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The Death of Distance

In this tutorial we will discuss the spatial aspect of Internet-enabled communication, in particular in relation to friendship. Claims for a “Death of Distance” are not new but have been voiced with the advent of every modern communication technology like the radio or the telephone. Therefore the tutorial will review some important works that have been inquiring into how much society is developing away from place-based communities to more spatially dispersed social networks. In addition we will discuss some recent works that offers ways to research the geographic distribution of social relations. The literature and our discussion should enable you to critically assess to what extent ICTs help people to overcome distance for their social relations.

Despite the affordances of the technology for long-distance communication and interaction, people do not use the Internet to create and maintain long-distance social relations (ie. beyond the place they are living in). Discuss!

Festinger, L., S. Schachter, et al. (1950). Social Pressures in Informal Groups. New York, Harper and Bros.

A classic text describing the relationship between distance and friendship. You should be alright to just read the review in the American Journal of Sociology.

Fischer, C. S. (1992). America calling : a social history of the telephone to 1940. Berkeley ; Oxford, University of California Press.

Another classic text, highlighting that the Internet was not the first electronic medium in which hopes for the death of distance were inscribed. Chapter 7 on Local Attachment and Chapter 9 (Conclusion) should be useful reading.

Wellman, B. (2001). "Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking." International Journal of Urban and Regional Research **25**(2): 227-252. *Barry Wellman is the great old man of social network analysis and much of his work did analyse how social networks change in response to new technological affordances. This paper links his early (ie. pre-Internet) work with his great contributions to the analysis of ICT-supported social networks on the neighbourhood level.*

Barlow, J. P. (1996). "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." Retrieved 07.05.2007, from <http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>.

You might know this short text already and it does not directly address our issue here but it gives a useful insight into the mindset of the early Internet pioneers and their perception of how the Internet will transcend “the real life”.

Benkler, Y. (2006). The wealth of networks : how social production transforms markets and freedom. New Haven, Conn. ; London, Yale University Press.
Benkler is a huge advocate of the benefits of a networked information environment as he calls it and in Chapter 10 (available from <http://www.congo-education.net/wealth-of-networks/ch-10.htm>) he also elaborates on its impact on social relations.

Cummings, J. N., J. B. Lee, et al. (2006). Communication Technology and Friendship During the Transition from High School to College. Computers, Phones, and the Internet: Domesticating Information Technology. R. Kraut, M. Brynin and S. Kiesler. Oxford, Oxford University Press: 265-278.
Presents not only a useful review of relevant literature but contributes empirical data to analyse how different media might affect long-distance friendship in different ways.

Utz, S. (2007). "Media use in long-distance friendships." Information, Communication & Society **10**(5): 694 - 713.

Utz highlights

Similarly to Cummings et al, Utz looks at which medium is best suited for different needs to maintain long-distance friendships.

Gilbert, E., K. Karahalios, et al. (2008). The Network in the Garden: An Empirical Analysis of Social Media in Rural Life. SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems.

Gilbert et al present a very interesting approach in collecting data to analyse social networks in the age of social network sites such as MySpace. This allows them to offer very specific measures of distance between friends. Also, their focus on differences between rural and urban MySpace users does again highlight the significance of geography in the network society.

Have a look at the following studies and see what they can tell you about how people use the Internet to establish and maintain social contacts in relation to distance:

- Lenhart, A. and M. Madden (2007). Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview. Pew Internet & American Life Project. Washington, D.C.
- Dutton, W. H. and E. J. Helsper (2007). Oxford Internet Survey 2007 Report: The Internet in Britain. Oxford Internet. Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute: 89.
- Livingstone, S. and M. Bober (2005). UK children go online: Final report of key project findings. London, UK, London School of Economics and Political Science.