The Internet and the Transformation of the Reality of Everyday Life: Toward a New Analytic Stance in Sociology

Shanyang Zhao, *Temple University*

This article examines the impact of the Internet on the social construction of reality. By revisiting the lifeworld Berger and Luckmann depicted 40 years ago, I seek to highlight the changes the Internet has brought to our everyday lives. I argue that the spread of the Internet has altered the conditions of interpersonal contact, as well as the realms of the lifeworld in which we live. Specifically, the Internet has created a new spatiotemporal zone—the zone of the "there and now," a new mode of communication—the electronic text chat, and a new social gathering place—the online public domain. These creations have in turn contributed to the rise of the realm of "consociated contemporaries," the formation of a new matrix of social contact, the maintenance of the subjective reality through text chat, and the involvement of the online world in the socialization process. In light of such changes, I join those who call for a revision of the existing sociological stance on human interaction.

Forty years ago, Berger and Luckmann (1966) published an influential book on the sociology of knowledge. The book provided a phenomenological account of the social construction of the reality of everyday life. Berger and Luckmann described the reality of everyday life as organized around the "here and now" of the individuals who interacted with each other in the face-to-face situation. However, since the beginning of the 1990s, the world has witnessed a rapid spread of the Internet, especially in the developed countries. In 2004, for example, nearly 70 percent of the adults and 9 of 10 young people between the ages of 12 and 17 years went online in the United States (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin 2005). There is thus a need to find out to what extent the Internet has changed the conditions of social interaction, and whether or not such changes have altered the ways in which individuals construct the reality of their everyday life.

Scholars have been debating the social impact of the Internet for more than a decade (DiMaggio et al. 2001). Skeptics argue that the Internet as a medium of communication is not really new, for electronic communications technology, such as the telegraph and telephone, existed long before the advent of the Internet (Tyler 2002). Even if it is new, it is argued that the Internet, like other electronic media, does not generate new social ties, for online interaction is mostly nested within the existing networks of face-to-face contact (Putnam 2000). Moreover, in situations where new relationships are forged online, such relationships are usually superficial and insignificant (Calhoun 1998). In sum, the Internet is not as revolutionary and transformative as its proponents would like us to believe. Advocates, on the other hand, contend that the Internet is an unparalleled

technology that allows people to communicate with one another regardless of time and space (Hiltz and Turoff 1978). Intimate relationships can be established between complete strangers who interact with each other solely on the Internet. Unlike offline human associations that are inherently constrained by physical proximity, online communities can be based entirely on common interests and mutual liking (Rheingold [1993] 2000). In short, the Internet provides new ways of communication and socializing that fundamentally transform the lifeworld in which we live.

The present article contributes to this ongoing debate on the social impact of the Internet. I approach the main issues from the phenomenological stand-point Berger and Luckmann articulated in their 1966 book. Specifically, I seek to compare and contrast the lifeworld Berger and Luckmann depicted 40 years ago with the Internet society we live in today. In so doing, I intend to show that the advent of the Internet has altered the conditions in which we interact with others in everyday life, and such alterations have led to the rise of new modes of social contact and, consequently, new ways of constructing the lifeworld. In the pages that follow, I will first describe the changes the Internet has brought about to the "contact situations" that individuals encounter in everyday life and then discuss the effects of such changes on the reconfiguration of the realms of the lifeworld. In the concluding section, I will join other scholars in calling for a revision of the existing analytic stance of sociology on social interaction. Instead of using corporeal copresence as the standard for judging all forms of human contact, we must now treat face-to-face interaction as one of the many ways in which individuals come to connect with each other in the emergent Internet era.

Changes in the Conditions of Social Interaction

Conditions of social interaction refer to the totality of the environment in which interpersonal contacts take place. From the perspective of phenomenology, such an environment consists of not only the "contact situations" that directly affect a given social encounter but also the "zones of operation" that partition the lifeworld into different time-space segments. The advent of the Internet has brought about significant changes to this environment by creating (1) a new spatiotemporal zone—the zone of the "there and now," (2) a new mode of communication—the electronic text chat, and (3) a new social gathering place—the online public domain.

"There and Now" Zone

Berger and Luckmann regarded the lifeworld as consisting of "multiple realities." Among these multiple realities is "the reality of everyday life" which presents itself to us as the "paramount reality" (1966:21). The reality of everyday life is structured "both spatially and temporally." The spatial structure of everyday

life extends from "here" which is close at hand to "there" which is far away, and the temporal structure of everyday life goes from "now" which is at present to "then" which is in the past.[1] The combination of these two structural dimensions of the lifeworld produces two basic "zones of everyday life": (1) the "here and now" zone that contains the "world within reach"—"the world in which I act so as to modify its reality, or the world in which I work"; and (2) the "there and then" zone that contains the "world beyond reach"—things "that are not accessible to me in this manner" (1966:22). There are, of course, many "intermediate areas" that connect these two zones to form a spatiotemporal continuum of the lifeworld.

The reality of everyday life, according to Berger and Luckmann, "is organized around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present," and "this 'here' and 'now' is the focus of my attention to the reality of everyday life" (1966:22). Our interest "in the far zones is less intense and certainly less urgent" because the distant world is not immediately accessible to our manipulation (1966:22). However, Berger and Luckmann later found it necessary to modify this depiction for it was untrue even then that individuals were capable of influencing only what was physically nearby in everyday life. Through the telephone, for example, we can be in direct touch with people on the other side of the globe: although they are not here with us, we can reach them there almost instantly. In a later book coauthored with Schutz, Luckmann revised his earlier statement by extending the "world within reach" to the "world within mediated reach," where we can, for instance, "telephone, pursue events on the television screen while they occur on other continents" (Schutz and Luckmann 1973:44). This telephone-based contact space belongs to a new zone of everyday life—the "there and now" zone, which was not fully developed until the advent of the Internet.

The emergence of this "there and now" zone has altered the spatiotemporal structure of the reality of everyday life. Instead of centering on the "'here' of my body and 'now' of my present," the reality of everyday life is now organized around both the "here" of my body and "there" of my mediated reach. Consequently, the focus of our attention to the reality of everyday life is substantially broadened to cover "social phenomena of massive time-space extension" (Giddens 1984:85). As Giddens remarks:

> The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, locationally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In conditions of modernity, . . . locales are thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them. What structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature. (1990:18–9)

Today, more and more distant locales are being connected through the Internet for instant contact, and the world beyond reach is shrinking correspondingly. With the rapid spread of the Internet across the globe in the years to come,

the zone of the "there and now" will continue to expand at an accelerated pace, thereby further altering the spatiotemporal structure of the reality of everyday life.

Electronic Text Chat

Language plays a crucial role in everyday life, for "everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellowmen" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:37). Serving as "an index of subjective meanings," language enables members of a linguistic community to exchange ideas and share experiences, hence "becoming both the basis and the instrument of the collective stock of knowledge" (1966:68).

An important property of language is its "detachability" from the immediate environment in which communication takes place. Through language, people are able to refer to and discuss things that are not present at hand, which renders it possible for the interlocutors to transcend the zone of the "here and now":

> The detachment of language lies much more basically in its capacity to communicate meanings that are not direct expressions of subjectivity "here and now"—I can speak about innumerable matters that are not present at all in the face-to-face situation, including matters I never have and never will experience directly. In this way, language is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulation of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:37)

By language, Berger and Luckmann meant primarily "a system of vocal signs" exchanged in face-to-face situations (1966:36–7). Although detachable from the immediate "here and now," human language is rooted in face-to-face communications. Aside from being accompanied by a rich array of "bodily indices," spoken language possesses "an inherent quality of reciprocity" that distinguishes it from other sign systems. The ability to immediately hear and respond to each other in the simultaneous verbal exchange enables the conversants to "synchronize" the flow of their inner consciousness and provides them with "a continuous, synchronized, reciprocal access" to each other's subjectivities (1966:37–8). Berger and Luckmann maintained that this "intersubjective closeness" obtained in the face-to-face situation was something that "no other sign system can duplicate" (1966:38).

However, detachability and synchronicity can in fact be found in sign systems used outside the face-to-face situation. For instance, simultaneous communications can also take place in electronically mediated settings. Berger and Luckmann pointed this out themselves. In discussing the detachability of language from the immediate "here and now," Berger and Luckmann acknowledged the possibility of having instant communication with distant others, citing the example of "speak[ing] on the telephone or via the radio" (1966:37). Unfortunately, Berger and Luckmann did not further elaborate on this point which

would otherwise have led them to the recognition of the zone of the "there and now." Berger and Luckmann also mentioned writing in passing, referring to it as "a sign system of the second degree" (1966:37). In a way, one can argue that written language actually serves as a better vehicle than oral language does for carrying meanings across space and preserving them in time. "Though words are grounded in oral speech," Ong (1982:12) observes, "writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever." As such, ideas can be "passed on unimpaired to men [and women] distant in time and space from their authors" (Cooley 1956:73). However, written communication in the form of postal correspondence is inherently asynchronous, lacking the simultaneity of oral exchange.

Electronic text chat, which combines the permanence of writing and the synchronicity of speaking, is an entirely new mode of human contact created by the Internet. In instant messaging, chat room, or the multiuser dungeon, distant individuals communicate with each other instantaneously through disembodied electronic text. The simultaneity of text chat allows for "the synchronism of two streams of consciousness" (Schutz [1932] 1967:102), without which, as Pappano (2001:73) puts it, "you can't have a good argument and you can't tell a good joke." Archived text messages capture and preserve the flow of expressed subjectivity that can be retrieved later for careful examination and reflection. Finally, the complete disembodiment of electronic text chat conceals the identity of interlocutors, contributing to the rise of an environment in which interpersonal communication becomes anonymous.

A broader definition of Internet-based text chat also includes asynchronous online messaging, for example, communications through e-mail, listservs, newsgroups, and bulletin boards. Unlike postal correspondence, asynchrony in online messaging is caused primarily by design rather than by delays in the transfer of information. Electronic transmission of text messages is virtually instantaneous, but instant replying requires telecopresence, a condition of communication that is not always available to the users. Asynchronous messaging has been designed to overcome this very problem, allowing messages to be received whenever they arrive and to be responded to whenever the users choose. In other words, users "may enter and receive the materials at a pace, time and place of their own choosing" (Hiltz and Turoff 1978:xxvi). Because of this advantage of temporal flexibility, some scholars believe that asynchronous online text chat "may turn out to be a more important effect of the Internet than liberation from the constraints of space" (Putnam 2000:174).

Online public domain

The reality of everyday life depicted by Berger and Luckmann lacks a public domain where strangers can meet and interact with each other face-to-face. Following Schutz ([1932] 1967), Berger and Luckmann divided the

contemporaneous lifeworld into two zones: the "here and now" zone and the "there and then" zone. In the "here and now" zone, "fellowmen" or people who are mutually acquainted interact with one another in face-to-face situations, and in the "there and then" zone, complete strangers and those who do not know each other well maintain no direct contact. Such dichotomous partitioning, therefore, leaves no room for face-to-face encounters among unacquainted individuals—a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common in modern society.

According to Goffman, public gathering places in corporeal copresence play a unique role in social life. Goffman agrees that face-to-face interactions normally take place among people already acquainted with one another. However, he points out that there are situations in everyday life where "[face-to-face] engagement among the unacquainted" is not only "permissible" but also "obligatory" (Goffman [1963] 1966:125–39). Goffman names three such situations. First, contact between strangers can take place when some of them hold an "exposed position," such as that of a receptionist, a shopkeeper, or a policeman, which opens the incumbent up to be approached by "unacquainted others." Second, contact between strangers can also occur when some of them hold an "opening position," such as that of a salesperson, a street vendor, or, again, a policeman, which gives the incumbent a sort of "license" to approach the unacquainted others. Finally, there are circumstances, such as those found in bars, at cocktail parties, or during carnivals, where unacquainted individuals are "mutually open to each other," each can approach and be approached by the unacquainted other. Situations like the foregoing constitute what is known as the public domain or sphere in which "serendipitous encounters between strangers" (Shaviro 2003:132) take place as part of the routine of everyday life.[2]

Prior to the advent of the Internet, public gathering places existed only in the zone of the "here and now" or the world of face-to-face interaction, but the spread of the Internet has made it possible for such places to also appear in the online world.[3] The online public domain resides in the electronic networks that allow for many-to-many contact, either synchronically or asynchronously, in an anonymous environment. Anonymity is characteristic of all public places. In face-to-face situations, anonymity stems from lack of familiarity among strangers who are brought together by an incidental encounter (Simmel [1908] 1971). In online situations, on the other hand, anonymity results from the disembodiment of the text environment in which interlocutors are unable to see each other. Plain electronic text, retractable screen names, and noninstitutional email addresses all contribute to the masking of a user's true identity, allowing individuals to be in contact and in hiding at the same time.

The online public domain, therefore, provides individuals with a gathering place for establishing acquaintanceship with others outside of face-to-face situations or the zone of the "now and here." In addition to many-to-many

synchronous text chat (e.g., chat room and multiuser dungeons) that takes place in the zone of the "there and now," there are various forms of many-to-many asynchronous text messaging (e.g., listservs and bulletin boards) that occur in the zone of the "there and then." Through these new modes of contact in the online public domain, unacquainted individuals are able to come together, interact with each other, and form "virtual communities" (Rheingold [1993] 2000). For the first time in history, it has become possible for a human association to emerge among complete strangers in the total absence of corporeal copresence.

Transformations of the Lifeworld

The foregoing change in the conditions of social interaction has resulted in the reconfiguration of the reality of everyday life and the transformation of the ways in which individuals construct the lifeworld. The emergence of the mode of electronic text chat, the zone of the "there and now," and the online public domain has led to, among other things, the rise of the realm of consociated contemporaries, the formation of a new matrix of interpersonal communication, the maintenance of the subjective reality through electronic text chat, and the involvement of the online world in the socialization processes. These changes have made the world we live in today considerably different from the one Berger and Luckmann depicted 40 years ago.

Rise of Consociated Contemporaries

The reality of everyday life is "intersubjective" in nature, for it is a world "shared with others." Based on the extent to which individuals' "lived experiences" intersect, Berger and Luckmann divided the contemporaneous lifeworld into two basic realms: the realm of consociates and the realm of mere contemporaries. Consociates, also called fellowmen, are those who have known each other intimately through long-term face-to-face interactions, and mere contemporaries are the rest of the population who remain largely anonymous to each other because of lack of frequent contact. Berger and Luckmann wrote:

> An important aspect of the experience of others in everyday life is thus the directness or indirectness of such experience. At any given time it is possible to distinguish between consociates with whom I interact in face-to-face situations and others who are mere contemporaries, of whom I have only more or less detailed recollections, or of whom I know merely by hearsay. (1966:32)

A close reading of this paragraph reveals that the distinction between these realms has been drawn on the basis of two criteria that are not necessarily always in line with each other: (1) knowledge of others (e.g., mutual familiarity) and (2) form of encounter (e.g., face-to-face contact). While consociates are mutually acquainted through face-to-face interaction, mere contemporaries are mutually unacquainted because of lack of face-to-face interaction. This simple

dichotomy seems to hold in a lifeworld where interpersonal contacts take place mainly in face-to-face situations; however, it becomes problematic when face-to-face interaction is no longer the only way of getting to know others. In the online public domain, for example, complete strangers can get acquainted with each other through disembodied text chat. Even though they have never met face-to-face, online acquaintances may have more intimate knowledge of each other than offline friends do.

Which of the two realms of the lifeworld—consociates or mere contemporaries—do online acquaintances belong to? Using the "knowledge of others" criterion, online acquaintances fall in the realm of consociates because they can be intimately familiar with each other; but using the "form of encounter" criterion, they belong to the realm of mere contemporaries because of the absence of face-to-face interaction. This difficulty suggests that online acquaintances represent an emergent social group that constitutes a new realm of the lifeworld, which may be named, for the lack of a better word, "consociated contemporaries" (Zhao 2004). Consociated contemporaries are therefore those individuals who have never interacted face-to-face with each other but have intimate mutual knowledge through frequent online communication. The rise of this third realm of the lifeworld marks a structural transformation in the reality of everyday life. Today, outside of the zone of the "here and now" stands an online public domain that straddles the zone of the "there and now" and the zone of the "there and then." Through frequent online contacts, both synchronously and asynchronously, individuals come to acquire intimate knowledge of others they have never met in person and, in many instances, never will.

The emergence of the realm of consociated contemporaries changes the anonymity structure of the lifeworld. In the traditional society, intimacy is closely tied to physical proximity and others become "progressively anonymous as they are removed from the 'here and now' of the face-to-face situation" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:33). However, anonymity is completely decoupled from physical distance in the online world. Although lacking the "multiplicity of vivid symptoms" that accompany face-to-face interaction, mediated online communication can generate intimate mutual knowledge by filling in the "anonymity of the typifications" that characterizes mere contemporaries.[4]

New Interaction Matrix

As noted earlier, Berger and Luckmann sought to define realms of the lifeworld in terms of mode of contact. For instance, they described the realm of consociates as consisting of people interacting with each other in corporeal copresence and the realm of mere contemporaries as people lacking face-to-face contact. This approach has run into a number of problems. For one thing, it cannot account for the fact that in everyday life mere contemporaries frequently

come into face-to-face contact with each other in public gathering places, such as shopping malls, parks, and bars. In those places, people remain anonymous while interacting with each other face-to-face. Second, people can get to know each other without face-to-face contact. In the online public domain, for example, acquaintanceships are forged among strangers exclusively through disembodied text chat. Third, it is not true that consociates interact with each other only in face-to-face situations, for they also keep in touch via other modes of contact. It is commonly known that telephone calls and postal exchanges occur most often among people who are already acquainted with each other. In short, there is no fixed one-to-one correspondence between the realm of the lifeworld and mode of contact.

The advent of the Internet has made the realm–mode relationship even more complicated. Online communication has not only given rise to a new social realm but also altered the "interaction mix" of the existing realms of the lifeworld. As Thompson notes, "social life in the modern world is increasingly made up of forms of interaction which are not face-to-face in character. With the rise of mediated interaction and quasi-interaction, the "interaction mix" of social life has changed" (1995:87).

Today, in every social realm of the lifeworld there is a plurality of modes of contact an individual can choose from to interact with others. In the realm of consociates, individuals may interact with each other face-to-face, by phone, by letter, via email or instant messaging. In the realm of consociated contemporaries, individuals may keep in touch with each other through chat room, listservs, bulletin boards, as well as email, instant messaging, and the telephone. Finally, in the realm of mere contemporaries, individuals may communicate with each other face-to-face, by phone, by e-mail, or through interactive devices such as the automated teller machine (ATM), automated voice system, and Web portal. Clearly, what makes one realm different from another is not any single mode of contact but the differential mix of multiple modes. Of course, not all modes of contact carry the same weight in the different realms of the lifeworld. Face-to-face interaction is the predominant mode of contact in the realm of consociates where all other forms of contact are embedded in the networks of face-to-face relationships (Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002; Pool 1977; Shklovski, Kraut, and Rainie 2004). Face-to-face interaction, however, plays a less crucial role in the realm of mere contemporaries, where its importance will further decline as direct human-to-human contacts are being increasingly replaced by human-to-computer interaction (Palmer 1995). Finally, face-to-face interaction is virtually absent from the realm of consociated contemporaries in which disembodied text chat remains the most preferred mode of contact.

The change in the "interaction mix" of the lifeworld invariably alters the politics of interpersonal contact. When new modes of contact are being adopted,

"once appropriate behavior may become inappropriate" (Meyrowitz 1985:4), resulting in the formation of a new normative order of interaction. For example, e-mail is not just a medium of asynchronous contact, it is also a tool that can be used to "relegate" others to "a subrelationship in which one can respond when one chooses," and such contacts can be "elevated to phone or live interactions" if the relationships are later deemed important (Pappano 2001:56–89). Similarly, human-to-computer interaction through the ATM, automated voice response system, interactive Web portal, and the like are ideal for dealing with what Calhoun (1998) calls "tertiary relationships" that are indirect and impersonal in nature. For these reasons, it has been argued that "the transition from in-person to online is not just trading slow for fast but is renegotiating the terms of engagement and the ground rules for living" (Pappano 2001:2).

Text Chat as Reality-Maintenance

In the world of everyday life, verbal exchanges between individuals in the form of chitchat can serve an important function of "reality-maintenance." The reality of everyday life is constantly maintained and reaffirmed in the routines of interpersonal communication. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966:152), "the most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation," for "one may view the individual's everyday life in terms of the working away of a conversational apparatus that ongoingly maintains, modifies and reconstructs his subjective reality." The ultimate purpose of reality-maintenance is "to safeguard a measure of symmetry between objective and subjective reality" (1966:147).

The "reality-generating potency" of conversation lies in its capacity to objectify the world through transforming the subjective experiences of different individuals into a collective order, and through establishing this order, "language realizes a world, in the double sense of apprehending and producing it" (1966:153). Casual conversation, or chitchat, which is seemingly trivial and insignificant, thereby plays an important role in maintaining the taken-for-granted world of everyday life:

> If this is understood, one will readily see that the great part, if not all, of everyday conversation maintains subjective reality. Indeed, its massivity is achieved by the accumulation and consistency of casual conversation—conversation that can afford to be casual precisely because it refers to the routines of a taken-for-granted world. The loss of casualness signals a break in the routines and, at least potentially, a threat to the taken-for-granted reality. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:153)

More specifically, casual conversation is important because it takes place "against the background of a world that is silently taken for granted" (1966:152). By taking the attitude of "things-as-usual" in chitchats, conversants implicitly confirm an established routine of everyday life. Conversely, conversation modifies reality by selectively focusing on certain aspects of it and neglecting others,

"thus the subjective reality of something that is never talked about comes to be shaky" (1966:53).

However, Berger and Luckmann believed that verbal exchange taking place in corporeal copresence was the only effective form of conversation for the purpose of reality-maintenance, all other techniques were, in their words, "greatly inferior to the face-to-face conversations" (1966:155). The main reason is that, to maintain the subjective reality effectively, conversations must be "continual" and "frequent." While frequency of conversation "enhances its reality-generating potency," disruptions of continuity "posit a threat to the subjective reality in question" (1966:154). Slow and transportation-dependent postal correspondence, for example, lacks the kind of continuity and frequency required of an effective conversation. But what about conversations over the phone that can be carried out as continually and frequently as face-to-face conversations? Berger and Luckmann remained conspicuously silent on this matter.

It is well known that most telephone conversations are "idle talks" in the sense that people call each other "just to talk" (Putnam 2000). Although they appear to be trivial or idle, "repeated brief telephone contacts" help prevent personal relationships from "atrophy[ing] with time" (Pool 1977:383). Text chat on the Internet can serve the same function. Like the telephone, text chat in the form of e-mail and instant messaging enables acquaintances to engage in frequent contact without being physically together. Yet, unlike telephone conversations that take place mostly among existing social ties, disembodied text chat in the online public domain allows unacquainted individuals to meet together and construct "an entire society online . . . a town, a club, a clique, a fantasy world . . . or anything one wants to be" (quoted in Chesebro 1985:205). Because of the latter feature, online text chat plays a more prominent role than the telephone does in reality-generation and maintenance.

Socialization Goes Online

A very important task of social construction is socializing young people into effective members of society. An individual is born with a predisposition toward sociality, and the individual becomes a member of society through internalizing the norms and values of society. Berger and Luckmann differentiated two major phases of socialization: "primary socialization" that proceeds in childhood, through which an individual acquires a self and a worldview; and "secondary socialization" that occurs in adulthood, through which an individual is inducted into different "subworlds" of the society. Following Mead (1934) and Cooley (1956), Berger and Luckmann emphasized the role of both "significant others" and the "generalized other" in the socialization processes. An individual comes to view him- or herself by taking the attitudes of significant others and learns to integrate the discrete views of concrete others by identifying with "a generality

of others," that is, with a society. The identification of the perspective of the generalized other marks the formation of a coherent self-concept and the corresponding worldview. The individual from that point on enters the second phase of socialization that involves the internalization of "institutional or institution-based 'subworlds.'" This phase lasts for the rest of the individual's life.

A threat to the success of primary socialization is what Berger and Luckmann (1966:167) called the "heterogeneity in the socializing personnel," namely, "different significant others mediating different objective realities to the individual." Discrepancies in views and attitudes among parents, teachers, and peers, for example, are likely to have a negative impact on the effectiveness of primary socialization. Fortunately, according to Berger and Luckmann, this is a less serious problem in the first phase of socialization:

> In primary socialization there is no problem of identification. There is no choice of significant others. Society presents the candidate for socialization with a predefined set of significant others, whom he must accept as such with no possibility of opting for another arrangement. . . . Since the child has no choice in the selection of his significant others, his identification with them is quasi-automatic. For the same reason, his internalization of their particular reality is quasi-inevitable. The child does not internalize the world of his significant others as one of many possible worlds. He internalizes it as *the* world, the only existent and only conceivable world, the world tout court. (1966:134)

Although lack of choice does not necessarily mean lack of discrepancies, it is generally true that a child lives in a relatively more homogenous social environment than an adult does. Prior to the advent of the Internet, the significant others a child interacted with all resided in the realm of consociates, primarily in the following three domains: family, school, and neighborhood. Restrained by limited mobility and close adult supervision, most children came into contact with essentially the same people in the three familiar domains of their offline world day in and day out. The spread of the Internet, however, has added a fourth domain—the online world—to the lifeworld of children. The presence of this new social domain changes the dynamics of primary socialization by enabling a child to interact with a much diverse and complex outside world without leaving home. As research has shown:

> When the construction of the self happens online in cyberspace, as is occurring at an increasingly rapid rate, taking the attitude of the other becomes awfully complex. It is not just me and my mom anymore. But it is also not just me and my family, or me and my community. Without fixed and distinct communities, the range of potential interactions becomes infinite. These are, after all, so many "others," so many unique identities to choose from. . . . Consequently, there will be no fixed self, but multiple selves, and identity will be further fragmented with each interaction in cyberspace. (Lipton 1996:343)

The impact of the involvement of the online world in the process of socializing children, especially, adolescents, can hardly be overestimated, for the spread of

the Internet has drastically altered the traditional ways of transferring the stock of social knowledge from one generation to another (Zhao 2005).

Toward a New Analytic Stance

The above analyses show that the advent of the Internet has brought about significant changes to the lifeworld. The world Berger and Luckmann depicted 40 years ago was primarily a world of physical copresence, where the reality of everyday life centered on the "here and now" of the individuals who interacted with each other mostly in face-to-face situations. The world we live in today, however, is characterized by "the tremendous expansion of the time-space distanciation of social activity" (Giddens 1984:37) and by the fact that mediated communication among dispersed individuals becomes indispensable for the generation as well as maintenance of the reality of everyday life. This transformation of social reality has therefore outdated the traditional stance of sociology on human contact that privileges corporeal copresence.

The phenomenological theory of the lifeworld Berger and Luckmann constructed 40 years ago gave its analytic primacy to the mode of face-to-face interaction. All other forms of human contact were regarded as "derivative," "remote," and "greatly inferior." This "pro-proximity" analytic stance still dominates the current practice of sociological theorizing. As Cerulo points out:

> We tend to locate intimate or quality exchanges within the heading "direct," a category that currently demands physical copresence. In contrast, we most often describe mediated interaction as impersonal, ingenuous, and fleeting. (1997:49)

Specifically, people taking this analytic stance regard face-to-face interaction as the standard for judging all other modes of human contact. Postal correspondence and telephone contact are considered "secondary" because they are used mainly as a supplement to face-to-face interaction. Internet-based online communication is, for the most part, seen as detrimental, with the exception of e-mail that is construed as nested within the existing networks of face-to-face relationships. Some scholars in this camp regard all forms of online communication as "asocial" in nature because, they maintain, "time on the Internet—email or otherwise—is fundamentally time spend alone" (Nie, Hillygus, and Erbring 2002:239). Thus, they argue that "by using the Internet, people are substituting poorer quality social relationships for better relationships, that is, substituting weak ties for strong ones" (Kraut et al. 1998:1029).

However, an increasing number of sociologists have been advocating a change to this traditional stance on human interaction. Meyrowitz, for example, criticized Goffman's study of face-to-face interaction for "ignor[ing] the influence and effects of media" (1985:4) and sought to correct that by combining the copresence theory with McLuhan's (1964) media analysis. Meyrowitz maintained

that electronic media had changed the "situational geography" of human communication in which individuals found themselves "in contact with others in new ways" (1985:5). A similar point was also made by Poster, who argued that electronic mediation of human contact had produced a new structure of interaction:

> [S]uch communications at a distance are in practice new structures of discourse. Older models of communicative interactions based on face-to-face or print situations are not simply expanded or multiplied by their electronic mediation. The mediation changes the structure, the conditions that underlie symbolic exchange. (1990:45)

Thompson carried this argument further, pointing out that use of communication media does not just create new conditions and new forms of interaction, but, more importantly, it "transforms the spatial and temporal organization of social life," producing "new kinds of social relationships" and "new modes of exercising power" (1995:4). In other words, the rise of online communication leads to a social transformation that goes much deeper than a mere shift in ways of contacting others.

The advent of the Internet and the ensuing social transformation has thus reconfigured the lifeworld we live in, specifically, the ways in which we connect with others. In this new environment, face-to-face interaction is only one of the many contact options individuals can choose from for "social relating." Face-to-face relationships used to be the context within which all other forms of contact (e.g., postal and telephone contacts) were embedded. Typically, people came to know each other in face-to-face situations first and used mail and the telephone afterward to help maintain the relationships. Now, this trajectory of acquaintanceship development can be entirely reversed. For example, it is possible for people to get to know each other first in online chat room, then move to e-mail exchange, to telephone contact, and, finally, to in-person meetings. In such cases, face-to-face interaction is the outcome rather than the basis of mediated communication. There are also instances in which social relationships are developed and maintained in total absence of corporeal copresence (e.g., the realm of consociated contemporaries). In other words, it is no longer true that the face-to-face situation is the "prototypical case of social interaction" and "all other cases are derivatives of it" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:28). Online communication, for example, can now become the basis upon which offline face-to-face contacts develop.

The emergence of a multimodal structure of human interaction has redefined the meaning of sociality. In a society of physical copresence, the distinction between "alone" and "with others" is usually unproblematic: alone means by oneself and with others means being in the presence of others. Today, this distinction becomes less obvious: one can be physically alone yet in real-time contact with multiple people. In online text chat, for example, one may be in a

room all by oneself, thus alone; but, at the same time, one is engaging in live discussions with a number of people, thus together with others. This new mode of connecting, which has been aptly dubbed "being alone together" (Locke 1998:186), shows that corporeal copresence is but one way of being with others, other forms of being together with others are also possible through technological mediation, most notably, the Internet.

New modes of connecting have given rise to new forms of human intimacy. Traditionally, anonymity is associated with strangers and intimacy with friends. Anonymous strangers become intimate friends mainly through face-to-face interaction in corporeal copresence. In the online world, however, people can get to know each other very well without ever seeing each other. Disembodied online contacts can therefore generate a relationship characterized by "anonymous intimacy" or "intimate anonymity." Through online text chat, for example, individuals can be intimately familiar with and completely anonymous to each other at the same time. Research has shown that such anonymous friendships can produce a major impact on a person's social life (Chayko 2002).

In light of those changes, we must now update our theory of human interaction. It is no longer productive to stress the divide between face-to-face interaction and all other forms of human contact, pitting the former against the latter. In the Internet era, human interaction takes multiple forms, each serving a different purpose. Face-to-face interaction remains to be a fundamental way of relating to others, but this does not mean that mediated contacts are inferior or insignificant, for it is not face-to-face interaction alone but its combination with other forms of human contact that create the world in which we live today. Thus, to have a full understanding of the ways in which individuals connect with each other in the increasingly distanciated lifeworld, it is imperative that we study not only human copresence in the zone of the "here and now" but also social interactions in the far zones that are mediated by communications technology. As our lifeworld has changed, so must our theory about it.

ENDNOTES

[1]There is also a "future" dimension to the temporal structure of everyday life, which creates the realm of "successors" in the lifeworld.

[2]Although Berger and Luckmann did not explicitly articulate a "public domain" in their depiction of everyday life, they made occasional references to the occurrence of face-to-face encounters among strangers in public places, for example, encounters with the "traffic police" or the "newspaper vendor on the street corner."

[3]Prior to the Internet, a special online public domain was once created via telegraphing and citizen brand (CB) radio, which allowed strangers to engage in many-to-many contact through the

Morse code (Standage 1998) as well as the anonymous "handles" similar to today's "screen names" (Cowlan 1979). However, this public domain was accessible only to a few telegraphers and CB radio operators.

⁴It should be noted, however, that schemes of typification are employed even in face-to-face interactions. As Berger and Luckmann (1966:32) have pointed out, "our face-to-face interaction will be patterned by these typifications as long as they do not become problematic through interference on his part."

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