



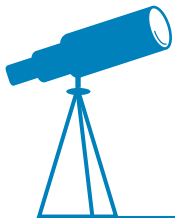
# **A HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter and the next will explore the history of social media and cultural approaches to its study. For our purposes, the history of social media can be split into three rough-hewn temporal divisions or ages: the Age of Electronic Communications (late 1960s to early 1990s), the Age of Virtual Community (early 1990s to early 2000s), and the Age of Social Media (early 2000s to date). This chapter examines the first two ages. Beginning with the Arpanet and the early years of (mostly corporate) networked communications, our history takes us into the world of private American online services such as CompuServe, Prodigy, and GENIE that rose to prominence in the 1980s. We also explore the internationalization of online services that happened with the publicly-owned European organizations such as Minitel in France. From there, we can see how the growth and richness of participation on the Usenet system helped inspire the work of early ethnographers of the Internet. As well, the Bulletin Board System was another popular and similar form of connection that proved amenable to an ethnographic approach. The research intensified and developed through the 1990s as the next age, the Age of Virtual Community, advanced. Corporate and news sites like Amazon, Netflix, TripAdvisor, and Salon.com all became recognizable hosts for peer-to-peer contact and conversation. In business and academia, a growing emphasis on 'community' began to hold sway, with the conception of 'virtual community' crystallizing the tendency. A developing field of ethnographies of online environments began to see life online as an evolving cultural context. It was against this conceptual and empirical background that netnography was developed and initially defined as a method for exploring cyberculture and online community. However, the electronic winds of change were already swirling. The translation of Livejournal and webpages into weblogs transitioned online socialities from more collective and communal forms such as newsgroups into more individualized and commodifiable formats, helping to usher in the current age, the Age of Social Media.

## THE AGE OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS: 1960s–1990s

### THE QUEST FOR SOCIAL MEDIA HISTORY



Instructions: Spend 10 minutes investigating the origins of social media. What can you find? When did your sources say that social media began? Discuss with a peer who engaged in a similar exercise. What can you learn from this? Now have a look at Figure 2.1, and then read on.

2.1

Social media histories usually start with an obligatory recounting of the early days of the Internet’s founding in the 1960s, including the first message sent over the Arpanet in 1969, immortalized in Werner Herzog’s documentary *Lo and Behold, Reveries of the Connected World* (Herzog, 2016). From there, many histories skip a few decades, jumping to Tim Berner Lee’s development in 1989 of protocols to link hypertext documents together into what became known as the World Wide Web. Five years later, we usually learn about the launch of Mosaic Netscape, the world’s first browser. Then, in 2004, Facebook was created and the age of what we have come to know as social media began. However, those unavoidable histories actually miss a lot of the action. Although those particular milestones are certainly important to our understanding of social media – and thus of netnography – many important developments actually helped establish the world of social media between Charley Kline first sending his ‘lo’ message in 1969 from UCLA to Stanford and Mosaic’s browser launch in 1994. Figure 2.2 depicts a map of the original four Arpanet sites. As you can surmise from the figure, the precursor to today’s Internet was something like a connection of four computers into a network, producing a device similar to an email server.

As you might imagine, bandwidth was exceedingly precious in the early years of the online world. Because it was originally funded by the government, merely social forms of communication were prohibited or severely constrained in those days. Hinting at the entrepreneurial and ideological motivations that comprise many contemporary social media communications, a 1982 handbook on computing at MIT’s Artificial Intelligence Lab warned users that ‘sending electronic mail over the Arpanet for commercial profit or political purposes is both anti-social and illegal’ (Stacy, 1982: 9). However, the same handbook also stated that ‘personal messages to other Arpanet subscribers (for example, to arrange a get-together or check and say a friendly hello) are generally not considered harmful’. These are netiquette types of rules, the stated social norms that many of us are familiar with from FAQs and other guides to specific online behavior. Archival work could be done on documents such as these

NETNOGRAPHY

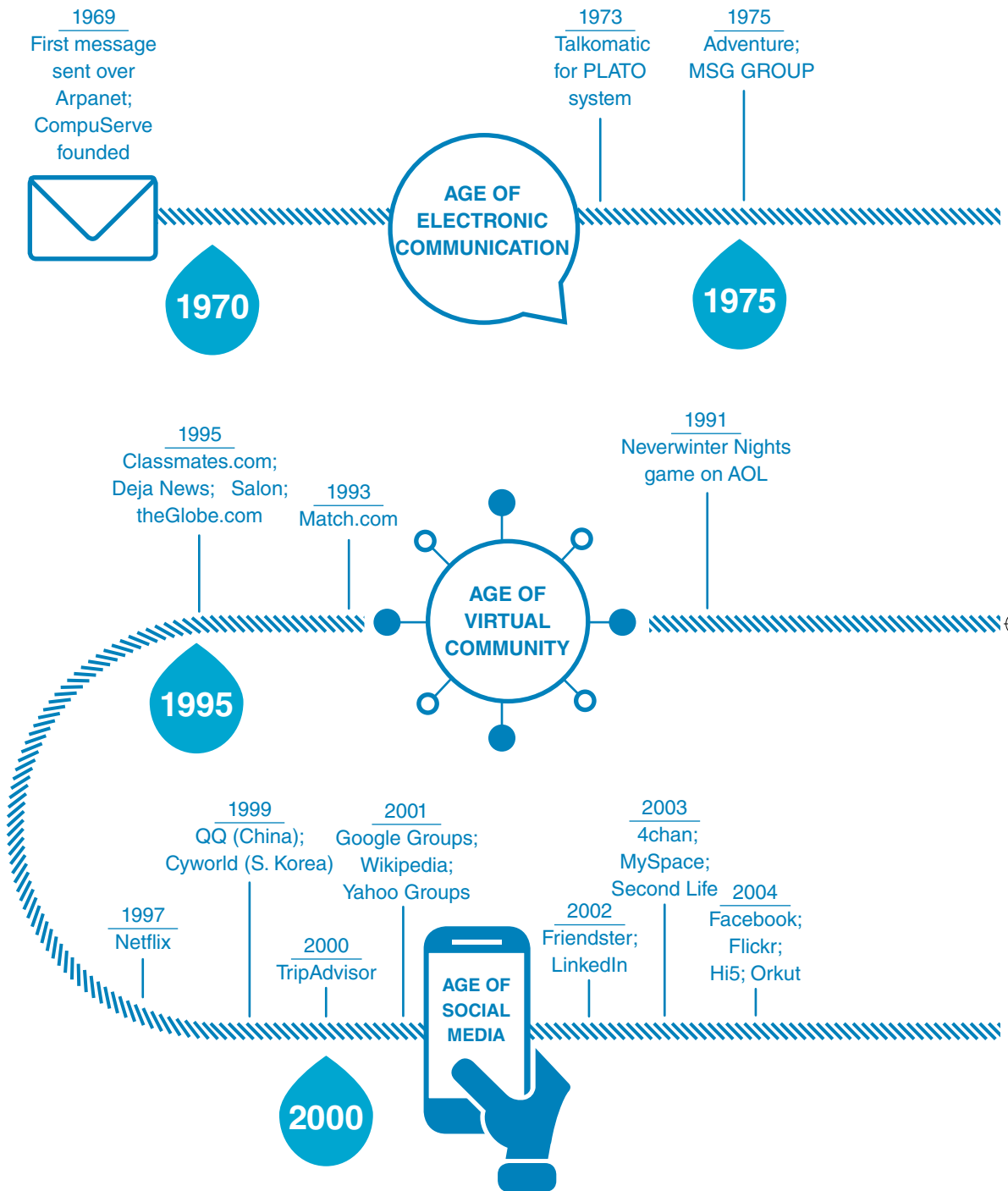
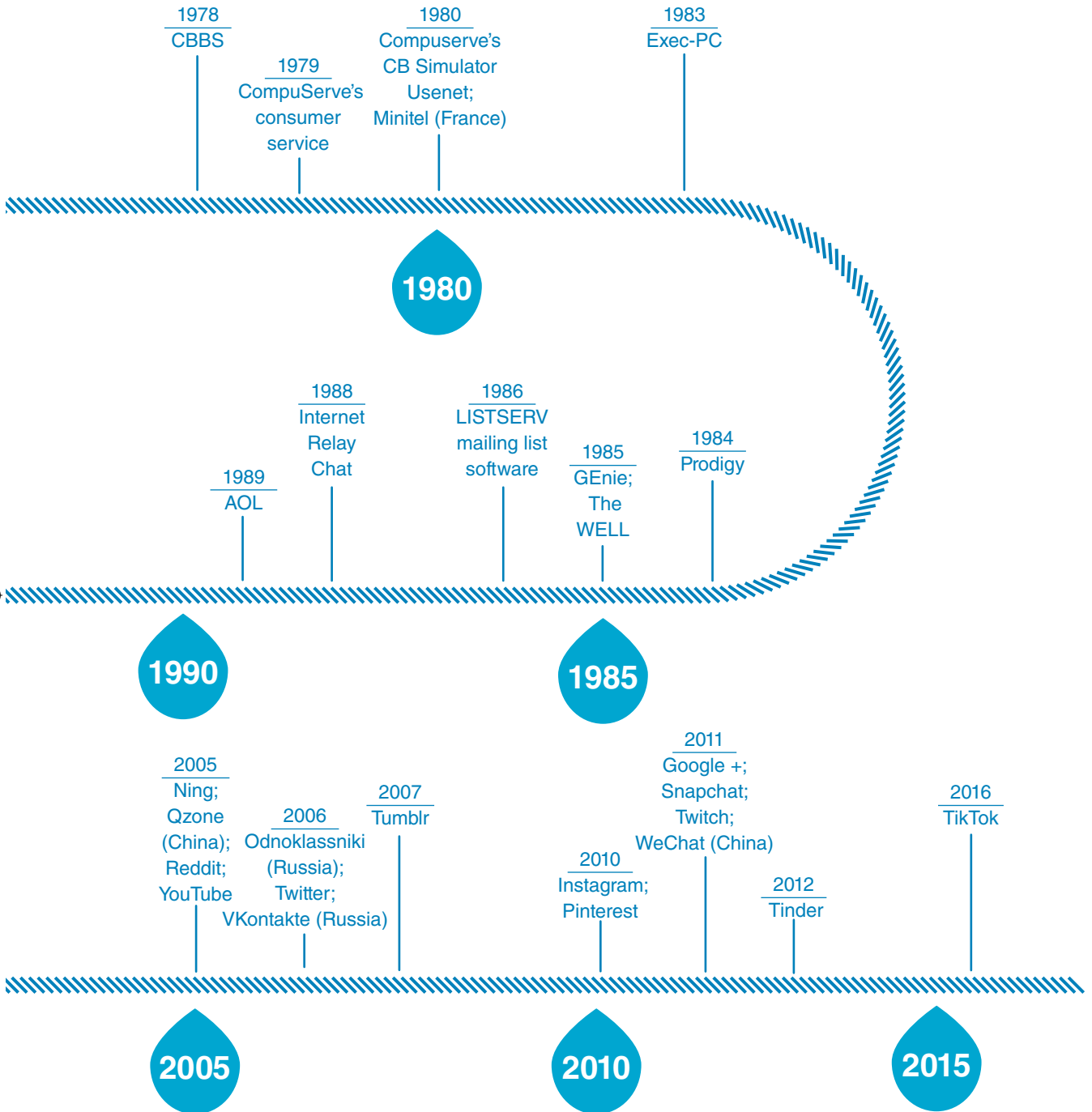
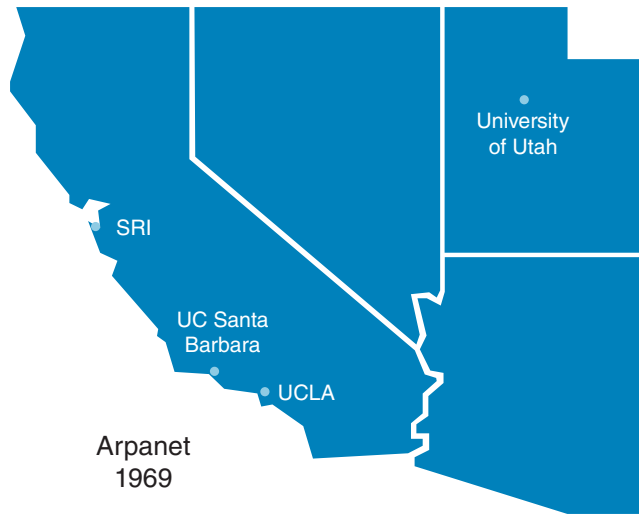


Figure 2.1 The history of social media





**Figure 2.2** Original Arpanet sites

to provide a historically-grounded and netnographic-type portrayal of social media's early days. What it would likely reveal about the early years of the Arpanet, along with its middle and latter years, is that it was full of conflicts and misunderstandings from the clashings of the different worldviews of people – as captured in a report on the first two decades of the Net, written in a scientific journal published NASA report in 1989 (Denning, 1989).

The ideological war and harmful behaviors in the Arpanet archives remind us about the importance of privacy, and one-to-one or selective communication. This, of course, is email. And email – which we must consider one of the most successful social applications of information technology to date – began in the 1960s and started to spread around 1973. Very early. Before the Arpanet, the phone networks had already been using their own digital-to-analog modems. Because email is not intended for the public production and distribution of content, it would typically not be included as a form of social media. Yet the introduction of listserv software for managing email lists made individual-to-individual private email much more public and social. Email lists are thus an important form of communication existing in a hazy gray zone between public and private, individual media and social media. A number of interesting netnographies have, in fact, been conducted on data gathered from listservs and other email lists. See, for example Pentina and Amos (2001).

In the academic world, our understanding of the evolving nature of social communications was exponentially increased by the perceptive work of a number of early social media researchers who were attuned to the cultural elements of the phenomenon. Among the first was a husband-and-wife team: computer scientist Murray Turoff and

sociologist Starr Roxanne Hiltz. Together, they wrote one of the earliest books about how people were beginning to use computer networks (or ‘computer conferencing’) to socialize, congregate, and organize, reflecting brilliant sociological insights that established Hiltz as a luminary. Published twelve years before the World Wide Web, *The Network Nation* (Hiltz and Turoff, 1978) foresaw a world of commonplace social media – and its researching. Hiltz and Turoff, along with other perceptive scholars of the early social networks like Jan van Dijk, Barry Wellman, and Manuel Castells, wrote that online technologies were creating new social universes, media and relational phenomena with vast effects upon culture, politics, and economies. Each of them appreciated the role of situated, contextualized research of online phenomenon. Each of them also paid attention to the institutional interweaving of science, systems, networks, and media with the public and private interests of people and organizations as they intermingled online. These early researchers informed us that the interconnected networking technologies and ever-more-sophisticated communications systems would have massive social and cultural implications that would keep ramifying and accelerating change.

**COMPARING SOCIAL MEDIA YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

**2.2**

What sorts of activities do you think are unique to today’s social media? When do you think they started? Write down your assumptions about social media’s history. Then, read on.

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Again and again in our historic exploration, we will see that the easy-to-use software structures, affordances, and patterns of behavior and communication, which are familiar and institutionalized in contemporary social media, were established many years ago in systems such as Minitel, Bildschirmtext, CompuServe, GENie and BBS. Politics, ideology, conflict, and vicious disagreement have always been a part of the online social experience. The easy crossover between types of social communications and accompanying acts, expressed, for example, in the desire to meet someone in

person who one has met online – this too has long been a part of online experience. Sexuality, dating, intimate relationships, rip-off schemes, and religion – all of these can be found in the half-century long history of social media. The origins and contours of all of these institutionalized elements of social media are matters with which all contemporary netnographers should be familiar so that they are not caught up in the ostensible ‘newness’ of social phenomena that, in all likelihood, have been going on since before they were born.

## Private American Online Services in the Seventies and Eighties: CompuServe, Prodigy, and GEnie

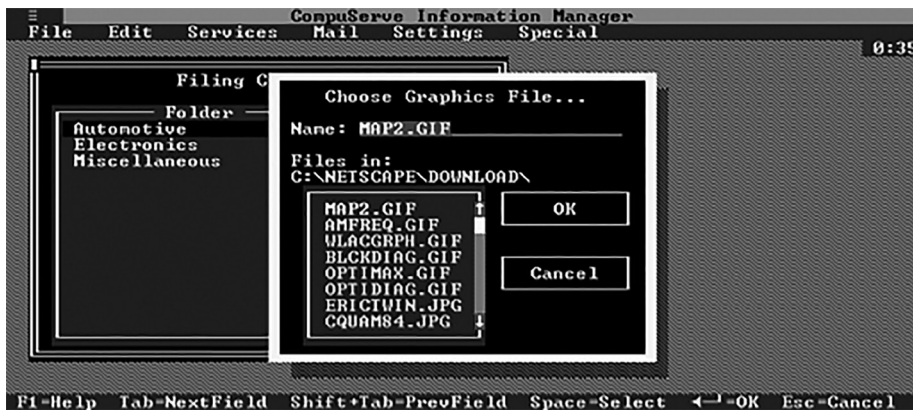


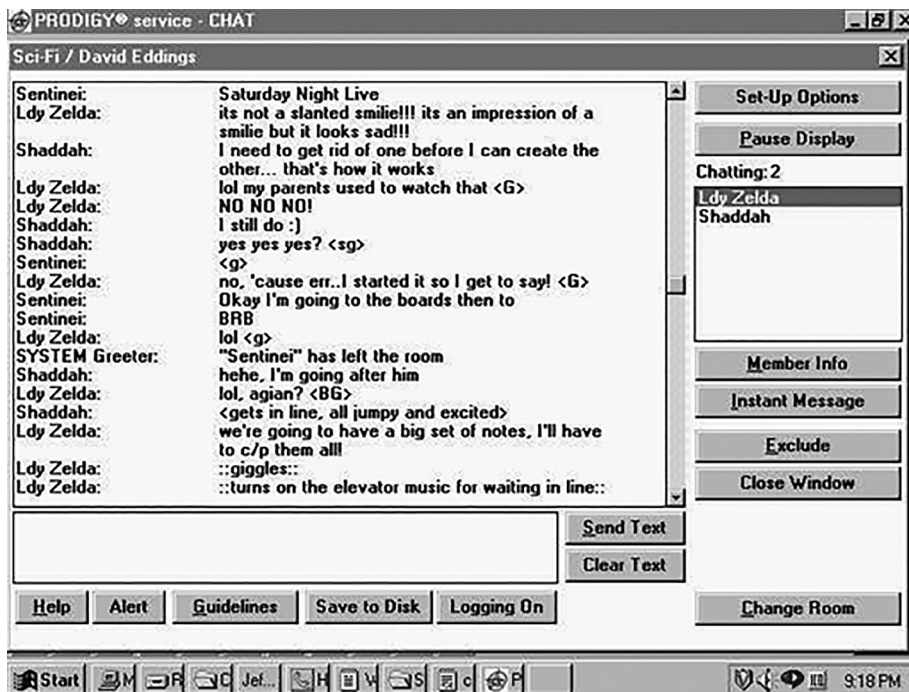
Figure 2.3 CompuServe screenshot showing file interface

And so, let us enter the time portal and traverse it back to 1969, the year of the Beatles’ last public performance, the year that Boeing debuted the 747, Woodstock was held, and the Arpanet was founded. Although rarely heralded for it, 1969 is also noteworthy for another milestone event in the history of social media: the founding of CompuServe. The brainchild of a subsidiary of an Ohio insurance company, CompuServe was the first major commercial online service provider in the United States. It ended up dominating the North American domestic private in-home online communication and information access industry in the 1980s. A screenshot of a late 1980s CompuServe interface is depicted in Figure 2.3. CompuServe remained a major influence through the mid-1990s. For early users, it offered up a veritable cornucopia of video-text services with a recognizably strong social media component.

In 1980, CompuServe offered the first public, commercial multi-user chat program, arguably one of the earliest and most successful of the original social media



applications. The ‘CB Simulator’, as CompuServe’s online text chat system was called, led to all sorts of interesting gatherings, foreshadowing the social fecundity of later connective media. Using the CB Simulator on CompuServe in the early 1980s, people were dating online, talking through text. Users organized real world events to meet one another. An online wedding occurred on the medium. And an online ethnography of events transpiring on CompuServe’s CB Simulator was written by Lindsay van Gelder (1991), which might possibly stand as the world’s first netnography.



**Figure 2.4** Prodigy chat function screenshot, showing the textual inventiveness of conversants

CompuServe hosted a series of popular online games, such as the Island of Kesmai, a historically important multi-user dungeon game and precursor of the MMORPG genre noted for its innovative use of pseudo-graphics. CompuServe revolutionized social media by introducing the GIF file format that greatly simplified the exchange of visual images, and which remains one of the standard visual file formats to this day. Finally, it offered its users a vast variety of message forums that covered a diverse number of topics, providing a bulletin board-like experience that used a combination of communal ‘sysop’ and compensated management. In 1984, the American

companies CBS, IBM, and Sears together launched Trintex, a competitor to CompuServe. Changing its name to Prodigy, the new videotex competitor used advertising and its own fully staffed newsroom to grow the market. And in the same year, General Electric entered the market with its GENie offering.



Figure 2.5 GENie screenshot of an 'Apple Mafia' technology aficionado group

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, CompuServe, Prodigy, and GENie offered American consumers an established and increasingly sophisticated variety of online media and social media experiences. Figure 2.4 provides a glimpse into the early world of chat rooms that was already fully developed well before this screenshot of a Prodigy interface was taken in the early 1990s. GENie, for example, was known for its sophisticated online games, which included massively multiplayer games and those with 3D graphics. GENie also had a well-developed system of 'RoundTables', that included message boards, chatrooms, and libraries for permanent files, all organized around particular topics such as Astrology, Aviation, Comics and Animation, Health, Music, Pets, Jerry Pournelle, ShowBiz, Sports, Religion and Philosophy, New Age beliefs, and many others. One such GENie roundtable, used by Apple computer aficionados, an organic early manifestation of a self-organizing online brand fan community, is depicted in the screenshot shown in Figure 2.5.

By the early 1990s, CompuServe, Prodigy, and GENie were offering their users thousands of moderated forums. The post, reply, thread, and subthread structures of these forums and roundtables closely resembled the moderated bulletin board systems that persist to this day on the contemporary web, such as those on Facebook, Reddit, BBS, Usenet, and in Twitter feeds. In the early 1990s, both CompuServe and Prodigy transitioned from developing and offering their own private online services to

offering users access to the World Wide Web. Eventually, they succumbed to the marketing might of America Online, or AOL, a company that began in 1983 as a gaming platform for early consoles and home computers.

## Internationalization, Expansion, and Ethnography

One of the most interesting and successful early social media application-running devices appeared in 1978 in France as a creation of French R&D, financed by public money, and designed for public benefit: a socialist Internet. Minitel was a publicly-owned service of France Télécom that eventually offered thousands of different online services to over 25 million French citizens. Among its offerings were message boards that allowed ordinary users to create, distribute, and receive content on a plenitude of different topics. In 1986, French university students used Minitel to coordinate a national strike, providing one of the earliest examples of social media activism. Systems similar to Minitel were introduced (albeit less successfully) in a range of different countries in the 1980s, including Germany's Bildschirmtex, Finland's TeleSamp, Italy's Videotel, and Viditel in the Netherlands. Just as social media does today, all of these services provided different ways for regular users to produce and publish content, as well as to connect, circulate, and comment on others' content in a variety of ways.

And while France and many of the European nations were experimenting successfully with the publicly-funded progenitors of social media, two American universities, one private and one public, were collaborating to create and launch a for-the-public-benefit online socialistic experiment of their own: a massively successful social media innovation called Usenet. Conceived in 1979 and established in 1980, Usenet is one of the oldest public access computer network communications systems still in use. Like CompuServe, Usenet's protocols and interface institutionalized a number of core elements of social media that persist to this day, such as topical forums, subject lines, posts, replies, and the resulting forms of message threads and subthreads, including branches to new threads, sub-forums, and different forums.

On Usenet, people posted messages or 'articles' onto the Arpanet (the early Internet). These 'articles' were deliberately entered into particular newsgroups that were organized by topical categories. The major 'big nine' categories of the Usenet were one of the early attempts to organize collective interests (such as an interest in science) and motives (such as a desire to discuss a subject with others) into neat categories. The interface placed message threads into the following categories utilizing consensual guidelines about subject and topic: alt, rec, comp, humanities, misc, news, sci, soc, and talk. The majority of posts on Usenet are response posts, which are called message threads. In all, Usenet provided a satisfying and flexible social experience, and from its inception met all relevant criteria for social media. This accessibility and variety is likely the reason why Usenet newsgroups were the sites of two of the earliest online ethnographies: Henry Jenkins' (1995) study of online fans of *Twin Peaks*, and Nancy Baym's (1993) research on a soap opera-based online group.

## Usenet and Early Online Ethnographies

rec.arts.startrek.tech Star Trek

**What does USS stand for?** Options

7 messages - [Expand all](#) - [Report discussion as spam](#)

Sean D. Baker [View profile](#) [More options](#) Feb 20 1995, 7:02 pm

In <Pine.SUN.3.90.950220120936.11612A-100000@osiris>, James GRAVES <sis1\_@sis.port.ac.uk> writes:

>Hello all,  
>Could somebody please answer the above query.  
>Surely someone out there knows the answer!!!

I'll quote from the ST Encyclopedica

"Identifying prefix used as part of the names of Federation starships, as in U.S.S. Enterprise. There is some questions as to what U.S.S. actually stands for. Captain Pike once identified the Enterprise as a United Space Ship, while it was called a United Star Ship in other episodes. We assume that ships with an S.S. prefix are usually vessels of Federation registry, but not part of the Federation starfleet"

Who knows...

[Reply to author](#) [Forward](#) [Report spam](#) [Rate this post](#) ☆☆☆☆☆

David Brickley [View profile](#) [More options](#) Feb 21 1995, 6:16 pm

In <3bahu\$@huey.cadvision.com> bak\_@cadvision.com (Sean D. Baker) writes:

>In <Pine.SUN.3.90.950220120936.11612A-100000@osiris>, James GRAVES <sis1\_@sis.port.ac.uk> writes:  
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>it was called a United Star Ship in other episodes. We assume  
>that ships with an S.S. prefix are usually vessels of Federation  
>registry, but not part of the Federation starfleet"

**Figure 2.6** Archived version of 1995 Usenet Newsgroup, viewed through Google Groups interface

Early netnographies had to begin with an explanation of what being online meant, and a general mapping of the relevant online social space. In an essay originally presented to the *Society for Cinema Studies* in Los Angeles in 1990, and later published in book chapters in 1992 and 1995, Henry Jenkins began by explaining the nature of Usenet and detailing some of its technological characteristics and capabilities (Jenkins, 1992, 1995). At the time Jenkins presented it, the Usenet reached over 50,000 participants. Jenkins then detailed the content and type of information that people shared on Usenet, which ranged from discussions about government, technology, and science to those about news, hobbies, and popular culture, and included digital sound files and graphic images, as well as both short and very long textual discussions. Even at that early stage of the Internet's development, Jenkins still felt the need to note the tendency for the researcher to be overwhelmed by online data: 'The problem

[when] working with the net becomes not how to attract sufficient responses to allow for adequate analysis but how to select and process materials from the endless flow of information and commentary' (Jenkins, 1995: 52). Then, in the most detailed and rigorous terms yet devised, Jenkins introduces the idea, opportunity, and challenge of conducting ethnographic research online:

Ethnographic research has often been criticized for its construction of the very audience it seeks to examine, via the organization and structuring of focus groups, rather than engaging with the activist or pre-existing cultural community as they conduct their daily lives (the focus of more traditional forms of ethnography). Here, the computer net groups allow us to observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community as it conducts its normal practices of forming, evaluation, and debating interpretations. These discussions occur without direct control or intervention by the researcher, yet in a form that is legitimately open to public scrutiny and analysis. (1995: 52–3)

Although he describes his work as ethnography, Jenkins decides to adopt a more distanced stance from the data. In direct contrast to his traditional ethnographic work among *Star Trek* and media fans, he does not discuss his own participation in the group. In fact, he valorizes the lack of engagement in the quote above as a benefit of the method. Further, there is no mention of self-reflection or use of fieldnotes in the essay. This early online ethnography is distanced and written in a more objective style than some of Jenkins' other work: the discursive data allows the analyst, who seems to be observing from a privileged position above or beyond the social site, to 'trace the processes by which television meanings are socially produced, circulated, and revised' (ibid.). Attuned to sampling issues, Jenkins then discusses the 'social specificity' of the audience he studies – an early adopter group 'who tend to be college-educated, professionally-oriented, technologically-inclined men, most of who are involved either with the academy or the computer industry' (ibid.). They are not, as Jenkins explains, representative of general populations. However, as time reveals, and as I would later theorize by connecting the work of Eric von Hippel with netnography, this group provided a window on activities and tastes that were later to become mainstream. Although Jenkins introduces, justifies, and briefly explains his use of online ethnography, he never enters into an explanation of its underlying procedural elements. Indeed, this is not its purpose. To get a sense of the application that Jenkins employed, we can see one of the mid-1980s forms of the original Usenet interface in Figure 2.7. Some of the Usenet was archived and became searchable using Google Groups, appearing similar to the graphic shown in Figure 2.6.

The other noteworthy early online ethnography is Nancy Baym's much more participant-embedded and experience-close interpretation of a soap opera-based online group (Baym, 1993), for which the Usenet rec.arts.tv.soaps newsgroup was the source of data. Her article expands the methodological elements of her online

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Group selection (rsmtp.oiduse.net 27 R)
-> 1 7 comments
2 4 fa.apollo
3 49 fa.arms-d
4 3 fa.arpa-bboard
5 2 fa.dungeon
6 7 fa.energy
7 16 fa.human-nets
8 31 fa.info-cpm
9 4 fa.info-micro
10 13 fa.info-terms
11 23 fa.sf-lovers
12 2 fa.test
13 33 fa.unix-wizards
14 27 general
15 89 gripes
16 383 hacknews
17 3 humour

<n>=set current to n; n=next unread; g,/=search pattern; c=catchup
A=line down; A=line up; h=help; m=move; q=quit; r=toggle all/unread
s=subscribe; S=sub pattern; u=unsubscribe; U=unsub pattern; y=yank in/out

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**Figure 2.7** Usenet interface screenshot as it appeared approx. 1987

ethnography. She explains that her work is ‘part of an ongoing ethnographic study of communication in the r.a.t.s [rec.arts.tv.soaps] newsgroup community’ and that her ‘position in the group is that of a participant at least as much as a researcher’ (p. 144). Then, she explains the nature of her participation. As ‘a long-time fan of soap operas’ she had an emotional and intellectual engagement with both the topic matter and the forum for its discussion (Baym, 1993: 144). She was ‘thrilled’ when she discovered the group, and ‘had been reading daily and participating regularly for a year’ before beginning her research within it. In a nod to the ‘member check’ practices of Lincoln and Guba (1985), Baym reveals that she shared her research work with the group members and ‘found them exceedingly supportive and helpful. They have acted as research participants as well as subjects and have treated me more as an ambassador than a researcher’ (Baym, 1993: 144).

An accounting of her analytic procedure follows. Unlike Jenkins, she uses the term ‘data’ to refer to the discussions and conversations she collected. She discusses saving the messages, collecting and analyzing them, their content, and ‘the demographic information [they contain] about the senders’. She also uses a type of online interview, where she posts a set of open-ended questions to participants, which were answered by 18 participants. As well, she includes personal email correspondence with ten other participants in the newsgroup.

She then discusses her ethical stance. Beginning with self-disclosure, she posts two notices ‘explaining the project and offering to exclude posts by those who preferred not to be involved’ (an early form of opting-out, it seems, and no one declined to participate). Baym changes all names and email addresses, but keeps the gender of the authors, where known, intact. Trying to maintain a sense of their original context,

she explains that they are presented ‘in a mono-space font’, with the spelling and grammar ‘remaining as they were written’ (p. 145).

## BBS and Correll’s Lesbian Cafe



**Figure 2.8** Screenshot of the Bulletin Board System, or BBS, early 1990s

Figure 2.8 depicts the early, white text on black background format of the bulletin board system, or BBS, which was similar in many ways to Usenet. Online in 1978, BBS was a social media platform that became interrelated with these early American and international online services. Similar to the early message boards, BBS was largely a text-based system, but that system, like the others, was flexible enough to allow a wide range of new social activities, such as the Australian Buddhist ‘buddhanet’ conversation group captured in Figure 2.8. Message boards and multi-user chat were present, as were some basic social networking features, such as the ability to leave messages on a user’s profile. In terms of topics, BBS offered a wide variety of special interest boards that included sports, entertainment, politics, religion, music, dating, and alternative lifestyles. Imaginative areas popped up, where users could commune and role play in themed fantasy areas, such as those based on being on a pirate ship or in a medieval castle.

Shelley Correll, who was then a doctoral student at Stanford, conducted one of the earliest online ethnographies on a computer BBS called the Lesbian Cafe. Her article,

published in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Correll, 1995), is interesting not only as an early ethnographic work, but also because of its emphasis on a powerful tripartite inter-combination. Correll links the experience of being online in a BBS, an early but intense form of bulletin board, with sociality (the need to be social), the sense of reality (related closely to what to believe, what to care about, and what is true – as found in both media and religion), and the perception of community (who am I? what groups do I identify with and belong to?).

The shared sense that users of the BBS have of a ‘common reality serves to maintain a community that carries out many of the same functions as do geographically anchored communities’, argues Correll (1995: 298). She tells us a lot about her involvement with the online group, and also about her research methods. These techniques had not been institutionalized and the early works are highly instructive for their procedural attention to detail, because social media was still feeling very new in the 1990s and yet the networks had established vibrant microcultures of their own.

Women who regularly participate in the Lesbian Cafe’s online discourses ‘do so to be around their own kind of people’, Correll states. She was already a member of the online Lesbian Cafe BBS when she begins her participant-observational study. She doesn’t mention keeping fieldnotes. But she does state that she asked the founder of the cafe for permission to conduct the study. She posted a note to the group describing her study, and asking for interview volunteers. Every week Correll posted a new note to the group, telling them that they were still being observed by her. Most likely, she captured those observations in data files and fieldnotes. She conducted open, exploratory, and then semi-structured email interviews with 13 female members. She conducted a semi-structured telephone interview with the founder of the cafe. She then conducted eight in-person interviews with members in Atlanta, Georgia, and then the eight of them ‘went to a real lesbian bar in Atlanta’ (p. 278). Her methods are clear to us, and these are participatory, ethically attuned, and enhanced with in-person, telephone, and email interviews.

It wasn’t all utopian and rosy, though. There were lots of unwelcome haters, those who came to the BBS to send messages that bashed, trolled or criticized lesbians. None of these trolls agreed to be interviewed by Correll. However, when asked, all of those ‘bashers’ self-identified as males. Correll sees them as consequential, and a manifestation of the half-full glass. The haters actually ‘provide a source of conflict that serves to increase community solidarity’ through a clarification of in-group and outgroup membership (p. 298). The Lesbian Cafe, and other online bulletin and message boards like it, serve ‘many of the same functions’ and have ‘many of the same features’ as traditional communities based upon geographic considerations. In fact, this interest-based segmentation is quite historically significant, as Schouten and McAlexander (1995) astutely point out in an article about consumption subcultures published the same year as the Lesbian Cafe article. Correll misses many important differences, but hey, we can cut her some



slack; she was a ground-breaking first-year PhD student at the time, just beginning a successful academic career.

Correll concludes her forward-thinking article with a statement that wisely side-steps future debates about technology ushering in the demise of sociality. She sees two notions, ‘community’ and ‘locale’, as ideas which are not diminishing, as Putnam (2000) and others such as Turkle (2011) feared, but are ‘only being reformulated’ (p. 298). Sociality reformulated in the forge of social media becomes almost a single minded-focus through the online scholarship of the 1990s. As we are about to learn, Correll’s (1995) focus on linking online experience with notions of community, and of linking online sociality with imaginary notions of spatiality, will become core themes of the scientific literature for almost a decade.

## THE AGE OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES: 1990s–EARLY 2000s

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the social web continued to expand as more companies and individuals offered more specialized and different sorts of online experiences. Companies of various sorts incorporated social media features into their purchasing and especially their review features. These social media features helped transform and begin to disrupt the retailing, entertainment, travel, and journalism industries of the 1990s – and also lay the groundwork for the rise of social networking sites.

Fairly early on in its history, online retailer Amazon allowed customers to rate and review books and other products, creating a social media phenomenon that grew to encompass an entire genre of funny reviews – a genre embraced by the company itself (see [www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?docId=1001250201](http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?docId=1001250201), the Amazon site’s listing of its own ‘funniest reviews’). Amazon’s embrace of social media and incorporation of online sociality into its pioneering of online retailing experience was one of the reasons it grew to become the largest and most important retailer in the world. Elsewhere (Kozinets, 2016), I examine several of these funny reviews to make the point that, even when engaging in supposedly rational economic behavior, such as rating products on a retail site, consumers use those directed connective opportunities to ‘fulfill a wide range of social, communicative, emotional, and identity-focused needs’, including ‘cultural connection, witty repartee, social commentary, entertainment, personal revelation, self-promotion’ and revenge-seeking (p. 836).

In the entertainment industry, Netflix began operating in 1997 as an online DVD rental concept with a major social component. The original Netflix site and model leveraged users’ online interactions. Users created profiles that could be viewed by other users, and contributed long and often highly detailed reviews. They could also recommend films to one another personally, and one user could see both the ratings and the detailed comments that other users gave to particular films. At that time,

Netflix was far more than a place for people to go and rent movies. It was also a hub of online social activity, recommendation, review, and discussion – all of it revolving around the world of entertainment. Its redesign strongly emphasized its automated recommender systems, fully eliminating the earlier communal components. Working with this more recent, and ‘de-communified’ incarnation, Shen (2014) used netnography to understand customers’ experiences, and discourses of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, with Netflix and other firms’ recommendation systems.

Different stories can be told for the online travel site TripAdvisor. In 2000, TripAdvisor launched a site that featured official travel reviews from newspapers, guidebooks, and magazines. However, the site offered its users a button where they could add their own reviews. Adding this interactive feature generated massive interest, helping to create the world’s largest travel website, and a pioneer of specialized social media. Also noteworthy among these early social media innovations was the world’s first recognizable social networking site, classmates.com, an American platform, launched in 1995, dedicated to helping users find former class members and colleagues from school, work, and the military. Numerous travel netnographies have used TripAdvisor as a source of data. For instance, Mkono (2011: 253) used ‘41 online tourist reviews of two Victoria Falls, ethnic-style restaurants’ to study how foreign food is ‘othered’ and reflects touristic representations of ‘the Other’. Researchers in other fields have also found TripAdvisor’s cultural form and rich conversations theoretically informative. In the accounting field, Jeacle and Carter (2011: 293) found that TripAdvisor builds its role as a ‘trusted intermediary for the “independent traveler”’ by enacting an online version of an objectively abstract system with calculative practices.

Change in the world of citizen journalism began to take shape when salon.com began operating in 1995, providing one of the earliest combinations of news and online reader commentary. Following Salon.com’s (and others’) early example, the comment sections to online news and journalism sites have grown to become important sites of social media and netnographic investigation. Netnographic research using the comments sections of online publications has turned out to be highly productive because many of these publications are specialized and cater to particular interests or particular groups. For example, Sandlin (2007) used an online lifestyle magazine and its discussion boards as the site of her online ethnography. More recently, Elvey et al. (2018: e443) looked at the comments to articles posted on *PulseToday*, a widely read online version of *Pulse* magazine, the United Kingdom’s most read new magazines for medical general practitioners. Using what they called a ‘tracer term’ of ‘access to care’ for their search of the archives of the online magazine, they narrowed their dataset to ‘about 300 comments containing around 21,000 words associated with the 331 articles’. Their analysis was ‘an iterative process’ that involved reading the entire dataset ‘repeatedly’, discussing the classification categories with the research team, refining the classifications, and then grouping them together into themes. Their findings revealed not only a general sense of being overworked, but also the ambivalence and ‘complex mix of resistance and resignation’ that general practitioners feel about their changing roles.

## The Time of Community

As the Internet grew throughout the 1990s, it was becoming increasingly obvious to academics, programmers, entrepreneurs, and others that more and more people were using online experiences for activities that were much more than ‘information superhighway’, library-like exchanges and market-like transactions. As the last section explored, there was already a range of platforms and software applications that offered numerous different sorts of social experiences such as live (single and multi-user) chat, (some massively) multiplayer gaming, email lists, and message or bulletin boards. The WELL, or Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, was a dial-up bulletin board system that began in 1985, and was similar to the online message boards one would find on BBS systems, CompuServe, and Usenet.

Although he never uses the word ‘ethnography’ to describe his work, or ‘ethnographic’ to describe his writing, the prolific author and Internet pioneer Howard Rheingold used the WELL as a type of ethnographic field site when he researched and wrote his book in 1992. Rheingold used a combination of participation in online communities, observation of posts, and email, in-person, and other forms of interviews to gain insights into the phenomenon. His use of extended self-description is obviously based on careful note-keeping of his own participation in the online discourse. The text of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* is filled with long verbatim quotes from online group members, described and offset in particular fonts and textual ways to preserve as many of their contextual elements as possible. And among the many different scholarly sources that Rheingold draws upon for his many explanations and elaborations, anthropologists make a strong showing. For example, to explain whether online communities have a culture, he turns to Clifford Geertz for a definition that is also a somewhat one-sided explanation about why we find culture anywhere:

Culture, according to Geertz, is ‘a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call “programs”) – for the governing of behaviour’. (Rheingold, 1993: 187)

Based on his observations of online interest-based forums, support groups and role-playing games, Rheingold noted that people in online communities ‘exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk’ (1993: 3). His engaging and ethnographic style of combining recounting of his own participation and observation with large inclusions of data collected from conversations on the WELL and direct quotes from interviews also proved to be an engaging way to introduce readers to what was already at that time becoming recognized as a new and meaningful social phenomenon.

Among participants and researchers at the time, who were rapidly discovering these new niche areas within a wider web of static webpages and slowly increasing online professionalization, a prevalent shorthand was the notion of ‘community’, preceded by the moderator ‘virtual’. Virtual and online were often held in contraposition, and as somewhat inferior to, something termed ‘RL’, i.e., real life – embodied, physical presence. In a definition that, like his book, emphasizes emotional commitment, longer-term connections, and personal exchanges, he defined ‘virtual communities’ as ‘social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on ... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’.

## The Virtual Community

### 2.3

#### THINKING ABOUT COMMUNITY ONLINE

What does the word community mean to you? What sorts of communities do you identify with? What communities do you participate in? In what ways do your experiences online feel like they bring you into contact with a ‘community’? Do different online experiences offer you different sorts of community experiences? How would you describe those different types of community experience? When Howard Rheingold was writing his book about online experience in the early 1990s, he was struggling with exactly those sorts of questions. But he had a much more limited world of social media than you do to develop these ideas with actual experience.

Rheingold’s (1993) timely use of the term ‘virtual communities’ for his book’s title is highly significant. A powerful term, ‘community’ suggested the sense that being online was a human social experience. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, cultural studies scholars, communications scholars, literary scholars, and a range of other social scientists and humanities scholars not only began adopting the virtual community terminology but also naturalized the community-based perspective that those online media were place-like locations where that ephemeral feeling called community could grow. The anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1994: 218) wrote that an anthropological understanding would be important ‘not only for understanding what these new “villages” and “communities” are but, equally important, for imagining the kinds of communities that human groups can create with the help of emerging technologies’. In other words, Escobar envisioned anthropologies of virtual communities to be useful for guiding the development of the very notion of community and

connectedness as it would become altered by these then-nascent, but looming, technological transformations.

However, the modifier ‘virtual’ suggested that these new forms of social connection were somehow not quite real, and perhaps best viewed with some suspicion. Indeed, early Internet scholars like Steven Jones (1998) were already unpacking and dissecting these notions. A range of scholars, including Jones and Doheny-Farina (1998), questioned the level of commitment that people had to ‘electronic communities’. As Jones put it:

In the physical world, community members must live together. When community membership is in no small way a matter of subscribing or unsubscribing to a bulletin board or electronic newsgroup, is the nature of interaction different simply because one may disengage with little or no consequence? (1998: 4)

The thought that spatial proximity leads to a magic sense of community is naïve, however. Past and contemporary unfortunate events too numerous to mention bear witness to the fact that merely living together does not guarantee some sense of easy breezy togetherness.

One way social media relate to community, emphasized by many of the early pioneers of what is now recognizable as online ethnography – Markham, Correll, Turkle, and Rheingold, especially – is the emotional reality of online communications, the fact that these interactions stir us, move us, and inspire us. This fact is taken as a phenomenological foundation and draws our attention to James Carey’s (1989: 18) distinction between viewing communications as a ‘transmission’ or language broadcast across distances for the purpose of controlling the masses, and a ‘ritual’ view that saw communication as ‘the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality’. At the time, there was much excitement about the public, democratizing, utopian potential of these novel communication forms, ‘the sense that we are embarking on an adventure in creating new communities and new forms of community’ (Jones, 1998: 9; Schuler, 1996). Could we actually learn from the mistakes of the past? Could we direct future media into more socially positive directions than the media of the past?

Or could it be that these new technologies were just another broken promise? Carey (1989) talked about a technophilic ‘rhetoric of the electrical sublime’, a ‘mythos of the electronic revolution’ (Carey and Quirk, 1970). Perhaps, as Beniger (1987: 353) warned, electronic communication and its aptitude for ‘personalization’ were hastening the sharp drop in interpersonal relations, moving from ‘traditional communal relationships’ to ‘impersonal, highly restricted associations’ that would later be captured in terms such as ‘filter bubbles’. Beniger (1987: 353) disparagingly terms this state ‘pseudo-community’ and finds it to be one in which impersonal associations masquerade as personalized communication, leading to insincere, inauthentic, and ultimately unsatisfying social relationships.

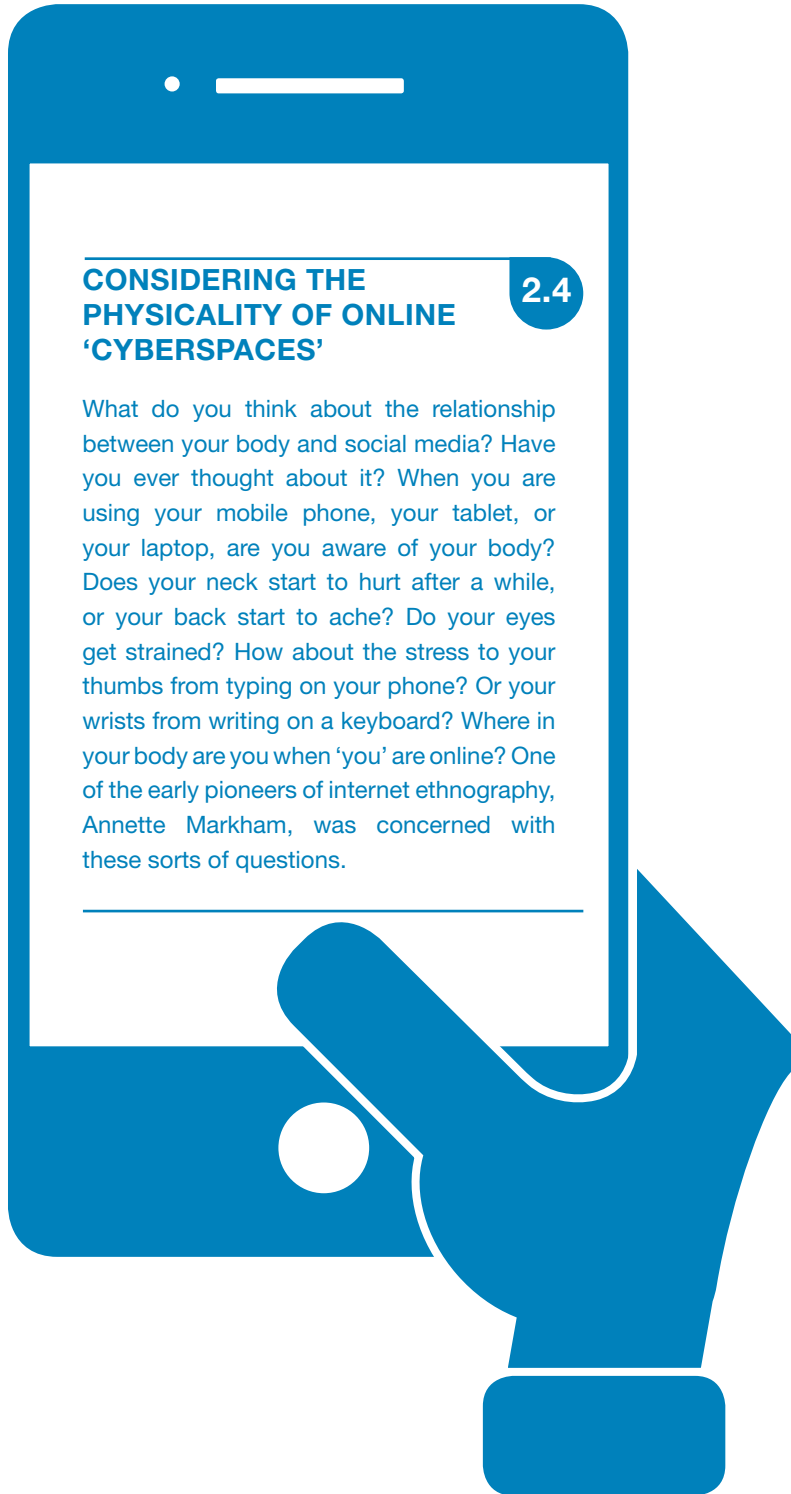
Maybe these new communities are destinations for the contemporary ‘imaginative diasporas’, the ‘cosmopolitans and the new professionals who lived in the imaginative worlds of politics, art, fashion, medicine, law and so forth’ (Carey, 1993: 178) – and reflect their interests, tastes, and values – including their desire, and lack of it, for social commitments. Perhaps it was that community is simply far too complex, too loaded and rich a concept to simply distinguish, or deny, its presence or absence from any communication medium – especially one so multifaceted as these new forms of communication. Fernback (1997: 39) points out how ‘infinitely complex and amorphous’ the concept is in academic discourse: it ‘has descriptive normative, and ideological connections’ and also ‘encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions’. The idea of community includes notions of territory, social interaction based on a geographic area, self-sufficiency, common life, consciousness of a kind, institutions of solidarity, primary interactions, culturally distinct groups, and the possession of common ends, norms, and means (Bell and Newby, 1974; Effrat, 1974; Jones, 1998). Answers about such contingent, complex, and crucial matters are not easy to find. Decades later, we still struggle with these same questions. Box 2.3 provides you with an exercise that gives a taste of one such conceptual struggle.

## Life Online as an Evolving Cultural Context

For Internet researchers in the mid-1990s, tackling ontological dilemmas about the difference between the virtual and the real was the order of the day. The subtitle of Internet research pioneer Annette Markham’s book (Markham, 1998) is instructive: *Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*. Her book, *Life Online*, is likely the first book-length ethnography of online social experience. It explores and captures her wonderment regarding the way that online communications allow her to extend the body’s traditional limitations:

By logging onto my computer, I (or a part of me) can seem to (or perhaps actually) exist separately from my body in ‘places’ formed by the exchange of messages ... I can exchange in activities with people of like interests around the globe, using nothing but my computer, my imagination, written text, and the capacity of digital code to process and mediate aspects of my life online. (1998: 17)

Markham’s fascination and confusion between the body and the computer, the virtual and the real, the embodied and the communicative, the truth and the lie, is perhaps most powerfully illustrated in an exchange she has with a long-term Prodigy member who educates her on the joys of virtual dating, virtual bodies, virtual sex, and even ‘virtual massage’ (p. 171). That sort of conceptual confusion between embodiment and digital virtuality was common in writing at the time. In 1991, another Internet research pioneer, Allucquère Rosanne Stone, had written a chapter about virtual existence



## CONSIDERING THE PHYSICALITY OF ONLINE 'CYBERSPACES'

2.4

What do you think about the relationship between your body and social media? Have you ever thought about it? When you are using your mobile phone, your tablet, or your laptop, are you aware of your body? Does your neck start to hurt after a while, or your back start to ache? Do your eyes get strained? How about the stress to your thumbs from typing on your phone? Or your wrists from writing on a keyboard? Where in your body are you when 'you' are online? One of the early pioneers of internet ethnography, Annette Markham, was concerned with these sorts of questions.

called ‘Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?’. As Hine (2000) cautioned, the virtual community experience and its ethnographic investigation had to deal with both ‘a sense of being disembodied’ and ‘a connotation of being “not quite” ... not exactly the real thing’.

Yet Markham’s (1998: 25) fascinating engagement with her online existence was profoundly shaped by the nature of her methodological engagement with it. She began with a straightforward, if highly philosophical, question: ‘How do people make sense of the concept of reality in or through online interaction?’ Her initial plan was to act as an ‘anonymous, distant observer’, a lurker who merely listened to and archived eight months of her chosen online community’s conversations ‘without participating’. However, as she tried, over and over again, to make sense of the data she collected in her context, the many ‘fascinating’ discussions she had saved about ‘the body and sexuality in cyberspace’, she was vexed by a lack of meaningful progress.

After several painstaking weeks of trying to write the first analysis of metaphors, I realized something was missing from the scene. Now, three months later, I realize *I* was missing. I was surprisingly absent from my own study, which I now realize is an ethnography. I was beginning to understand that cyberspace is not simply a collection of texts to analyze; rather it is an evolving cultural context of immense magnitude and complex scope. I wanted to say something meaningful about the way people experience these new cultural contexts, but I had never really experienced them myself.

And so, aware that what she wanted to do, what she must do in order to be able to reveal the perceived reality of this novel context for social behavior, Markham alters her project. Consciously, she begins to craft her study as an ethnography of these virtual social spaces, reading and citing scholars such as John van Maanen (1988). She also inserts herself, quite profoundly, into the data and the text. She moves from a methodological position of anonymity and distance to one of closeness to her own experience and writes a highly reflexive ethnography, something I would later call ‘an auto-netnography’:

Even as I do this ethnography, I am not separate from it. The more I become a part of the ethnography, the more it becomes a part of me. In the end, I am not sure if I will have learned more about cyberspace, the participants, or me. (Markham, 1998: 83)

## Early Netnography

In fan culture, canon is the authoritative source material, the real story. This short section is provided to give some background on the founding of netnography, the



particular spin on online ethnography that is the subject of this book, as well as to continue the analysis of community, culture, and its online investigation that so consumed researchers working in the era when netnography began. Although I had been active on CompuServe for a time in the late 1980s, the more recent story of netnography begins, strangely and appropriately enough, in a Wendy's in Toronto in 1995. Surrounded by fellow members of a *Star Trek* fan club I had joined as part of my ethnographic investigation into fan culture, one of my key ethnographic participants turned to me and said, 'You know what you need to do? You need to go online. Online for *Star Trek* fans is like a 24/7 Convention!'

My experience was not like Nancy Baym's, where she had been an active member of her online field site for a year, contributing expertly and passionately about soap operas with other soap opera fans. Online fandom was something I had explored, but not particularly deeply or seriously, and had not considered much until that moment. But in that instant, in the Wendy's, in a very organic way, I was drawn into the world of online communications by in-person communication during my ethnography. I upped my Internet game, and started moving online. Exploring those online sites, I knew no one. I didn't even know my fellow crew members' online handles. I started down the path of netnography as a stranger in a strange online world. Like Nancy Baym, however, I did have a solid grounding in the central topics that the participants on those message boards would be discussing.

I learned. I learned that there were tens of thousands of sites dedicated to *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* online, and all sorts of technology, and weird religions, and conspiracy theory science besides. Webpages. Usenet groups. They made up the majority of most of my data collection. My earliest published fan netnographies used the rec.arts.star-trek (Kozinets, 1997a) and alt.tv.x-files (Kozinets, 1997b) Usenet newsgroups, but I was also looking at a variety of fan sites dedicated to shows currently popular at the time such as *Babylon 5* and *Space: Above and Beyond*.

Because watching and listening could get me only a certain type of knowledge, and because I had learned that posting research questions onto general bulletin boards could be problematic, I decided to code and post my own 'Star Trek Research Webpage' with lots of information and accompanying research questions. I began getting responses to it via email, and continuing those conversations, eventually communicating with 65 different people from 12 different countries (Kozinets, 2001: 70). As well, throughout 1996, I began participating in groups and collecting data on consumer activism with Jay Handelman. In that research, we used 11 relevant Usenet groups, including alt.activism, misc.activism.progressive, alt.society.labor-unions, and talk.politics.theory (Kozinets and Handelman, 1998). Between 1996 and 1998, as I finished at Queen's and started at Northwestern, I was conducting a number of online ethnographies, and combined online and ethnographic projects, including one situated in the massively multiplayer video game Quake and another long-term one, begun in 1998, that focused on online interactions centering around food and beverage consumption, including wine and coffee.

## Netnography in the Age of Virtual Community

As a doctoral student, I was also reading everything I could about the topic of online community. Was the online world ‘virtual’ or was it real? Was the phenomenon of online ‘community’ good or was it bad for us? How could I do this kind of ethnography in an ethical and effective way? How should I handle all of this data? I closely read all of the online ethnographies I could find. Jenkins, Baym, Correll, and Markham were core figures on my academic altar, and I turned to them daily – and those they cited – for wisdom about how to approach the mysteries of online ethnography. It should be no secret, then, that my work would end up closely reflecting the notions of community and culture in wide circulation at the time. So when I presented my netnography paper in Tucson in October of 1996, as a final-year PhD student at my very first conference, the *Association for Consumer Research*, I had no idea that the definition I presented would still be in play two decades later – because that definition is where I started with netnography, but it is almost nothing like what netnography is now.

I was very focused on the product at first, more than the process itself. ‘The textual output of Internet-related field work’ was my initial attempt to define exactly what it was I was doing (Kozinets, 1997b: 471). Then, ‘a written account of online cyberculture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology’ (ibid.). It was a convenient shorthand, text-centric, focused only on the Internet, and dependent on the definition of ‘cyberculture’ – which I broadly defined the next year in another published conference paper as ‘the complex field of social forces in which human bodies, machines, and scientific discourses intersect’ (Escobar, 1994; Kozinets, 1998: 366).

Ethics emerged as an important concern almost immediately. Along with the broad definition, I discuss the ethical gray zone that netnography operates within. I include the fact that, when asked, one of the newsgroup members who I had contacted did not want their public posting about a UFO sighting quoted in the research. The first published netnography was, in a way, not only about television shows but also about the public discussion of UFOs, government secrecy, and conspiracies.

Similarly, it was concerned from the beginning about the sampling frame for a netnographic study and the amount and type of data required. I state that I analyze all of the online data using ‘a holographic sampling frame’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 202) – a way to screen and pre-select masses of data that are representative of the whole and pertinent to the particular research question. I report the amount of data collected at exactly 83,150 words, and also provide a reader-orienting estimate that it would amount to about 600 pages of single-spaced, single-sided, regular-sized pages if printed. I tell the reader about how many times I read those 600 pages of data through in the course of analyzing them (nine times).

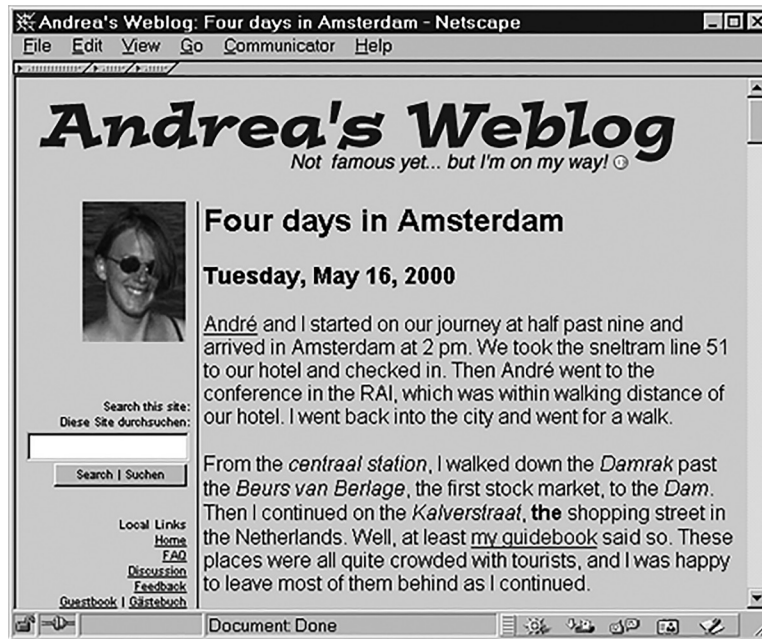
Whether intentional or not, I do not fully recall, but those first definitions avoid the word ‘community’. However, in the 1998 paper I refine and redefine netnography as ‘a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from on-line, computer mediated, or Internet-based communications,

where both the field work and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology’ (Kozinets: 1998: 366). The use of community and culture in this 1998 definition weighed quite heavily on the formulation of a later marketing research journal article, which I wrote two years later and which served, for many, as their introduction to the approach: “‘netnography”, or ethnography on the Internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications’ (Kozinets, 2002a: 62).

What was meant by ‘cultures and communities’? Merely that online communications bear culture, and that linguistic symbols always come preloaded with reams of almost infinitely-extensible meaning. As well, this early definition reflected my sense that the connections people make online form relationship networks. Did it also mean that netnography was focused mainly on studying the symbolic dance of Carey’s ‘ritual’ communication, the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality? Did it mean studying and focusing on the more emotional, more committed, closer relationship types of communities that Correll found in the Lesbian Cafe, and Rheingold found on the WELL? Well, to some extent, it did. Although it was possible to lurk on them, of course, those early Usenets were structured differently from the more deliberately anonymous and distant platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, or Twitter today. The Usenets were more egalitarian and group-directed, and many of the members were familiar to one another. As many of the early virtual and online community scholars had pointed out, this was part of their appeal: online discussions mix communicative acts with social connection. As I wrote in 1998, ‘what began primarily as a search for information [online, often] transforms into a source of community and understanding’. Those were the days of virtual community. As a product of those days, netnography reflected my interest in examining those closer and more committed types of online relationships. But netnography could not remain an offshoot of those types of relationships forever, with them built into its very definition. Indeed, social media was transforming quickly and netnography had to be twisted and reshaped to suit its dynamic research environment. Like its early definitions’ highlighting of newness, netnography’s early emphasis on community would have to change as both the technique and the environment it studied morphed into something very different.

## BLOGS ENTER THE SCENE

As Figure 2.9 clearly shows, the blog form was already established in the early years of the millennium. Around 1994, as far as anyone could tell, people started dynamically updating their formerly static webpages and the format that eventually came to be known as a blog was born. As Reed (2005: 240–1) recounts, ‘in 1999 the first automated weblog-publishing systems emerged; these allowed unskilled individuals to run blogs easily and free of charge. As a consequence, interest in weblogging (or “blogging”)



**Figure 2.9** Early weblog or blog screenshot, circa 2000, exhibited on Netscape browser

has soared.' Blogs, when open to public comments, were a lot like message boards, with some important differences. Similar to message boards, they (optionally) allowed members of the public to make comments anonymously, initiating and continuing conversations that often took wild turns and ended up in unexpected places. But different from those message boards, they took place in an online environment directed by the blog creator, tended to focus on the content creator's interests and posts, and were usually moderated by them. Blogs offered people a form of individualized, personalized, and cultivated communication that was also scalable, searchable, and – as companies and bloggers eventually discovered – salable. In many ways, blogs heralded a new age of social media. They spread rapidly throughout the world and remain important backbones of social media activity on the Internet. In many countries, Japan for example, blogs are currently much more popular than they are in other nations.

Online ethnographies of blogs followed soon after the user-friendly social media formats became established. In one of the earliest, Reed says that his

fieldwork began in August 2001 when I started reading weblogs and began contacting directory members [i.e., bloggers] to organize individual interviews offline. Gradually I was invited to join the mailing list and to attend pub gatherings; members also encouraged me to start my own weblog (running a

weblog remains crucial to my participation in the UK blogging scene). Lately, I have begun to visit individuals at home and work (from where many of them blog) in order to get a better appreciation of posting culture. As well as continuing to meet up with bloggers offline, I sustain conversations through email and instant messaging and through weblog exchanges. (2005: 225)

Reed's ethnographic work reflects its positioning at a point in time when online communications were still very collegial and communal. His analysis, however, reveals notes of narcissism, exhibitionism, immediacy, publicity, and celebrity culture – core constituting elements of the coming Age of Social Media.

In 2006, I published some initial guidelines for adapting netnography to the world of blogs: 'Unlike the more communal and democratic forums like newsgroups', the blog is a 'near-autocracy where the owner remains the undisputed star' (Kozinets, 2006a: 137). Its individualized personalization and perspective is its defining feature, and this move to individualization indelibly changed social media from a flatter and more communal experience to one increasingly based upon audiences and micro- and macro-celebrity star power. Another important element mentioned in the methodological overview is the ability of blogs to gain attention from mass media news outlets. This was something new – comment pages on Usenet groups generally had not broken major news stories, destroyed stock values, or led to respected journalists, such as Dan Rather, retiring. Blogs had star power and mass media appeal – by the mid-2000s, the homestead of virtual community was transforming into a recognizably mass form of media.

Kretz and de Valck (2010) studied 60 fashion and luxury blogs for the narratives they provided to associate the blogger and various fashion brands. They discovered a vocabulary of personal brand association, ranging from implicit photographs to explicit endorsements. McQuarrie and colleagues (2013: 153) looked deeply into 10 popular fashion blogs written by women. Their detailed, contextual, and cultural look at the professionalization of social media in the early 2010s concluded that 'a focus on consumers' newfound capacity, courtesy of the web, to acquire a mass audience requires a new theorization'. There 'is no offline equivalent of a verbal-visual blog, a Yelp restaurant review, or user-generated video content', and (perhaps ignoring decades of fan and zine culture) previously 'only professionals holding an institutional position could publish their writing', make and share high quality video, or receive major funds in exchange for personal endorsements, advertising and promotional consideration. McQuarrie et al.'s (2013: 136) cultural analysis coined a term for this new ability to 'reach a mass audience' by virtue of the empowerment of 'the web': 'the Megaphone Effect'. Writing in the journal *Celebrity Studies*, Ashleigh Logan (2015) explored the self-presentation of female fashion bloggers on Twitter who identify with Kate Middleton, and also play a part in establishing and maintaining a community-like foundation of Twitter followers. Among this group, assuming a leadership role also means building their own group of followers. It also means

playing with linguistic alterations and the creation of entirely new vocabularies of identity symbols, such as identifying as a ‘replikate’ or a ‘copykate’.

From a research perspective, blogs were held to contain some interesting analytic characteristics that were later attributed to general social media data. The first was aggregation. If one scanned a selection of blogs about a particular topic, patterns could reveal facts about the general population of blogs considered, or an even wider population. The second was trending elements. If one wished to monitor and aggregate the content from a number of blogs over time, patterns in their content might inform us about upcoming trends. These qualities in blog data led to numerous types of quantitative or automated content analysis, data-monitoring software products being developed, often under the rubric of ‘social monitoring’ or ‘social listening’ tools. From an online ethnography perspective, all analytic movements into aggregation and the discerning of trends are potentially informative. However, the scale of the inquiries needs to be kept small enough to maintain a close look into their cultural elements. For a successful netnography, social media from platforms such as blogs need to be analyzed as a particular form of communication, and treated with their narrative forms, story-revealing, and self-promotional megaphone effects kept in mind. That transformation, and its ramification for online interaction and ethnography, became increasingly evident as Twitter rose to prominence. We will see as our investigation of social media’s history continues in the next chapter that these changes happened alongside the commercialization and mass adoption of social networking sites, creating dramatic changes to the conceptualization and practice of netnography.

## 2.5

## NETNOGRAPHY ON BLOGS



Figure 2.10 Barq's – The blog with bite! landing page screenshot, 12 November 2006

To demonstrate netnography with a brief analysis for a methodological chapter (Kozinets, 2006a) in a book about research methods (Belk, 2006), I focused on a blog by the anonymous and self-proclaimed 'Barq's Man' who had created 'Barq's – The Blog With Bite', as a tribute to Barq's Root Beer, a soda pop brand he enjoyed and which contained a lot of nostalgic meaning for him. The results revealed that blogs were capable of revealing intensely personal first-person stories about particular topics and also revealing upcoming trends with immediacy. The Barq's blog was also covered in prominently-featured advertising. As Figure 2.10's screenshot of the landing page reveals, the front page of the blog contains an advertisement for 'business listings for soda near you!', as well as another asking 'got a beer belly?' and offering 'a proven remedy'.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined the first two ages of the history of the phenomenon we currently know as social media, as well as overviewing some of the cultural research that ethnographically pursued its investigation. The first age was the Age of Electronic Communications, which ran from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. Beginning with the Arpanet and the early years of (mostly corporate) networked communications, the Age of Electronic Communications included the growth and spread of private American online services such as CompuServe, Prodigy, and GEnie, as well as the publicly-owned European services such as Minitel in France. Several important early ethnographers of the Internet developed their research in the context of the rapidly expanding Usenet and BBS networks. Business and academia increasingly employed and emphasized notions of 'community', a tendency cemented with the publication and spread of Howard Rheingold's influential book. Research intensified and developed throughout the 1990s as the Age of Virtual Community congealed and advanced. The chapter proceeded to describe how a developing field of ethnographies of online environments conceptualized life online as an evolving cultural context, and also that it was against this conceptual and empirical background that netnography was initially developed and defined. In the chapter's final section, which provided a very short history of blogs, we learned how the post-Dotcom crash rise of the weblog format helped bring about the current age of social media by transitioning online socialities from more communal to more individualized and mass media-connected formats.

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