AFL) is the biggest subcult of them all. These are at the heart of Australian identity that shapes how an individual sees themselves. The cult of the West Coast Eagles unites across the geographic and local administrative divides of Australia.

Bulbeck suggests that national identity is in danger of fragmentation because of regional differences and the global village based on global media technologies [14]. However it is often the reverse in that technologies are able to bring a national identity to the people by linking individuals to centres of national life and a wider public world beyond the routines of a narrow existence [15]. A sense of nation as a lived experience becomes reality through broadcast technologies, more often than not at the expense of local communities.

4   "Sorry I can't come over tonight. There is something good on Foxtel."

Without the extra channels provided by pay-TV (primarily Foxtel) Laverton would probably go insane. Anderson [10] notes the nation is imagined through an influx of

information, symbols and ideas so it must also be true that community and global unity are imagined, for the imaginary bonds that unite are controlled by the delivery of information to individuals. Any bond can be imagined and implanted to override the national identity. There is more to Laverton than Australian rules, more to individual identity than nationalism, and part of that deficit is covered by the increase of information supplied by Foxtel.

Foxtel subscribers access more channels and increase their information input to establish an escape from reality and physical community. At a time when government initiatives are attempting to build the social capital of small communities (see [4, 16]) transients 'escaping' can pose a functional dilemma for the local governments that administer social programmes. Mackay [17] realises that people are searching for the opportunity of escaping from their own anxieties into the fathomless sea of information about other people's lives. He goes further to predict that "if we feel obliged to worry about events which do not touch us, or have opinions about situations in which we are not involved, we may finally lose our capacity for deciding what is important and what is relevant"[5]. Transients believe what is important is escape from the anxieties imposed by Laverton. For them the local community first do not matter, then becomes irrelevant, and finally becomes 'not-real' through simple lack of participation and involvement in community identity creation. They are not important as reality becomes active involvement digesting information from around the world, from strangers lives brought into the house by Foxtel and individuals seeking escape.

Seconding Bulbeck's [14] thoughts, Morely and Robbins [15] note a growing fear that new technologies have disturbing and damaging implications for established national identity. For some communities Foxtel becomes a tool carrying data along the veins of information grids and image spaces like blood, creating new transnational communication spheres, markets and communities, and breaking existing geographical bonds. Laverton has access to the international marketplace where documentaries, movies, and shopping from around the world shape the identity of individuals. With an increase in information comes an increase in choice and, by choosing to watch Foxtel rather than participate in social life, transients are undertaking rituals in conjunction with an imagined electronic community that exists beyond the national consensus and creates a new arena of worship. If cultural identity needs to be grounded in the analysis of everyday practices on a daily basis [15] then worship of Foxtel is a ready made ritual that can be observed in the private home.

5   Broadband the future of identity creation

The installation of wireless broadband to Laverton in 2006 will allow the further withdrawal of individuals from community participation to seek identity inside their houses. If AFL is the heart of Australian nationalism and Foxtel is a global perspective on unrelated lives then broadband is the ultimate tool in post-modern identity creation. While information can be used for practical purposes there remains a dark side of too much information. There is a common fear that we are losing our

sense of community, and therefore our moral fibre, coupled with a dubious idea that sophisticated technology can enhance our relationships, tempting us to pay less attention to our role as member of a local community [5]. Is there a need for human relationships when the internet can bring anything to our fingertips in an instant and the real world is replaced with a faster download speed? It has been shown that new technologies play a role in new spatial structures creating a new relationship between place and space through the capacity to transgress frontiers and subvert territories [15]. The traditional boundaries of location in nation or local government are traversed as the individual harbours an identity based upon pre-existing social ties or builds one based upon an imagined electronic world. In 1900 life in Laverton was supplied with information and identity based on the local community with limited contact to the outside world. Today transients can have an absent identity shaped by information supplied by a global system where the internet is a pathway to funnel information and fill the void left by the lack of desire to participate in the local community. The path to escape is complete as it is possible to leave Laverton without leaving the house.

Toffler's [2] notion of Future Shock becomes reality as data rushes to fill the gaps in transient identity and increased technology creates a sensory overload where individuals cannot cope with the influx of choice. The result is a form of psychological pollution stemming from the advancing self-reinforcing character of technology. A community needs not more information, but more participation and interaction between human beings. This is the clearest point where personal identity influences local community identity. This symbiotic relationship is an important element that unfortunately is overlooked in the rush to provide information and build larger, absent social networks. The real concern is that individual identity becomes created from data-flow rather than emotion and choices that far exceed anything the human mind has ever encountered. Mackay [5] asserts the negative effect that if we start to equate ourselves with data transfer rather than as human beings with emotions and personalities then we will threaten our sense of what it means to be a community, and by extension, what it means to be human. Turkle [8] has furthered the analysis to include a higher information level of artificial world creation to understand that the virtual experience may be so compelling that we believe that within it we've achieved more than we have [eg: gender swapping, overcoming fears, seeing a real crocodile] without ever having had human or physical contact. An avatar is created, an identity that is not who we are, but who and where we would rather be. Individuals are choosing what is important and shaping personal frameworks based on an artificial experience provided by increased information, and increased choices across spatial and temporal divides. Choice is maximised, reality is blurred, information keeps coming.

6   The social cost of technology

The value of individual participation is immeasurable to the success of remote communities. It is therefore imperative that the individual associates their identity with that community and participates in social activities for without one person the

ability of other members of the community to perform its rituals is hindered. Without the participation of transients, local Laverton residents cannot perform their rituals instead they must also resort to passively watching the games that other people play. Ironically the upside of this dilemma is that the residents can now also purchase broadband internet to access more data and reshape their identity based on the global information. As more individuals seek an absent identity founded in electronic coffee shops, the lack of participation causes a death sentence for remote communities.

In a community the individual is not sovereign [18] but is reliant upon the skills and support of others in an ongoing negotiation of personal and social identity. However, in the information age "individual habits, perceptions, concepts of self, ideas of space and time, social relationships, and moral and political boundaries have all been powerfully restructured in the course of modern technological development" [Winner, 19] to a point where few traditional frameworks remain. Mackay [5] understands the identity crises as he explains that long term success in communication depends upon personal contact not data transference. Human life involves physical contact not endless input from machines, computers, or satellites. Reality is in the physical world, not in an electronic database. Without an understanding of human community there is more than a dilemma for local councils but a crises of governance and social capital in remote communities. While investigating the advances into virtual reality, Slouka notes invasions into human thought and individual identity. Some cyber-junkies see that technology advances have established a world where physical space, reality itself, has turned to plastic and malleable, mere constructs we might chose to buy into...there is nothing real...reality is just a habit...its all just information [20]. As we have seen this is the aspect of life that can create a negative component to human evolution. It is unfortunately true for many people that the use of even the most basic form of information technology is a constructed escape from the mundane routine and boring life. Slouka [20] quotes Benedikt to explain the concept of the 'reality is death' idea that if identity is created through information and experienced in cyber space then the experience of life in real space will mean the destruction of the artificial reality, identity and the individual. Artificial reality becomes the space we identify with and real space becomes death for our identity.

Rather than accept the premise of technological evolution and global identity creation Mackay [17] has used the concept of escapism to define the loss of reality experienced by many Australians and their search for something more than they have. He identifies some new forms of escapism including a new obsession with the bush, the domestic cave of home, and the information club of cyberspace members as tools for avoiding reality to first transport the individual to a temporary reality and secondly allow a harmless return to everyday life. But what if that life is Laverton? Information technology is being used to create artificial realities from which there may be no desire to return. If escapism is a source of comfort and reassurance then the "goal seems to be to create the impression that one's heart is in the country, even if one's life is firmly based elsewhere" [17]. It is the concept of experience and the input device that becomes reality and allows individuals to return home claiming an outback experience without actually experiencing one. Transients are thereby more like vagabonds wandering through a community.

The experiences of life combine to create a trajectory tracing where an individual has been, where they are going, and how they have shaped identities. The individual who lives in Laverton cannot escape from the fact that Laverton will be connected to them in some way. By attempting to escape through technology an identity is created that can often replace the local community and the technological fix becomes a technological trap [21] that becomes a means of life rather than means of escape. Increased reliance on information input can encase an individual even after return to urban life. The trajectory changes whereby, no longer eager for coffee shops and social life, the individual contains a thirst for information on the lives of fictional, foreign characters from around the globe. This is not a result of the outback experience but from efforts to escape it.

7   Global identity control

Although providing a case-study of a single Australian town and a single point of identity creation the realisations drawn in this article can be applied to both men and women, young and old, and to cultures all over the world. Small communities and those in remote regions all suffer population shortages, conflicting identity crises and from an appealing escape into the artifical world of cyber-space. Be it Laverton, Kiruna, or even Tallinn, people are looking for identity and often finding it in a non-geographical location. This absent identity separates social networks and alienates people from traditional cultural rituals.

Wherever a person resides, even if 'post-modern' and 'modern' are simultaneous ways of living in contemporary culture [9] multiple forms of governance and identity creation are rarely possible. This is especially true when trying to invoke processes to build social capital, where social networks, essential for community development, are influenced by external and internal sources as well as individual and group identity. As personal identity is influenced by all forms of input the understanding of the relationship between personal and community identity is imperative in understanding of human bonds and cultural networks. A remote community cannot survive while its transients are trying desperately to escape. Returning control of information sources to local communities and away from national and global identity will assist in building participation in community life. By helping individuals understand their importance in local community identity, social networks and community development processes will be enhanced. When isolated, the individuals of Laverton are obliged to bond together and share their experiences to create an identity as part of the town through rituals. The use of increased information and technology has served to divide the people, fracture the town and break traditional forms of unity such as national identity, geographical proximity and human contact. Now rituals are performed in private, not as a public group enhancing a social capital network.

For some it will be a short stay in the desert but for others it is a life. Individuals must choose how they spend their time: as part of the physical environment, or the electronic impulses of cyber space technology. Choice is determined by both the information received and how each human embraces it to understand what is

important to 'me'. At the local level information is best provided through reciprocal participation while globally it is through passive one-way technologies. An endless supply of information coupled with continual advances in technology can pose a real and serious threat to a local community as individuals travel multiple avenues of identity creation in search of a reality based on images and concepts from maybe merely fictional worlds.

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