

Lightning Talk Proposal

Presenter: Joanne White, PhD student, ATLAS, University of Colorado at Boulder

Topic: The Latent Sphere of Community in the Network Society

As society moves into a reality of intermingled connectivity between the offline and online spheres, traditionally held notions of identity, community and friendship have become blurred, and call for re-examination. In this new space, individuals continue to seek connections with all they encounter, even if their thoughts and ideals are not aligned. This practice creates communities of people which challenge the notion that homophily is intensified through online social networking, to the exclusion of an array of opinions and experience.

The offline assumptions and descriptions that are commonly ascribed to identity, friends and community do not translate easily to the online sphere. Today, we must consider that for many, online friendships build before the parties meet face to face, and in some instances, they never physically do, or even intend to.

It is therefore almost impossible to define an easy translation of the traditionally established idea of strong and weak ties between the two environments. It has been argued weak ties are predominant in the online sphere. However, we must reflect on these ties. I propose that we view them as a latent sphere of ties rather than individual links.

This lightning talk outlines three key points related to community, discovered through my Master's Thesis research, completed Spring 2010, for the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at CU.

1. There is no longer a separation between the offline and online worlds. We have a truly intertwined existence and the term IRL (in real life) no longer offers a clear delineation between the different identities someone might own. While communities exist in both, they overlap and become indistinct to the extent that alignments and influencers do not become identifiable until a 'crisis' occurs. This crisis serves to create a tightening of ties.
2. Social capital remains key in building communities. In the latent sphere of community capital is highly valued and revolves strongly around identity work, built both online and offline. Research has indicated that impressions of others are felt more strongly if they are introduced primarily through online conversations. These impressions are reinforced through an individual's actions both online and offline.
3. The elements of relationships which define strong and weak ties in the offline sphere are not identifiable in this new sphere of community. Instead, the redefinition, latent ties which tighten over points of mutual interest, best appreciates the myriad relationship networks and communities that exist in our intertwined realm of the network society.