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BUILDING AND FOSTERING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY OF THE COMCULT WEBLOG

by

Linda Gagatsis, BA (with Honours), Ryerson University, 2000

A thesis

presented to Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In the Program of

Communication & Culture

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2007

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Abstract

Building and Fostering a Sense of Community: A Case Study of the ComCult weblog

Master of Arts, 2007

Linda Gagatsis

Communication & Culture

Ryerson University and York University

In this thesis, I set forth to examine and explore a blog's ability to build and foster a sense of community, to construct and maintain a collective identity within this community and its effectiveness as a method of communication. I launched a community blog for the Communication and Culture program, of which I am enrolled as an MA student, to address the following questions; 1) Do blogs encourage a sense of community? 2) Do blogs help to construct and maintain a collective identity within this community? 3) How is a blog more or less effective than previous online communication mediums?

Key findings include the blog's small-scale success in fostering a sense of community for the group of students that participated on the blog, and the ComCult community's need to focus on encouraging face-to-face interaction in order to foster a stronger sense of community and a stronger collective identity.

Keywords: weblog, blog, community, collective identity, communication

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Introduction

In this thesis, I set forth to examine and explore a blog's ability to build and foster a sense of community, to construct and maintain a collective identity within this community and its effectiveness as a method of communication. I launched a community blog for the Communication and Culture program, of which I am enrolled as an MA student, to address the following questions; 1) Do blogs encourage a sense of community? 2) Do blogs help to construct and maintain a collective identity within this community? 3) How is a blog more or less effective than previous online communication mediums?

Key findings of this study include the blog's small-scale success in fostering a sense of community for the small group of students that participated on the blog, the ComCult community's need to focus on encouraging face-to-face interaction in order to build and foster a stronger sense of community and a stronger collective identity and the blog's inability to function as an effective method of communication due to a low level of community participation on the blog indicating an overall low level of community engagement with the ComCult blog.

The remainder of this section will provide an overview of the format of this thesis. Chapter one will introduce blogs, as well as introduce the ComCult blog research study and questions. Chapter two discusses community (off and online) outlining early work on the concept, as well as giving a brief overview of the existing debate regarding online communities and touching upon medium theory and ritual and transmission views of communication. Chapter two continues by outlining a number of earlier online

communities and their role in the adoption and diffusion of the blog as a prominent sub-medium of the Internet. This chapter then moves on to present literature that examines the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on the development and maintenance of community online, the formation of an online self and collective identity and the effectiveness of various computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) as communication mediums. Chapter three states the study's research questions and the motivation behind this research, and continues by discussing the research methodology and data collection methods utilized during this study. Chapter three moves on to give justification for the study and its research methodology and outlines the case study discussing the ComCult program, the already existing method of communication within the program (the ComCult GSA listserv) and the ComCult blog in detail.

Chapter four tells the story of the ComCult blog, from design, to launch, to close. Chapter five includes data analysis from the study's various instruments of data collection. Chapter six discusses the research questions as informed by the major research findings and outlines further theories regarding ComCult students' lack of interest in and participation on the blog. Chapter seven discusses the study's contributions to the ComCult community. Chapter eight outlines the limitations of the study. Chapter nine discusses the wider implications and contributions to the body of knowledge on blogs and, in closing, summarizes the study's major research findings

Chapter One: Introduction to Blogs and the ComCult Blog

1.1 Introduction to Blogs

The weblog or blog as it is more commonly known today has captured the imagination of mainstream writers and researchers alike. Technorati, a blog tracking site, currently tracks 71 million blogs (Technorati, 2007). According to its latest report, 100,000 new blogs are created a day and the Blogosphere doubles in size every 236 days (Sifry, 2006). In those early days of the Internet, blogs were mainly web portals, collections of annotated links in which their authors (usually a web designer) pointed out noteworthy sites that were appearing on the web at an increasing rate. By 2004, scholar Jodi Dean observed, "various media voices have proclaimed each of the last three years the 'year of the blog'—that is, the year blogs became mainstream, started getting major print and television notice, or had significant political impact" (p. 3). Since then, blogs have further risen in profile as blog writers (known as bloggers) attended the Republican and Democratic conventions as accredited journalists (Smith, 2004; Webb, 2004), bloggers' eyewitness accounts of the 2005 London bombings captured mainstream media attention (Houpt, 2005) and bloggers, tirelessly reporting the catastrophic after effects of Hurricane Katrina, were credited for mobilizing relief efforts in New Orleans (Leaver, 2006). As well as capturing the media's attention, blogs have captured the imagination of millions of netizens, as The Pew Internet and American Life Project reports 39% of Internet users – or about 57 million American adults – read blogs while 8% of Internet users – or 12 million – maintain blogs of their own (Lenhart, 2006). More and more people are choosing to go from passive consumers to active participants in the production of online content. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006) reports that 77%

of bloggers have shared their own artwork, photos, stories or videos online compared to only 26% of Internet users who have done the same. Much to the chagrin – and exaltation – of mainstream media producers, some bloggers are acting as media watchdogs, posting rebuttals, pointing out contradictions, misquotations and discrepancies in sloppy reporting (Warren as cited in Keren, 2004). Other blogs are written with a more light hearted approach, for example, Julie Powell landed a book deal for blogging her way through Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, humourously detailing the trials and tribulations of attempting to emulate the famous chef and her cooking.

In the same spirit of freedom of expression, blogs have proliferated in countries where ruling parties dictate what people can safely talk about, what women can wear, and who can interact with whom. The Initiative for an Open Arab Internet (2006) reports the existence of almost 40,000 Arabic blogs. The earliest of these blogs, featuring an Iraqi blogging under the pseudonym, Salem Pax, gained international attention, when he wrote about his hometown on the brink of war. The blog's early existence as web portal, cataloguing and filtering the seemingly limitless content on the Internet, gave way to an ability to cross otherwise impenetrable borders and hear voices that have been previously been marginalized or silenced.

It is popularly reported that 'weblogs' came into being in the mid-1990s when web designers published their journals online alongside their websites (Keren, 2004). There are several variations of the blog, its format and concept ranging from a collection of annotated web links to an online journal to a multi-authored community gathering place. To describe a blog generally is to say it is a website that is frequently updated,

sometimes several times a day, with posts appearing chronologically in reverse order (the most recently posted content appearing at the top (or first)) (Blood, 2002; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Boyd, 2006; Loft, 2004; Stone, 2002; Vaisman, 2006).

A simple and uncomplicated view, the weblogging (more commonly known now as blogging) phenomenon is most often attributed to the development of user-friendly weblog applications that were developed and introduced in the late 90s, such as Blogger, Livejournal, and Userland (Blood, 2002; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Stone, 2002). These easy-to-use applications allowed people with no prior knowledge of web design to create and manage their own blogs (Keren, 2004, Jensen, 2003).

Empowering those who previously were without a voice or the technical wherewithal, the meteoric rise in online publishing and content production allows anyone to write frankly about whatever topic they choose. Anyone, with access to a computer and an Internet connection, can publish their thoughts, belong to an online community and even build and maintain an online community – all seemingly a few keystrokes away.

Blogs, although widely written about in mainstream media and trade publications, make up a relatively fledgling area of academic study. Because blogs are often characterized as having revolutionized online expression and content production (Boyd, 2006; Leaver, 2006; Vaisman, 2006; Stone, 2002), as well as fostering a new kind of online community (Loft, 2004; Powazek, 2002), I set out to study a blog's ability to create and foster community. I launched a blog for the Communication and Culture (ComCult) program, a joint-program at Ryerson and York Universities of which I am an MA student, and set forth hoping to answer the following questions; 1) Do blogs

encourage a sense of community? 2) Do blogs help construct and maintain a collective identity within this community? 3) How is a blog more effective or less effective than previous online communication mediums such as listserv or bulletin boards?

The ComCult program was the most obvious community in which to explore the community building aspects of this new online medium. Made up of communications and cultural studies students who by definition should be interested in various forms and artifacts of communications and culture, I argue this group would be more open than others to a new method of communication, especially one that had the online world in such a buzz.

1.2 The ComCult Blog

In July 2005, I commissioned the design of a community blog for the ComCult students. The ComCult blog went live in September 2005. Every Ryerson or York ComCult student could register as a contributor to the ComCult weblog, empowering themselves with the ability to share their thoughts, opinions and news with the rest of the ComCult community.

Though Dahlberg (2002) stresses that a strict formalization of rules is necessary for an online community to run smoothly, I wanted the blog to develop organically – to let the members shape the content and observe where the community took the blog. Because of this philosophy, I did not develop a formal set of rules or etiquette upon the blog's initial launch.

1.3 The ComCult Blog: A Case Study

There are many reasons why a blog is much more efficient and less cumbersome than a listserv. Typically, with a blog, the reader is not bombarded with countless emails

but instead, has the ability to investigate content on the blog that interests and inspires them to participate in the community discussion, thereby connecting and identifying with other members of the community. In launching the ComCult community blog, there was a strong hope (and purpose) that this online space would bring the two separate University communities closer together, building and fostering a sense of community between the two. At the same time, I hoped to answer the research questions I posed about blogs and their potential for community building and collective identity formation, as well as their effectiveness as communication mediums. In the right circumstances, the blog could act as a living, changing multi-authored text of the ComCult program created by those within the community.

Chapter Two: Background and Literature Review

2.1 Social and Cultural Background of the Blog

Certainly the introduction of several easy-to-use blog applications made it practically simpler for users to self-publish, but that does not sufficiently explain the rapid rate of adoption and diffusion of the weblog as an Internet sub-medium, not to mention the blog's influence on mainstream media production and presentation. Both its ideology and its features encourage self-expression and connections between bloggers and between bloggers and blog readers leading one to surmise that the blog format is seized by many as an opportunity to share and connect with others in an environment full of others looking to do the same. Earlier online trends have facilitated blogs' entry into the online mainstream and have worked to integrate blogs and blogging into everyday online activities. Existence of earlier online communities groomed netizens for the advanced interaction and participation that is now possible with blogging and reading blogs. As Mattelart (2003) urges "reflection on the myriad interconnections among the modes of social, cultural and educational mediation through which the uses of digital technology are formed..." (p. 162), I deconstruct the rise of blogs as the intersection of the agency of online journaling, the kinship of online communities and the spirit of independent media. In doing so, I discuss, in the following section, a number of earlier online phenomenon including online journaling, bulletin-board systems (BBSs) and Usenet, multi-user domains (MUDs), and independent news media (such as Indymedia) and how their existence made way for blogs' introduction, adoption and rapid diffusion into mainstream culture. I move on to examine the impact of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on the development and maintenance of community online, the

formation of collective identity and the effectiveness of several computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) as communication mediums while situating blogs in these research areas. I close this section by outlining reasons discussed by online community designers and researchers as to why individuals participate in online communities.

I begin this section by discussing community from a historical perspective while attempting to situate community in the context of today's increasingly high-tech, urbanized and privatized environments. I also briefly outline the debate 'for' and 'against' online communities , touch upon medium theory and the ritual and transmission views of communication, and define the terms blog communities, community blogs and the Blog Community (also known as 'the Blogosphere') for context and clarity.

2.2. Community and Online Community

2.2.1. Community: A historical perspective

The concept of community has long been debated, discussed and theorized. Lawton (2005) notes Bell and Newby's assertion that defining community is almost impossible, stating that discussing what community *involves* is possible, describing what community *is* is an endeavour fraught with value judgments and emotional overtones that more often than not leads to a conflation of what community *is* and what it *should* be (Bell and Newby, 1971, as cited in Lawton). Ferdinand Tönnies, who, along with Émile Durkheim, was a principal theorist of community in the nineteenth century, described community in pre-industrial and pre-media society using the terms '*Gemeinschaft*', and '*Gesellschaft.*' A form of 'unity in plurality', *Gemeinschaft* is "close-knit: 'the intimate, private, exclusive living together – like a family'" and is starkly contrasted by how Tönnies defines '*Gesellschaft*', a form of 'plurality in unity', public life – the world itself

– which is transitory and superficial (Holmes, 2005, pp. 168 – 169). "One goes into *Gesellschaft* (society) as one goes into a strange country" (Tönnies, 1955, as quoted in Holmes, p. 169). According to Tönnies, "in *Gesellschaft*, every person strives for that which is to his own advantage and affirms the actions of others only in so far as and as long as they can further his interest" (Tönnies, 1955, as quoted in Holmes, p. 169). Durkheim described community using the term '*the conscience collective*' defining it "as 'the set of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a single society [which] forms a determinate system that has its own life" (cited in Lukes, 1973; as quoted in Holmes, 2005, p. 168) as exhibited in the organized values held by those practicing the same religion. These shared values make up a system of belief that Durkheim viewed as an overarching organizing mechanism of association. The advance of modern societies threatened such centralized means of association, characteristic to what Durkheim termed 'mechanical' societies, to give way to new means of association. An increasing division of labour, which Durkheim saw as the principle organizing agent in social integration in what he called 'organic societies', became the basis for differentiation which, according to Durkheim, "is itself elevated to a belief and a basis for a new kind of solidarity" (Holmes, p. 168). Because of this view, Durkheim placed less stress on the *conscience collective* as being based on ideas and more "on the recognition of the importance of institutions, from family, to education, to workplace, and, at the same time, a recognition of the necessity of the division of labour" (Ibid). As populations increased and the urban landscape became increasingly privatized, society and how individuals associated began to change. Holmes asserts that communication and transportation become vital in maintaining any semblance of community found in pre-industrial, pre-media societies.

Durkheim saw the onset of *Gesellschaft* creating a "weak overall sense of a *conscience collective* for any given society as a whole and for Durkheim, the division of labour was not a sufficient unifying force to overcome the loss of an ideational bond" (Ibid., p. 169). In modern societies, individuals do not look to the "'social whole' for a sense of integration" – indeed, as Holmes asserts, individuals often feel a sense of anomie if they try – but seek to integrate themselves within more manageable and knowable spaces - in private and closed environments of institution and family. Holmes refers to this as a 'miniaturization' of community that can "realize itself in the workplace, subcultures...television and the Internet" (Fukuyuma as cited in Holmes, p. 169). Indeed, McLuhan stated that "to go outside was to be alone" (from an interview with Tom Wolfe as quoted in Holmes) – and "staying inside becomes the basis of connection" (p. 200). Bell and Newby distinguish between three different forms of community: 1) geographically based communities of propinquity, which do not necessarily require a strong conscience collective; 2) communities of localized social sub-systems such as in institutions; and 3) the populist sense of community as belonging and goodwill, which is described as communion in which "communion need not depend only on parochial assembly and may well occur at a distance" (1976 as cited in Holmes, p. 170). Simmel believed group cohesion was possible even if geographical proximity was lacking, especially when group affiliation was based on common interests (as cited in Loft, 2004). As Loft explains, Simmel viewed,

> "voluntary participation as the basis of unity along with a shared interest in ideas and in knowledge. He explains that individuals become enmeshed in a "web of circumstances," and establish for themselves contacts with others who are outside the individual's original group-affiliation. The new group-affiliation is comprised of people now related to the individual by virtue of a similarity of

> talents, inclinations, and special interests (Simmel, 1955, as cited in Loft, 2004, p. 53).

Dempsey (1998) reviewed the definitions of community as it has appeared in the last 50 years and points to two commonly repeated characteristics; 1) having the social ties in common that produce a high degree of social solidarity (a structural characteristic) and 2) the experience of belonging together (as cited in Lawton, 2005). Holmes asserts that "from a Durkheimian point of view, all individuals need to be social integrated in some way or another. How this occurs may vary enormously between individuals and according to the place in which they live, including the new 'places' that are able to come into existence, such as cyberspace" (p. 175).

2.2.2. General definitions of Community and Online Community

De Cindio et al (2003) define community generally as "a web of social relations held together by a variety of circumstances" such as common interests, strong shared values, feelings of solidarity, geographical location, or coincidence (p. 395).

An online community (also referred to alternately as 'virtual community') is a collection of people who share similar or common interests and interact with each other on a regular basis through online mediums such as chat rooms, online forums, bulletin boards and email (Kang et al, 2004) and additionally MUDs, blogs, listservs, social networking sites and wikis.

2.2.3. The debate 'For' and 'Against' online communities

There are several scholars on both sides of the 'online community' debate; some viewing online communities as beneficial to society, others viewing online communities as detrimental to society. Scholars that celebrate and champion online communities tout

these new community spaces as enabling individuals to build relationships with people who share common interests and experiences across the street, across the city or across the world, allowing individuals to form and belong to invaluable networks of support and resources. Detractors argue that online communities work to diminish opportunities for real and meaningful interaction, upholding the traditional concept of community where face-to-face interaction in local settings constitutes 'the real world' (Lawton, 2005).

2.2.4. Brief overview of medium theory and the ritual view of communication

Holmes (2005) points out,

> It is increasingly clear in media societies that tradition and belief, or a conscience collective, are no longer an organizing basis for community. Through mediums and rituals, it has become quite orthodox for people who do not known one another to have a sense of belonging together in a mediated ceremony (p. 175).

The content of beliefs and interests is only one component of Durkheim's original descriptions of the conscience collective. Durkheim "also specified intensity – the intimacy of interactions, volume, the number of people enveloped by the interactions – and rigidity – the regularity and adherence of these interactions" (Holmes, p. 175).

> ...[S]ocial integration is based on the *practice* of interaction, not just what it signifies. When we routinize our interaction with others and with the mediums through which we conduct such interactions, we create a world around us which becomes very familiar to us, regardless of what the context of our interaction is (Holmes, p. 175 – 176).

Holmes draws from Durkheim the observation that community is as much about practice as it is about belief – a distinction also noted by Baym (2000) with her assertion that understanding online communities requires understanding them as "communities of

practice, organized like all communities, through habitualized ways of acting" (as cited in Holmes, p. 176). Holmes argues that there are divergent perceptions of the function of communication in social life; "for content theorists, it is cognitive interaction, but for medium theorists, it is increasingly a matter of social integration by way of media rituals" (p. 118). A return to medium theory in communication studies has been accompanied by the emergence of ritual views of communication. Ritual views of communication "contend that individuals exchange understandings not out of self-interest nor for the accumulation of information but for the need for communion, commonality and fraternity" while, conversely, transmission (or transport) views of communication view communication as an instrumental act, the sending and receiving of messages. As Holmes continues,

> What is common to all ritual views, is that they suggest that mediums are not 'used' for the purposes of social interaction, but are, instead, forms of social integration (p. 123).

Holmes uses the examples of having the TV on in the background without it being watched or downloading email when at work before engaging in face-to-face contact, as ways in which individuals immerse themselves "in forms of media integration" (Ibid). As Hegel once observed that the morning paper has replaced morning prayer, an imagined community exists amongst those who practice the same media habits, one that is not dependent on other people but on the knowledge that other people are enacting the same rituals. Medium theory suggests that social integration occurs via interaction with mediums, that "even when we are not interacting with others 'through' these mediums, the mediums themselves still frame our lives" (Holmes, p.119).

2.2.5. Defining blog communities, community blogs and 'the Blogosphere'

For the purposes of clarity and context, I will define the following terms: 'blog communities', 'community blogs' and the 'Blog Community' known and referred to by mainstream media and by bloggers alike as 'the Blogosphere.'

A blog community refers to the group of readers that congregate around a single- or multi-authored blog. While this group of blog readers may visit and read the blog on a regular basis, this group does not contribute or publish front page content to the blog but can contribute content to the blog by posting comments, if this function is enabled by the blog author. By virtue of the regularity and intensity of their involvement in the blog, these readers and sometimes contributors form a community around the blog.

Community blogs refer to blogs that are multi-authored, in which readers are also members of the site and participate by contributing content to (or submitting content to an editorial team for) the front page of the blog in the form of links, commentary, opinion, photos, or other information. In addition to contributing content to the front page of the blog, the members of the community blog can also post comments (or replies) as well.

'The Blogosphere' is the collective term for the Internet Blog Community that consists of, by Technorati's last count, 71 million blogs. According to most reports, this term was coined in 1999 by Brad L. Graham, of 'The Bradlands' (an early and extremely popular blog) in his blog post in which he bemoaned the shortening of 'weblog' to 'blog'.

2.3. Deconstructing the Rise of the Blog

2.3.1. Online Journaling: Collaboration between Writer and Reader

McNeill (2003) raises the issue of a blog's function and its various definitions pointing out the confusion surrounding these online texts - what are they supposed to be, what should they be doing and for whom? McNeill suggests that mainstream media has further confused the matter by defining the blog as a "kind of spontaneous online public journal" (Taylor, p. 68, as quoted in McNeill, p. 28), a "sort of hybrid diary/bio/community/bulletin" (p. 28). It is clear that the blog has taken on each of these definitions to different bloggers. Many detractors have disparaged the blog, insisting that the majority of blogs focus on the trivial and the mundane, however, McNeill maintains that "because anyone with access to and some familiarity with a computer can create a Web diary, readers will not be expecting texts or lives that are literary, exceptional, gifted, or even particularly thoughtful" (2003, p. 29). Online journals have since multiplied exponentially, and Sorapure (2003) contends that the insistent "presentness" on the Internet and the imperative to keep blogs frequently updated parallels what is "the diary's traditionally non-retrospective autobiographical form: a series of entries, each one dated and rooted firmly in its present moment" (p. 2). Rebecca Blood, early blogger and author, believes that online diaries are evidence of blogs' democratic potential: "that everyone could publish, that a thousand voices could flourish, communicate, connect" (as quoted in Sorapure, p. 2). In a culture of reality TV, confessional and voyeuristic, it is not difficult to see why blogs that focus on the personal lives of their writers garner so much attention. The interactivity of the blog allows the writer to respond to her readers, creating an environment that is no longer a monologue (as the private diary) but a

dialogue or a multi-logue, "where response will not be just imagined but actual" (Ibid.) and where a blogger writes not only for themselves but for others to read (Kitzmann, 2003). Indeed, Pew Internet & American Life reports that 76% of bloggers "blog to document their personal experiences and share them with others" (Lenhart, 2006, p. 7). The blog should be seen not as a private document but an environment that encourages interaction, community-building and communication (Sorapure, 2003; Kitzmann, 2003). Pew Internet & American Life (2007) reports that nearly nine out of ten bloggers include a comment function on their blog which allows the reader to become an active participant in the blog's narrative. "Many diarists use it to make connections with others. In *'Cher Ecran...'* Lejeune comes to this conclusion, as well, remarking on ...the invisible network of communications that is both a consequence of online diary writing and its goal" (Sorapure, p. 10). Similarly, Boyd (2006) points out "the performative and social aspects of blogging" and "the ways in which blogging is intertwined with community participation" (para. 40). Kitzmann writes that allowing the public to access personal thoughts and personal space is a form of agency for those in the weblog community – a way in which bloggers seek feedback and support from each other and their readers – celebrating a completely interactive and communal experience.

2.3.2. BBS and Usenet: Early Online Conversations

Emerging earlier than online journaling, the appearance of both bulletin-board systems (BBSs) and Usenet has been attributed to early computer enthusiasts, tinkering away at their computers, building connections to the outside world from the comfort of their own home. Rheingold (1993) refers to these early netizens as hobbyists who connected personal computers through telephone lines to create bulletin-board systems

(BBS), a grassroots use of technology that turned out to be a very difficult network to dismantle – just as the Department of Defense had hoped and planned when they created ARPANET. BBSs did not grow out of government research or funding but emerged in the late 70s when Ward Christensen and Randy Suess decided it was snowing too hard to leave their respective Chicago homes to exchange computer files. Earlier, Christensen had created and publicly released a program called MODEM, which allowed two computers in different locations to exchange files by sending them through a telephone line. On January 16, 1978, Christensen and Suess set up the very first bulletin-board system. In 1979, their BBS went public in Chicago, allowing people to leave messages and replies like any other bulletin board in real life. Around the same time, the CommuniTree BBS went online in the hopes of building a community based on spiritual practice and values (Rheingold). In 1993, *Boardwatch* magazine estimated that 60,000 BBSs operated in the United States alone. Each BBS supported anywhere from a dozen to thousands of participants (Ibid).

The Well, often argued the most well-known and most influential BBS, first went online in 1985 and was the brainchild of physician and successful businessman, Larry Brilliant, and counterculturalist, Stewart Brand. Within months of operating, The Well had attracted dozens of subscribers. This community grew rapidly, offering an expanding number of conferences that ranged in topic. In each of The Well's conferences, members passionately discussed, debated, and very often argued, a wide variety of subjects. Because owning a modem in 1985 was reserved for a select few early adopters, The Well's membership (which included futurist and author, Howard Rheingold) tended to include those who were technically hip and left-leaning, held post-

graduate degrees and had a flair for the written word. The Well's creators also saw the online community as a social experiment. Stewart Brand, the creative force behind The Well's inception, did not want The Well to simply replicate the several BBSs that already operated in the San Francisco area. He was interested in how electronic dialogue knit itself into the fabric of everyday life and how the two activities (computer-mediated communication and face-to-face interaction) fueled each other (Hafner, 2001). As a result, The Well had monthly office parties in which members would meet face-to-face fostering regular interaction offline as well as on (Ibid). Years later, members reflected on The Well's uniqueness, the bonds forged in The Well's conferences, the financial as well as emotional support that members lent to each other in times of need and the exciting and sometimes even distressing intellectual sparring which took place on The Well. Well historian Katie Hafner writes, "Many ideas first generated on The Well became pivotal in the history of cyberspace including the naming of cyberspace itself. It was in a Well posting that John Perry Barlow first took science fiction writer William Gibson's term and applied it to the present" (Hafner, 2001, p. 104). By 1990, The Well had become "a force whose influence was wildly disproportionate to its size" (Ibid).

The Well spawned early imitators, too. On the east coast, Stacy Horn, a member of The Well, started up The Echo (named so for East Coast Hang Out) and by spreading the news about Echo at parties and other functions, she attracted a small but intense group of people that interacted and were committed to this online community (Hafner, 2001).

Hafner (2001) asserts that much of the intellectual history of digital communities could be found on The Well often springing forth from Rheingold's and other members' interest in the topic, and the conferences hosted on The Well. Rheingold's early

description of electronic bulletin board systems, including The Well, could very well describe a blog today: "a BBS turns an ordinary person anywhere in the world into a publisher, an eyewitness reporter, an advocate, an organizer, a student or a teacher, and potential participant in a worldwide citizen-to-citizen conversation" (p. 131). While an obvious techno-utopian, Rheingold does admit that much of BBS culture is mundane or puerile or esoteric – accusations with which blogs and blog culture have been also been charged.

More and more frequently, community blogs, upholding the same ideals as BBSs, are set up for classes or in workplaces in efforts to keep everyone up-to-date with class or project management and allow class or project participants to share with classmates or team members their progress. At Sun Microsystems, hundreds of Sun employees blog about their work. Management there thinks that the unfiltered conversation between companies and customer taking place on these blogs has a positive impact on business (Roush, 2005). Scholar Katherine Cole (2004) studying blogs in a classroom setting, found blogs facilitated an environment that was "motivating, free of criticism and judgment" fostering "quality response" and enabling students "not only to have an audience for their writing but likewise allows the reading of peers' writing" (p. ix).

Usenet is another one-to-many communication medium and early online community that emerged in the early days of the Internet. Developed at the University of North Caroline at Chapel Hill and Duke University, Usenet spread like a virus from campus to campus to consist of thousands of threads of conversation ranging in topic from rock n' roll to parenting tips to sexual fetishes and everything in between. Likened to a giant coffeehouse with thousands of rooms or Speaker's Corner in London's Hyde

Park, Usenet is a system of managing public conversations about specific topics, located not at some central hub but spread throughout the system. Anyone online can post to a thread of conversation, as Rheingold states, "in Usenet, every member of the audience is also potentially a publisher. Students at universities in Taiwan who had Usenet access and telephone links to relatives in China become a network of correspondents during the 1989 events at Tiananmen Square (p. 130)." Similarly, blogs multiplied by the thousands after the events of September 11, 2001 in the US (Jensen, 2003; Keren, 2004; Welch, 2003). These events compelled some to create their own blogs as a response, others took up reading them, seeking out alternative news sources and points of view. In *The State of the Blogosphere*, Technorati reports that blog activity (specifically posting volume) spikes in reaction to world events, citing the Israeli / Hezbollah conflict as well as other escalating tensions in the Middle East in July 2006 as the reason for that month's surge in blog activity (Sifry, 2006). Although BBSs and Usenet may have lost critical importance since the emergence of listservs and blogs, their place in history must be documented and acknowledged as early communication mediums and important breakthroughs in the history of the blog. Without the do-it-yourself efforts of early hobbyists and enthusiasts to build a grassroots communications culture, laying the early foundations of online communities and grooming netizens worldwide socially and culturally for life online, blogs might never have risen to such popularity.

2.3.3. MUDs: Multiple Identities in Multiple Screens

Again originating from a college campus, yet another type of early online community, the very first Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) appeared at the University of Essex, England around 1979. This first MUD, called 'The Land', was modeled on

Tolkien's world of hobbits, wizards, dwarves and elves (Rheingold, 1993). In MUDs, players take on a different persona, sometimes several different personae, as they travel throughout the game, interacting with other characters (players) through text typed out on screen. Players can often add to the MUD, creating tools to use, rooms to roam in, clothing, weapons, and other objects they may need in this world. In a big game of make-believe, players are able to act out their fantasies of alternate identities, or alter egos, without, for the most part, any real world consequences. Rheingold describes MUDs as "imaginary worlds in databases where people use words and programming languages to improvise melodramas, build worlds and all the objects in them, solve puzzles...gain wisdom, seek revenge, indulge greed and lust and violent impulses" (p. 145). By 1992, there were more than 170 multi-user games on the net with over a hundred thousand users. Turkle (1995) asserts that text-based MUDs were, at the time, a new form of collaboratively written literature.

With role-playing, alternate identities and written text at the centre of this phenomenon, MUDs exhibit some of the same qualities that blogs do when their authors post their lives online for all to see. Players in MUDs create pseudonyms for their online identities. Similarly, bloggers often will take on handles or pseudonyms when blogging. In fact, more than half of bloggers use a pseudonym (Lenhart, 2007). In MUDs, unlike online journals discussed above, nothing has to be real, everything can be imagined, and arguably, that is the point of MUDs. Readers of online journals, on the other hand, often feel betrayed if news leaks that the diarist has been less than honest on their weblog. MUDs are included here to contrast these two phenomena (MUDs and online journaling) but also to highlight that the fact that blogs have taken from both of these phenomena.

Some bloggers will take on the persona of a fictional character and blog in this character's voice. Harry Potter is blogging in the Blogosphere (and a member of the Livejournal community) as is The Grim Reaper and other icons from the annals of popular culture. Like MUDs, blogs afford the author freedom of expression and freedom to imagine and create (even fabricate). Bloggers can revel in the Internet's elasticity of the real; fuzzy boundaries long since explored in MUDs, an earlier online communities. Arguably, a factor in the prominence and persistence of online communities, Sherry Turkle (1995) observes that "[people] explicitly turn to computers for experiences that they hope will change their ways of thinking or will affect their social and emotional lives" (p. 26).

2.3.4. Indymedia: Building a network of independent journalists

The nineties saw the rise in independent media sources and radical news reporting as journalists and reporters sought to tell alternate stories via the Internet. Crystallizing this new movement of online alternative press was something that scholar Cleaver (1998) called "The Zapatista Effect." Considered a 'radical ideal' by alternative media commentators and social scientists alike, the Zapatistas' method of employing the Internet to upload communiqués globalized their local issues. Manuel Castells called what the Zapatistas engaged in as "the first informational guerrilla movement" and John Downing emphasized the Zapatistas' "conception of the public sphere as...an arena for radical inclusivity (as quoted in Atton, p. 6). The Zapatistas inspired the global online networking of like-minded activist groups and causes to act together, publishing and protesting as networked 'affinity groups' (Bookchin as cited in Atton, p. 7).

The Indymedia network, an alternative news outlet, was born in 1999 with the "anti-globalization" protests in Seattle and has grown exponentially across the globe. Utilizing an open source publishing application very similar to blog applications, the Indymedia network enables reporters anywhere in the world to upload communiqués and photos to its site without the filter of an editor (Atton, 2002; Beckerman, 2003). Kidd (2003) asserts that by the 1990s, hundreds of individuals and groups, loosely connected in the open source movement, were circulating information for free, sharing new software and hardware and challenging the parameters of intellectual property through regulatory and entrepreneurial means – a global community of activists continually challenging the corporate takeover of the Internet, staking their small claims to the web where they could. The Indymedia network emphasizes 'native reporting' as "amateur journalists—explicitly partisan—report from the 'front line', from the grassroots, from within the movements and communities they thus come to represent" (Atton, p. 10).

Jennifer McGinley's early research (2005) on blogs as alternative and citizen-based media led her to surmise that weblogs, while blurring the lines between mainstream and alternative media, "show signs of facilitating unique spaces where democratic and civic practices and activities can take shape" (p. iii). Similarly, Leaver (2006) states that blogs "provide new spaces for new voices to critique the existing media structures" asserting that blogs act as "The Fifth Estate" (para. 13). Vaisman (2006) goes so far as to characterize blogging as "everyday resistance" where "the amateur voice of millions of grassroots online cultural producers are cohering to form a realm of participatory culture... (para. 2)."

2.3.5. Blogs: 'Push Button Publishing for the People'

Techno-utopians are excited by the emergence and popularity of the blog, as Blood (2002) enthuses, "a new voice will emerge, that of the weblog itself, a synthesis of many viewpoints that merge to create a distinct community" (p. 73) providing "fascinating examples of information sharing, analysis and dissemination" (p. 22). Biz Stone (2004) describes a weblog as

> a collection of digital content that, when examined over a period of time, exposes the intellectual soul of its author or authors. Blogging is the act of creating, composing, and publishing this content; and a blogger is the person behind the curtain. Part social software and part web building, blogging is peer-to-peer publishing—the future of our connected lives (p. 35).

2.3.6. Community Blogs: New Gathering Places

Community blogs offer a space in which members seek out others, and gather in a new kind of "neighbourhood" to share news and exchange ideas (Loft, 2004). One such community blog, Matt Haughey's MetaFilter, boasts a 20,000-strong community and a mission to point out the best and wackiest of the web. MetaFilter "exists to break down the barriers between people, to extend a weblog beyond just one person, and to foster discussion among its members" (MetaFilter as quoted by Ali-Hasan, 2005, p. 7). One scholar and MetaFilter observer, Noor Ali-Hasan, contends that MetaFilter acts as an "archive of societal and cultural memory" pointing to the comments posted just moments after the first plane hit the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. This conversation thread culminated in a total 490 posts, capturing the community's early reactions and reflecting, Ali-Hasan argues, American society's as a whole. Ali-Hasan goes on to compare a community blog, specifically MetaFilter, to a "traditional cultural

institution that satisfies individuals' needs to reconnect with their culture and past, share their knowledge, and ensure the longevity of their cultures" (Carr as cited in Ali-Hasan, p. 7).

2.4. CMC and the Development and Maintenance of Online Community

2.4.1 Building and Fostering Community Through CSSNs: Case Studies

Wellman et al (1996) examine the nature of computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) and the social implications of this ever expanding network. Wellman et al contend that CSSNs were born out of the US Defense Department's ARPANET project that linked large university computers with some of their users. Since then, computer networking has grown to include a number of different forms. From email, to listservs, to Usenet groups, to Multi-User Dungeons (MUDS), to chat rooms, to BBSs, to blogs, to online social networking sites, these technologies range from either asynchronous to synchronous ('real-time'), to one-to-one to one-to-many computer mediated communication (CMC) or a combination of all of the above. Studies looking at the loss of verbal nuances, nonverbal cues, physical context and other observable social characteristics (all factors involved in face-to-face contact) through CMC came to some interesting conclusions. Many researchers found that CMC resulted in "increased participation, more egalitarian participation, more ideas offered, and less centralized leadership" (Hiltz et al, 1986; Kielser et al, 1984; Rice, 1987; Adrianson & Hjelmquist, 1991, Weisband et al, 1995 as cited in Wellman et al, p. 218). Kiesler et al also found that "limited social presence may also encourage people to communicate more freely and

creatively than they do in person, at times "flaming" others by using extreme, aggressive language" (Wellman et al, p. 218). Despite the increased possibility of flaming another user, many researchers found that people participating within CSSNs find social support, companionship, and a sense of belonging, even when these communities are composed of people they do not know or hardly know (Rice & Love, 1987; McCormick & McCormick, 1992; Haythornwaite et al, 1995, Walther, 1996; Wellman & Gulia, 1996). Wellman et al found that many online ties facilitate "frequent, reciprocal, companionable, and often supportive contact, and the placelessness of CSSN interactions facilitates long-term contact without loss of relationships that often accompanies residential mobility" (p. 221). This reciprocity of support and exchange of information encouraged within CSSNs allows participants to demonstrate their technical expertise, increase their self-esteem, and earn respect and status (Wellman et al).

In the case study of Netville, a wired community in which many, but not all, houses were outfitted with high speed, broadband Internet and subsidized computers, Hampton and Wellman (1999, 2001, 2003) studied the impact of information and communication technology (ICTs) on the size and strength of ties in residents' social network, community participation, and collective action. Hampton and Wellman (2003) found that being wired increased the number and range of neighbourhood ties that a resident had in Netville and "wired Netville residents had a greater number of local social ties than their nonwired counterparts" (Hampton, 2003, p. 421). Being wired influenced the resident's number of weak ties but not the amount of strong links at all. Hampton and Wellman (2003) argue the importance of weak ties in accessing information and resources, linking groups and providing social identities. The researchers also found that

ICT facilitated community participation and collective action by "creating large dense networks of relatively weak social ties and...through the use of ICTs as an organizational tool" (Hampton, 2003, p. 418). NET-L, the Netville community listserv, provided Netville residents with new online opportunities for participation which in turn encouraged more frequent online and offline communication amongst community members, while simultaneously providing Netville residents with "specific cultural capital in terms of knowledge of local events, local services, and the opinions and activities of other residents" (Hampton, 2003, p. 420). Hampton (2003) further states,

> Online forums provided a visibility to participation that encouraged individual contributions, overcame high thresholds to participation, supported the appearance of group solidarity and prevented the loss of individual involvement (p. 426).

Supported by their positive findings regarding ICTs and Netville community participation and involvement, Hampton (2003) assert optimistically, that "For the foreseeable future, accessible and asynchronous forms of CMC are most likely to improve the flow of information, increase the size of social networks and in turn facilitate community involvement" (p. 426), not by replacing face-to-face interaction but by existing as an additional avenue for communication, participation and support, enhancing community life, neither transforming nor weakening it (Hampton, 2003; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; 2003).

The Well demonstrates, through a combination of on- and offline interaction, the strength of online community bonds and the importance of the community-written text to this online community. The Well office hosted parties that quickly became a monthly tradition and as Brand, the creative force behind The Well, had envisioned, offline interaction deepened relationships that began online – "something happened when people

who had earlier met online met each other in physical space. It intensified their closeness when they resumed their online lives on The Well" (Hafner, 2001, p. 45). Members of The Well committed great acts of community for other Well members, for example, when regular Well contributor, Phil Catalfo's seven-year-old son, Gabe, was diagnosed with leukemia, people on The Well showed support by sitting a virtual vigil and posting Catalfo and his family reams of support (Hafner, 2001). When Isaac, a teenage Well member, could not afford tuition to go to school, Well members helped him to come up with the money, donating some of their own in the process. Members' response to need created and fostered The Well's unique sense of community.

2.5. Construction and Maintenance of an Online Self and Collective Identity

Roz Ivanic theorizes "that we construct an identity that reflects our association with that group" and that we "negotiate an identity within the range of possibilities for self-hood which are supported or at least tolerated by the community" (McNeill, 2003, p. 34). Elkin (2006) writes of the bloggers' relationship with their readers as "mutually constitutive; each exist[ing] in a dynamic, co-creative, and parasitic relationship to the other" (para. 13). Elkin also contemplates the constraint bloggers often feel under their readers' critical gaze, likening the Internet to a panopticon, where bloggers are constantly under the surveillance of unseen others (readers), which, in turn, sets the stage for the "pronounced state of performance" (para. 15) that characterizes both the act of blogging and blog communities themselves.

The Well gave users such as Tom Mandel, entrenched Well member and conference host, the ability to fragment himself, alter and modify his identity he could not have done so easily, if at all, offline, supporting what Sherry Turkle called "the multiple

and fluid self". When Mandel had his first (of several) "breakups" with The Well, he erased entire conferences that he had hosted, as a way of obliterating himself from The Well. By doing this, Mandel not only took advantage of his elevated status of host entrusted to him by the community managers of The Well, but deleted years of conversation, leaving gaping holes in The Well's collective memory, which some members viewed as the ultimate betrayal of community spirit. Many people had come to believe that postings on The Well became part of common lore and community property (Hafner, 2001).

In one study, Joyce Y. M. Nip (2004) examines The Queer Sisters' electronic bulletin board, the online community space of a women's group in Hong Kong, as a tool for offline social movement mobilization from the perspective of identity building. Nip cites scholars that have found that computer mediated communication does indeed facilitate the development of a collective identity, by providing the space and the opportunity in which the group can debate issues, make meaning and come to a consensus of shared values and goals (Myers, 1994; Downing 1989 as cited in Nip). According to Melucci (1995, as cited in Nip), "a collective identity is not something static; rather it is 'the process through which a collective becomes a collective' (p. 26). An element of collective identity is a shared sense of 'we' "or solidarity when [a group] define[s] some shared characteristics as salient and important" (p. 26).

Nip (2004), looking at literature revolving specifically around social movements, finds that although the Queer Sisters' electronic bulletin board is successful in fostering a sense of belonging amongst its participants, it falls short of building a collective identity. Despite Nip's findings, there are many social movements, such as the Zapatistas

movement and the 'anti-globalization' movement, that have greatly benefited from the use of the Internet as these networks of activists drew on the Net's strengths: facilitating communication in information dissemination, formal networking and action co-ordination (Nip, 2004). Community building initiatives, too, such as the case of Netville outlined above, have benefited from these perceived strengths, most notably when Netville residents mobilized efforts and acted against both the developer and Magenta Consortium (the company responsible for wiring the community) in two different instances by using Netville's listserv as an organizational tool. "Collective action in itself is an indication that the actors involved have achieved a certain extent of collective identity (Melucci 1995), while at the same time being a process of building a collective identity (Calhoun, 1991; Melucci 1995)" (as quoted in Nip, 26). Pizzorno (1985 as cited in Nip) states "collective identity formation and maintenance requires a network of active relationships between the actors, which necessitates the direct participation of the individual actor in interactions" (p. 27). Although a strong collective identity was never achieved among the Queer Sisters group, Nip contends that "the potential of the Internet in building identities for social movements [and I contend other communities bound together by similar interests, beliefs, goals and affiliations] is revealed in the successful development of a sense of solidarity among the bulletin board participants with The Queer Sisters group" (p. 41).

Because interaction is encouraged by a blog's comment feature, the blog can act as an online salon or coffeehouse of sorts for previously unconnected people. MetaFilter is an example of a highly successful community blog. With its strong sense of purpose (to exhibit the best of the web), many members care deeply about the quality of the site and

consider MetaFilter to be a place, evident in the overwhelming amount of conversation threads that revolve around the site's content and the site itself. Ali-Hasan (2005) asserts that this kind of investment as well as the constant reaffirming of group norms works to build, promote and reinforce a MetaFilter (MeFi) identity. Often MetaFilter serves as a launching point for other types of CMC (such as instant messaging and email) as well as face-to-face meetings (called MeFi Meet Ups) between MeFi members. Some MetaFilter members extend their online MeFi identities into real life, sporting MeFi t-shirts with their username emblazoned on their backs. Active participation includes posting content to the front page, MetaTalk, Ask MetaFilter and/or posting comments, all of which work, according to Wenger (1998), to create and reinforce a sense of identity within the community (as cited in Ali-Hasan, 2005). Ali-Hasan (2005) believes MetaFilter exhibits characteristics of both common identity and common bond groups as discussed by Sassanberg (2002),

> Common bond groups are tied together by interpersonal connections. In these groups, members' personal attraction to one another is more important to group attachment than members' attraction to the group itself. Common identity groups are tied together by common goal or purpose. In these groups, members' attraction and identification with the group itself is more important than members' attraction to a particular individual in the group. Common identity groups are expected to be more continuous and stable than common bond groups (as cited in Ali-Hasan, 2005).

As Ali-Hasan explains MeFi members' desire to connect both on the site and in real life is a characteristic of a common bond group. Regardless of this, most people use the site not because of who is going to be there but because they identify with the group's purpose and goal – members' connection to MetaFilter as a whole is stronger than any one connection to an individual member. As well, MeFi regulars have changed over the

years, and yet the site still remains extremely popular with high volumes of content being posted to the site. Although in the beginning, MetaFilter functioned primarily as a common bond group, being Matt Haughey's site, visited and written by a small group of Haughey's friends, MetaFilter now, with its 20,000-strong membership, functions as a common identity group.

2.6. CSSNs as Effective Communication Mediums: Case Studies

As well as building and fostering a sense of community and the formation of a collective identity, CSSNs lend their authors and/or active members an opportunity to express themselves, gain knowledge and thus feel empowered – an oft-reported result of community development – demonstrating their effectiveness as mediums of communication. In one case study, researcher Stephen Coleman examined an online forum designed for British women who had survived domestic violence. The forum encouraged the participants to submit their experiences and testimony to parliamentarians interested in policy development. This online forum lasted only a month and Coleman, who conducted post-forum surveys of the participants, found that participants felt "the experience of interacting online with other survivors of domestic violence to be empowering. As the month went on, they began to use the forum to create an online community of mutual support, as well as engaging in a parliamentary consultation" (Coleman, 2004, p. 9). Many participants, grateful for the network of support that the forum provided, indicated that they would keep in contact with other participants online as well as offline even after the forum closed down (Coleman, 2004). The forum not only served as a space for women to connect but a springboard for further communication.

Other examples of successful community building and development, which also demonstrate CSSNs' effectiveness as communication mediums include an elaborate case study designed by Randal Pinkett and Richard O'Bryant, two researchers at MIT. Their project aimed to build community, empowerment and self-sufficiency at Camfield Estates, a lower income neighbourhood, by outfitting community households with state-of-the-art desktop computers, software and high speed Internet, a community technology centre in a community centre and community content delivered through a community-based web system. As part of the project, computer and technology workshops were also offered to members of the community. The project's strategies included methods of community building and technology integration that encouraged community involvement and promoted community members to be active participants and producers of online information and content thereby empowering the community and establishing self-sufficiency (Pinkett and O'Bryant, 2003; Pinkett, 2003). In their first round of analysis, Pinkett and O'Bryant found that community members' sense of empowerment, civic engagement, social ties and sense of community did correlate positively with Internet use as well as a heightened sense of awareness of community resources, information and events and renewed confidence in themselves and their ability to learn. Pinkett and O'Bryant's findings also correspond with Hampton and Wellman's findings in their study of Netville.

Online forums that offer the opportunity for deliberative discussion and public contribution to policy development like those in Britain that were subject to Stephen Coleman's study proved that online forums were effective methods of communication. Other examples of effective communication mediums devoted to fostering community

involvement and civic engagement include Minnesota E-Democracy, "an Internet-democracy initiative in the USA that has attempted to facilitate online public interaction" (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 616). Community members were included on a listserv which ensured all participants would receive the same community information as well as allow all community members to contribute new ideas and opinions and participate in public debate of issues that directly affected the community. According to Dahlberg, the project's success was based on a formalization of rules and guidelines, such as how many times each individual participant could post per day, the careful management of the forum, the development of self-moderation and the strict focus of issues that affect the community within a geographically bounded political jurisdiction. Many other community site designers also stress the critical importance of a set of rules or guidelines for the community to follow that are fairly and consistently enforced (Kim; 2000; Haughey, 2002; Powazek, 2002; De Cindio, Gentile, Grew & Redolfi, 2003).

2.7. Why individuals participate in online communities

Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist, developed what he called The Hierarchy of Needs in which he outlined the human needs, ranging from basic survival (physiological) to self-fulfillment (self-actualization), that people are motivated to satisfy and the order in which people would fulfill these needs (for example, basic survival needs would be met before one would attempt to develop skills and fulfill one's potential). Using Maslow's chart, Amy Jo Kim, an online community designer and expert, mapped out online community equivalents, and Bowman and Willis (2003) considering Kim's work, conclude that people are motivated to participate in online communities "in order to achieve a sense of belonging to a group; to build self-esteem through contributions and

to garner recognition for contributing; and to develop new skills and opportunities for ego building and self-actualization" (p. 38). Bowman and Willis elaborate on Kim's theory in their report entitled *We Media*. They believe individuals participate in online communities to gain status (what Bourdieu would label as social capital), and to create connections with others who have similar interests on- and offline. Bowman and Willis also argue that individuals participate in online communities to understand what is going on around them and make meaning as "weblog, forums, usenets and other online social forums have become real-time wellsprings of sense-making from their peers on just about any subject. They also function as archives of perspectives" (p. 40). Bowman and Willis go on to argue that individuals take part in online communities for the opportunity to inform others and be informed, to entertain and be entertained and for the opportunity to create as an act of self-actualization. Canter states, "(Weblogging is) at the core of creativity – expressing your feelings, opinions and showing everyone else what you think is important" (as quoted in Bowman and Willis, p. 41).

2.8. Summary

The literature discussed above strongly supports the belief that building and fostering a sense of community is possible within different types of CSSNs including online journals, BBSs, Usenet, and MUDs. The little research that exists on community blogs suggests that building and maintaining a sense of community and a strong collective identity with this type of CMC is achievable. Despite the many case studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of different types of CMC such as listservs, online forums and bulletin boards as communication mediums, there is little research attesting to a blog's effectiveness as such. This suggests that a study with objectives to explore: 1) a

blog's ability to build and foster a sense of community, 2) to construct and maintain a collective identity within this community, and 3) its effectiveness as a communication medium would further research on blogs, specifically, and further existing research on CMC and CSSNs, in general.

Chapter Three: Research Questions, Methodology and Justification for Research

3.1. Research Questions and Motivation for Research

Blogs, although widely written about in mainstream media and trade publications, make up a relatively fledgling area of academic study. Because blogs are so often characterized as having revolutionized online expression and content production (Boyd, 2006; Leaver, 2006; Vaisman, 2006; Stone, 2002), as well as fostering a new kind of community online (Loft, 2004; Powazek, 2002), I designed a study in which I could explore a weblog's ability to create and foster community, to construct and maintain collective identity and its effectiveness as a communication medium. I launched a blog for the Communication and Culture (ComCult) program, a joint-program at Ryerson and York Universities of which I am an MA student, in order to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: Do blogs encourage a sense of community? If not, why not?

RQ 2: Do blogs help construct and maintain a collective identity within this community? If so, how? If not, why not?

RQ 3: How is a blog more effective or less effective than previous online communication mediums such as listserv or bulletin boards?

The aims of the study were to affect positive change within the community by introducing the blog as an additional avenue for communication as well as to observe the blog's ability to foster a sense of community, build a collective identity within this community and to function as an effective method of communication. My overall objective was not to test hypotheses that revolved around blog communities but to carry out an interpretive study in which to provide insights on a specific community.

3.2. Research Methodology and Data Collection Methods

Action research is a research method in which action (change) and research are the intended outcomes (Dick, 1997). There are several approaches to this method including my method, participatory action research. A type of action research that I believed my work was best suited by following one that employs a defined cycle of research and the use of participatory methods to produce emancipation (Dick, 1993). With the introduction of the ComCult blog, my purpose was not only to provide an alternate and additional communication method, but to build a stronger sense of community and encourage a space in which students could express themselves in discussion and debate while connecting with others in the ComCult community.

My work fits in as participatory action research because of the change I aimed to affect as well as the research findings I had hoped to achieve and contribute to the relatively new area of weblog study. I sent out a questionnaire early on in the research study to review the group's level of blog awareness, and knowledge of and participation in online communities. I had planned to conduct a content analysis mid-way through the study to review and assess the blog's impact and influence on the ComCult community, but when the mid-way point arrived, I was still the main contributor to the site. Because of this, I had my technical administrator run the web logs on the blog to assess traffic levels of the site. The logs indicated that traffic was low and that I was the primary visitor. I decided to forego conducting a content analysis midway through the blogging year and decided to focus on the questionnaires and blog itself. As Dick (1993) outlines in action research, this method involves conducting research in cycles. As I gathered information both from the first questionnaire and from posts on the ComCult blog

(specific requests were posted on the ComCult blog by contributors), I made changes to the site to facilitate the blog's ease of use and to ensure the blog was filling the immediate needs of the community.

I used a qualitative research method to observe the blog's ability to build and foster a sense of community, construct and maintain a collective identity and the blog's effectiveness as a communication tool within the community. The instruments of data collection and subsequent analysis included two questionnaires (sent out at the beginning and end of the research study), a content analysis of the blog, and an examination of the blog's web logs, which tracks and reports the site's visitor data among other data.

3.2.1. Questionnaires: Beginning and End

In the early stages of the ComCult weblog's life online, I sent out the first questionnaire with the goal of gaining insight into ComCult students' general online practices, participation in online communities, knowledge and maintenance of blogs, and participation in the Blogosphere. As well, the questionnaire set out to learn about the current sense of community within the program, where and who the students turned to for program information, what students wanted out of a community blog and whether they would object to faculty being invited as contributors to the ComCult blog (Appendix 1: Questionnaire #1, November 15, 2005).

As with Nip (2004), Wellman and Hampton (1999), Pinkett and O'Bryant (2003) and Coleman's (2004) case studies, post 'consultation' or post-experience surveys were conducted at the end of Winter 2006 semester, allowing roughly two semesters of community blogging to pass (Appendix 2: Questionnaire #2, April 24, 2006). Links to both online questionnaires were posted on the ComCult blog, as Nip had done on The

Queer Sister electronic board. As well, the program assistants at each university emailed the links to both questionnaires to each student in the program, at my request, to involve both the blog's participants and the non-participants.

3.2.2. Content Analysis

As with Nip's study, a content analysis of the blog was conducted in order to assess what type of interaction and information exchange occurred on the ComCult blog, what function the blog performed for the students that read and contributed to the blog and whether the blog helped to construct and maintain a collective identity for ComCult students. Nip analyzed a period from September 1999 to July 2000 and organized the posts into a ten-category scheme that she had referenced and modified from previous studies (that included studies done by researchers such as Myers 1987; Correll 1995; McLaughlin et al. 1995; Kollock & Smith 1996; Rheingold 1996; Wellman & Gulia 1999). Nip's ten category scheme included the categories: Information, Relational, Task, Sharing, Advice, Discussion, Management, Intrusion (messages posted by outsiders that are disruptive in nature), and others. I used a similar category scheme but dropped the 'Intrusion' category as there were no intruders posting on the blog since a community member first had to register with his or her Ryerson or York email address in order to contribute to the blog. According to Nip, relational messages are those that would be used by a poster to address a particular community member for an interpersonal message. Sharing messages are those that carry "the feelings or views of the poster, typically not addressed to anybody, and that draw replies...Expression messages also carry the personal feelings or views of the posters and are not addressed to anyone, but do not draw replies" (Nip, p. 33). Nip does not define each of her categories but I will here. An

Advice message included the opinion of a poster sent to the community such as if a poster has seen a good article, good movie, that the poster feels the community will benefit from seeing, or the poster has learned of some news of an interesting conference or lecture that may benefit the community, to give a few examples. These posts did not necessarily provoke a response. Information posts carried information about upcoming events, job openings, noteworthy articles, could be wide-ranging and be either social, or academic, which did not necessarily draw replies. An important characteristic of an Information post is that this type of post is devoid of the poster's opinion or any form of commentary. A Discussion post could grow out of an initial post (be it Advice, Sharing, Task, Management) in which a discussion arises from the original post. Discussion posts are from one poster, sharing an opinion in response to another post and so on. Management posts are administrative in nature for example, the due date of a progress report or student government elections and do not necessarily need to illicit a response. Finally, Task posts request participation or assistance in specific situations, for example volunteer positions at the annual ComCult conference.

Nip analyzed 603 posts over an eleven month period and for simplification, each post was only counted in one category. In other words, a post could not qualify as both an Advice post and a Sharing post. To check reliability of the coding scheme, Nip coded each post twice and reclassified those posts that came up as discrepancies. I also coded each post (front page post and accompanying comment(s) of the blog from September 2005 to April 2006 twice to check the reliability of the coding schedule. I categorized the posts into the defined categories in order to analyze the function of the blog.

As Ali-Hasan (2005) states non-contributing members on MetaFilter and the site's lurkers (those who are not registered members of the site and simply read but do not participate by contributing content) do not work to foster the sense of community on the site, I similarly view posts that regularly fail to initiate community response as failing to keep community spirit alive, in fact, consistent lack of response may be evidence that community does not exist at all (community being "as much about practice as it is about belief" (Holmes, 2005, p. 176)). As well as analyzing the function of the ComCult blog by categorizing posts as Information, Expression, Management, etc, I wanted to analyze what type of posts initiated the most community response, or alternately, which posts consistently failed to initiate community response. In my view, those posts that encouraged participation worked to foster and strengthen community involvement and participation resulting in a greater sense of community and those posts that consistently failed in this regard, also failed to foster community spirit and possibly work to erode the strength of the community. I also examined posts for evidence that contributors felt a shared sense of 'we' or were attempting to work out group norms and values (and thereby some semblance of a collective identity) via interactions with and through the blog.

3.2.3. Contributions to the ComCult Blog

Contributions to the blog were also tracked by month and by member to indicate community engagement throughout the study.

3.2.4. Web Logs of the ComCult Blog

The web logs of the ComCult blog were examined briefly as an indicator of blog traffic. As community participation on the ComCult blog was low, it was unsurprising to learn that the logs indicated low user traffic between December 2005 and May 2006.

Unfortunately, traffic for September (month of blog's launch), October (first full month of blog's life and the busiest month of posts and comments) and November 2005 were was not tracked by the site's technical administrator so logs do not exist for this time period. If web logs revealed that site traffic had been very high but participation remained low, I maintain, as argued above, that lurkers and non-contributing members of the blog do not contribute to a sense of community on the blog or overall, in the program.

3.3. Justification for Study and Research Methodology

3.3.1. Questionnaires

As mentioned above, I included questionnaires in the research study as I specifically sought to learn respondents' thoughts and views regarding the ComCult community with questions that specifically inquired about the overall sense of community they felt as students of the ComCult program as well as how the blog – and the listserv – contributed to this sense of community. Also included in the questionnaires were specific questions that related to the collective identity of the community, and the effectiveness of the blog as a method of communication.

3.3.2. Content Analysis

Coding the posts into categories was done to assess the blog's function within the community and the community's use of the blog as a space in which to form and maintain a collective identity (Appendix 3: Coding schedule). By looking at what type of posts the community contributed and how much discussion each of these types of posts generated as well as examining the nature and content of blog communication, I could assess whether the blog was utilized by the community as a bulletin board for events or

listings or a discussion forum and working provide the community the space in which a collective identity could be constructed and maintained via discussion and debate regarding a shared set of community values and perspective.

As well as coding posts into specific categories, the number of posts and comments per month and per member were tracked to assess the level of community engagement throughout the study and to observe individual member engagement as evidenced through participation. High levels of community engagement and community involvement with the blog would suggest positive findings regarding one or all of the research questions; that the blog was working to build and enhance the ComCult community, providing space in which collective identity could be discussed, debated and therefore formed and maintained, and/or that the blog was proving to be an effective method of communication for the ComCult community.

3.3.3. Web logs

The web logs were examined to gain full insight on the level of traffic the blog experienced. Low member participation (in other words, members were not contributing posts) may not have necessarily meant low site traffic. The web logs indicated all types of members (contributors and lurkers) – and gave me the opportunity to assess more completely the level of community engagement with the blog. As with the content analysis of the blog, assessing the level of community engagement with the blog by looking at the web logs would have lent some insight into the blog's ability to build and foster community within the program.

3.4 The Case Study

3.4.1. The ComCult program

The ComCult program was the most obvious community in which to explore this new online tool and format. Made up of communications and cultural studies students, from two universities, who presumably would be interested in various forms and artifacts of communications and culture, I argue this group would be more open than others to testing a new communication medium.

Celebrating its inaugural year in 2000, ComCult is a young graduate program. ComCult students are registered at either Ryerson University or York University and theoretically, both groups of students have access to the same resources and information. There were, at the time of this research study, 2005/2006 school year, 209 students in Communication and Culture. Eighty-seven were registered at Ryerson University, 19 of which were full time PhD students. Twenty-three of the remaining 68 MA students were registered as part time students (Jo Ann Mackie, November 2005). The York ComCult numbers were much harder to obtain, as my requests for York enrollment numbers went unanswered. I obtained approximate numbers through a helpful faculty member. The ComCult program at York boasted 67 MA students and 55 PhD students – I was unable to obtain how many MA students were studying part-time at York.

The ComCult program is interdisciplinary in nature and as such, attracts both students and faculty with wide-ranging, and arguably disparate, research interests, professional experience, skills, talents, passions and pet projects. The program admits both full time and part time students, and both PhD and MA candidates, resulting in a motley collection of individuals with diverse research goals, on varying completion

schedules, following various study paths and learning practices, instead of large groups or 'cohorts' beginning and ending together as is common with undergraduate programs. Students are often isolated from one another by their own academic paths, various additional academic, professional and personal commitments, and the program's allowances and limitations (such as when a course is offered; what time of day it is scheduled; the number of students that can enroll in each course, etc). Add to these temporal and physical limitations the real distance that stands in for the perceived distance between the two groups of students as the program's two campuses – at Ryerson and York – are over 20 kilometres apart, translating into an hour and a half commute by public transit. This distance is further compounded by the Universities' differing administrative requirements, and employment and research opportunities (for example, York students can obtain teaching, graduate and research assistantships at Ryerson but not vice versa).

Not an insignificant group of ComCult students are enrolled in the program part-time. A part-time student often feels an acute sense of isolation, and, with less time to devote to school, simple things like knowing which classes to take and in what order, familiarizing oneself with the ComCult Graduate Student Association (GSA), while juggling the responsibilities and pressures of full time employment, are major challenges. Face-to-face events can be intimidating social functions and are often skipped in favour of engaging in less energy-exerting activities, such as spending time with people already firmly entrenched in ones' social network.

The ComCult GSA hosts a student-run community listserv (known simply as 'the listserv') for ComCult students past and present. ComCult students can use this listserv

to communicate with each other about anything but the topics usually centre on program information, events, issues and deadlines. Listserv topics can drift off-topic to include non-program related event announcements, calls for conferences or papers, employment opportunities, political discussions and debates, attempts to sell things and housing information. The ComCult GSA uses the listserv to send the GSA meetings' minutes over the listserv and keep the student body informed of their activities. Occasionally, political issues have been raised and discussed via the listserv, for example, students debating the ComCult's (or the universities') position on a particular issue. ComCult students who have subscribed to the listserv will get all the email that has been sent to the listserv's one central email address. In turn, those who wish to broadcast over the listserv do so by emailing this one address and that email will, in turn, be sent to everyone on the subscribers' list. Subscribing to the listserv is voluntary - not all students subscribe to it and, though steps are taken by the GSA to disseminate listserv information and instructions on how to subscribe and use the listserv, not all students in ComCult know about it.

Communicating via the listserv is a tricky undertaking and while it took me a while to subscribe to it, it did not take me long to understand (as long as it took me to get flamed) that there was a listserv hierarchy and there were rules – not those semi-formalized rules that comprised the listserv etiquette sent around once or twice a year by the GSA president as a polite reminder to mind one's manners – but unspoken rules about who had social capital when it came to participating in this online community and who did not. The listserv was not a space in which anyone in the program could reach out to everyone and talk about anything. Often, off-topic email was considered spam. After

months of watching the listserv with a wary eye, I began to consider the possibility of an alternate space. A space which could afford the ComCult community an opportunity to contribute anything; commentary about a book one liked, links to the site of a community member's favourite band and an invite to an upcoming show, a space where postings were not considered spam, but as part of a collaboratively written piece of work, an archive of what was important to ComCult students over the school year. This space could also offer a student who could not be on campus regularly, an opportunity to seek out fellow ComCult students with whom to share and exchange news, ideas and opinions, without having to be physically present. I began to conceive of that space as a program weblog.

3.4.2. The ComCult Blog

There are many reasons why I contend a blog is much more efficient and less cumbersome than a listserv. Namely, a student is not bombarded with countless emails but has the ability to investigate links on the blog that offer information, opinions and links that interest and inspire them to participate in the community discussion, thereby connecting and identifying with other members of the community. While email lists such as the listserv, described above, serve to promote a sense of ownership one has in the community – Powazek (2002) asserts that because email is coming to the users, users feel as though the email belongs to them and their Inbox is a safe and private place – there is a downside to listservs as well, namely being inundated with unwanted email leading to email desensitization. When the NET-L listserv in Netville was ablaze with emails regarding a dispute between the community and Magenta, the corporation that wired the community in the first place, some Netville residents sent messages over the listserv of

"how they had begun to dread checking their email" (Hampton, 2003, p. 423). While Hampton (2003) reported the positive affordances of NET-L, such as "visibility to participation that encouraged individual contributions, over[coming] high thresholds to participation, [and] support[ing] the appearance of group solidarity and prevented the loss of individual involvement" (p. 426), the researchers also noted that "visibility was a double-edged sword: Just as participation increased as network members witnessed the investment of others, individual commitment quickly declined when network visibility created the perception that others were no longer investing" (Ibid). Similarly, high volumes of email can work to desensitize members of the community to others' opinions, calls for action, events and so on, creating an atmosphere where members read little to none of the email coming into their Inbox from the listserv.

In launching the ComCult community blog, there was a strong hope (and purpose) that this online space could bring the two separate University communities closer to together, building and fostering a sense of community between the two – while at the same time, answering the research questions I posed about blogs and their potential for community building, collective identity formation, and the effectiveness of the blog as a communication tool in this specific community. In the right circumstances, the blog could act as a living, changing multi-authored text of the ComCult program created by those within the community.

Chapter Four: The Story of the ComCult Blog

4.1. Preparation for the Study

In June 2005, I implemented the design of a weblog, allowing multiple authors, for the ComCult student body. I introduced and launched the ComCult blog in September 2005 (Appendix 4: Screenshot of first post). Every Ryerson or York registered ComCult student could register as a contributor to the ComCult weblog, empowering themselves with the ability to post their own news, opinions, and/or announcements.

Though Dahlberg (2002) maintains that a strict formalization of rules is necessary, I believe it was important to see how the blog developed organically, where the members took the blog, and how they shaped the content, so there was no formalization of rules or any type of etiquette outlined upon the blog's initial launch.

Due to the nature of the research study, I was required to submit the thesis proposal for review by the Ethics Review Board and subsequently received approval in September 2005.

In preparation of introducing and launching the ComCult blog in September 2005, I notified the GSA president, the Director (York) and Associate Director (Ryerson) of Communication and Culture, and both program assistants at York and Ryerson. Because the research study and accompanying consent form had not yet been approved by the Ethics Review Board, I was unable to communicate with the ComCult student body en masse regarding the research study or to send out an advance questionnaire as I had initially planned.

While waiting for feedback and subsequent approval from the Ethics Review Board, I enlisted the help of Carrington Vanston, a web designer and computer

programmer unconnected to ComCult, to begin discussing the weblog, its key features and design aesthetic. On August 31st, I emailed the GSA president to inform her of the ComCult blog and the accompanying research study. She responded once I had followed up my initial email on September 8th. Though her response to ComCult weblog was positive, she voiced a concern that the ComCult student body would not see the benefit of a blog, above and beyond any benefits the listserv already provided – the perceived benefits of the listserv were not questioned nor was it considered that the two could co-exist, each serving its own purpose in the ComCult community. As well as alerting the GSA president, I emailed the Director and Associate Director of Communication and Culture, on September 2nd in order to introduce (re-introduce, in the case of the Associate Director who had approved my thesis proposal) the research study that I was conducting around the ComCult blog and the intended outcomes of a greater sense of community and stronger collective identity within the ComCult program. Neither the Director nor the Associate Director contacted me with any questions, comments or concerns at any point during the research study. The Ethics Review Board contacted me for some clarification regarding whether the blog would be accessible to view by anyone on the Internet (which it was) and a request that contributors log on and post using a pseudonym as to ensure that participation in the study would remain confidential. By ensuring the confidentiality of the participants of the study, the participants would also remain anonymous to each other throughout the course of the study, something that I believe hindered the blog's ability to work as a springboard for further communication (as MetaFilter and other online communities do) which possibly hindered the blog's ability to foster and build community amongst ComCult students. I had hoped that every

time a member posted a front page post or comment, their username would appear as a link to their email address to facilitate communication between ComCult blog community members. Ensuring the confidentiality of the blog contributor-participants made this feature impossible.

4.2. Design features and functions of the ComCult blog

After sending clarification to the Ethics Review Board, I received approval to go ahead with the study on September 7, 2005. Leading up to receiving the green light, the site designer built the ComCult blog according to my specifications. I wanted the ComCult students to have the ability to categorize their post(s) by topic to ensure easy archive-searching for specific items on the blog. For example, if someone wanted to look at only the Calls for Papers or Conferences postings, they would be able to do so by clicking on that category link and viewing all the posts that were categorized as such. As well, the blog was designed with a clean, uncluttered look – this was done with the desire to make the blog as inviting and more importantly, as straightforward as possible to attract (and not frustrate) potential blog contributors that may be novices to the practice. In *Design for Community*, Powazek (2002), stresses the importance of simplicity and readability, promoting an online aesthetic that remained uncluttered by too many design elements or too much text. Powazek (2002) also recommends curved elements and warm colours to create a space that is welcoming and inclusive. I wanted the site to be primarily white for maximum readability with orange accents to invoke a vibrant dynamic (Appendix 4: Screenshot of first post). Placed in the top right corner of the sidebar were the words "Register To Post" – or if a visitor had already registered as a contributor and logged in, "Write a Post" – which the visitor could then click on to

register, log on and then write a front page post (FPP). Below this link were a search box and a growing list of archival links organized by month beginning with September 2005. This list of monthly archive links grew with the passage of time so at the end of April it consisted of a link for each month of the study (September 2005 – April 2006) (Appendix 5: Screenshot of last page of blog). Under the monthly archives was the list of categories in which to find front page posts already written and published on the site. Under the post categories were a number of York and Ryerson links to useful and important websites for quick reference that included links to York and Ryerson University's main page, the ComCult websites on each of the university's websites, university library websites, York and Ryerson webmail, York and Ryerson significant dates calendar, the ComCult GSA website, and later add-ons: CUPE 3903 on the York list of quick links and CUPE 3904 on the Ryerson list of quick links, as well as the York's Graduate Students Association website and Ryerson's Student Union website. If a member registered and logged onto the ComCult weblog with their Ryerson email address, the Ryerson quick links appeared closer to the top (with the York quick links appearing below the Ryerson list) and vice versa if a member registered and logged on with their York email address. Also appearing below the Ryerson and York list of quick links was a list of websites under the heading "Of Interest." At the launch of the ComCult weblog, the list only included links to the SSHRC and OGS websites for those ComCult community members applying for scholarships that year, which were especially timely as application deadlines for both were around mid-October. I added links that ComCult weblog community members shared in front page posts on the blog such as Community Arts Network; the Arts and Letters Daily; Google Scholar; and media ecologist and NYU professor, Mark Crispin

Miller's site (and blog). I also added links that may be of interest to the community such as the link to the program's annual conference website, Intersections 2006: Emerging Spaces, Transforming Scapes.

During the last weeks of summer and the first weeks of the semester, the ComCult blog look and features were finalized and the site went live (unbeknownst to the student body) on September 19th, undergoing a week of stress tests. The blog was hosted under Carrington Vanston's account at Pair Networks, in which the blog data (coding, posts, comments, user profiles, etc) was stored at a co-located server owned entirely by Carrington Vanston. Vanston's role in this research study was disclosed to the Ethics Review Board. I registered a domain name that was short and easy to remember, "www.comcultweblog.net" and from then on, that was the only title used for the ComCult blog. Other design aspects were worked out, including how member comments/replies would appear and how long the front page post would be before linking to a page solely dedicated to that post and subsequent comments/replies. In order to ensure a clean and simple aesthetic, front page posts, if longer than 13 lines, would be truncated and a link would appear that led to a separate internal blog page that showed the post in its entirety and any corresponding comments/replies. In that same vein, comments/replies were not visible on the front page of the weblog, but could be found under a link that announced the number of comments posted in response to the respective front page post. When writing a front page post, a registered and logged in member would click the link, 'Write a Post', on the top right hand side of the blog's sidebar and be led to a message box that asked for a title of the post and another larger message box for the content of the post (Appendix 6: Screenshot of 'Write A Post' message box).

Along the top of the larger message box were quick html tag buttons that could be used to alter the appearance of the blog post, such as bolding, italicizing, indenting text ('block quoting'), including a link, and so on. These quick html tags granted those with no prior knowledge of html the ability to add some design flair to or embed a link in their post. The member could save their post as a draft to return to at a later date, publish the post immediately, or even keep it as a private post.

Once the blogger hit 'submit' and the post was published on the blog, the most recently submitted post would appear nearest to the top of the site, the rest of the posts appearing in reverse-chronological order. The post would appear with its title immediately followed by the contributor's self-chosen username/pseudonym. The post would then appear while the contributor's username/pseudonym, the categories in which the contributor placed the post, and the date and time would follow. There was a short discussion as to whether or not posts and/or comments should go through a moderation process (a design feature of WordPress, the code backbone of the blog) but I quickly discarded this feature. The spirit of the ComCult blog was to support a space in which the ComCult community shaped the content of the blog (including subject matter, opinions, thoughts and links shared on front page posts or subsequent comments). Having someone (like me) in a role like 'moderator' to approve content would go against this idea.

When writing a comment (a response or reply to a front page post), a contributor would click a link that appeared under the front page post that said 'post a comment' and be led to an empty box in which to type their comment, a 'submit' button and a preview

window pane below their message box. The title of their reply would simply appear as "re:" followed by the title of the original post.

In order to facilitate ease of use and encourage traffic and participation on the blog, a Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feed feature was installed on the ComCult blog for both front page posts and comments to allow contributors the opportunity to receive blog content directly into their email Inbox.[1]

4.3. Launching the ComCult Blog

On September 22nd, I wrote an email to both of the Communication and Culture program assistants at York and Ryerson to alert them of the ComCult blog and the pending launch date. I was concerned about approaching the assistants with the invitation to participate in the blog community, knowing that the program assistants would be loaded down with the administrative burden of registering students and acquainting new students with ComCult's bureaucratic process. It was important to let them know about the blog with one of the hopes being that its existence as a portal to information and a space for program information and discussion would possibly lighten their administrative load of information dissemination. Both program assistants responded with words of support for the study and concern about their possible participation on the blog. The two program assistants were resistant to the idea of having any involvement in the blog as they both viewed this opportunity as an increase in

[1] Pew Internet and American Life Project (2007) reports, "18% of bloggers...offered an RSS feed of their blog. Nearly 6 in 10 (59%) say they do not have an RSS feed for their blog content. It is worth noting that bloggers are not behind the curve when it comes to this new technology. In a general internet-user survey conducted in May-June 2005 only 9% of internet users said they have a good idea of the meaning of the term "RSS feeds"" (Lenhart, p. 12).

workload, and not, as I suggested and hoped, as a possible decrease. Ultimately, they did not participate in the ComCult blog or accompanying study.

On Monday, September 26, I attended Professor Catherine Middleton's Pro Seminar course in order to give a presentation about the blog and research study. I brought many copies of the consent form which outlined the nature of the study to give out to the class. This mandatory first year class for MA students was an excellent opportunity to talk to a large number of ComCult students face-to-face about the blog and invite them in person to participate. Professor Middleton was kind to give me a seat on the panel that night. I gave a short presentation and answered a few questions regarding the blog, which mainly revolving around the blog's technical capabilities such as streaming audio clips.

The following day, I sent out a general announcement to the program assistants to forward to the ComCult student body at Ryerson and York. This announcement gave details about the blog and instructions on where to find it and how to register – students had to register with their Ryerson or York email address (Appendix 7). The consent form was part of the registration process. Reading the consent form and giving informed consent was mandatory in order to register as a contributor to the ComCult weblog (Appendix 8: Consent Form).

That night, I sent out the same general announcement to the ComCult GSA listserv (see Appendix 9). The most immediate response was a private email (not broadcast over the listserv) from a ComCult PhD student who first congratulated me about the blog then asked me some questions about the software that was used to build it as he was looking at some blog ideas for a group research project. The next morning, a

couple of students replied to the announcement over the listserv, one expressing great interest in the research study and requesting that I email him off-list (which is to say, privately and not over the listserv); the second email was asking how the blog was different from the listserv. Before I had a chance to reply to that particular student regarding how I thought the weblog could serve the ComCult student population, a discussion broke out on the listserv regarding the blog. The discussion that ensued on the listserv involved some students venting their displeasure (and frustration) regarding the introduction of the ComCult blog as well as what they viewed as the fractured communication that had been (arguably still is) a reigning characteristic of the *Communication* and Culture program.

The points that were brought up were very interesting and I gained new insight into how diverse views are on the practice of community building and appropriate method(s) of communication that should take place in the program. One student bemoaned the multiple methods of communication in the program, listing the ComCult GSA listserv, the ComCult PhD listserv and now the blog, fearing that increased avenues to communicate would ultimately result in diminished communication. The student outlined her campaign to abolish the PhD listserv and stated her worry that students may use the weblog in lieu of the listserv. Her thoughts were, with the young ComCult program being stretched across two campuses in a very big city, that energies should be solely directed at the GSA – as a spokes-organization for the program – rather than disperse efforts to create a sense of community, one that she thought was tenuous, at best. Another student chimed in with his thoughts on the communication within the program pushing a program-wide listserv that would include both students and faculty. Yet

another student emailed the listserv pointing out that the weblog had RSS feeds, allowing posts and comments to arrive in one's Inbox effortlessly. In this time, I was able to write an email sent to subscribers of the listserv, mainly responding to the initial question of how the blog would differ from the listserv but also addressing some issues regarding community and communication that had been brought up during the day (Appendix 10: Initial listserv response). Another student weighed in with comments about blogs augmenting institutional memory – and how pulling key information relevant to the ComCult student body and posting it onto the blog can work to create a body of useful knowledge that is less ephemeral than an email listserv. He also commented on the aesthetic appeal of the blog, playfully asking, "Who doesn't like pretty?" This discussion continued with two other students throwing in their two cents; one student commenting on how one must go *to* a weblog and how that will leave some students out (whether through disinterest or unwillingness to check the blog). He feared if the weblog replaced the listserv that this would only serve to further isolate community members, and finished his email by stating that he would not be visiting such a site and he suspected that his feelings may reflect the reality of many other students' prioritizing as well. The other student pointed out the outdated information on the program's websites and wondered if a wiki or a wiki and a blog would better serve the program, a wiki's main feature being that anyone can write, contribute, update and edit the information on one. What seemed to end the discussion on the listserv (for the time being) is one student's reminder that the weblog is part of a student's thesis research, interested in learning about the formation of online communities. The student then pasted an excerpt of the weblog consent form in her email.

This discussion was interesting in many ways. First, it was interesting to see how many students immediately viewed the blog as oppositional to the listserv; that one necessarily had to replace the other, or that these two, different, methods of communication, could not co-exist and serve different purposes within the community. Second, that while bemoaning a breakdown or a fractured state of communication, the students were engaging in very open and stimulating discussion about communication on the listserv. It was interesting to note that students who were unhappy about the blog and its introduction expressed their criticisms publicly broadcasting their thoughts to the entire ComCult student population subscribing to the listserv, whereas those who were supportive of the idea did so more often in private email communication directly to me. Neither during that initial discussion nor subsequent discussions about the blog, occurring on the listserv, did I ever receive private communication relating negative criticism for the blog or the project but always publicly along with everyone else subscribing to the listserv.

It is also interesting to note that of the five students that were enthusiastic about the idea of the blog, only two ever registered to be a part of the blog community. The two students that contacted me immediately following the announcement regarding the ComCult blog never participated in the blog community, even after expressing a strong interest in blogs and blog research.

Additionally, those that were most critical of the blog were those students who used (or continue to use) the listserv frequently (on a weekly if not daily basis) to broadcast their opinions, events, send questions to the community and participate in listserv discussions. I argue that those who advocated most for the use of the listserv did

so because they use it most and felt as though their main method of communicating to the community was threatened by the introduction of an alternate method of communication. It is possible they do not see the listserv's deficiencies (mainly its overuse, but also its use by only a core group of students), because they themselves overuse it and/or are part of the core group of students who have mastered its use. Those who participate in the listserv online community frequently do so because they have no fear of recrimination (as others may have), and their opinions are valued – by themselves and the rest of the listserv community. In sharing their opinions frequently and spearheading or participating in several listserv discussions over a period of time, they have carved out an online space for themselves, and created for themselves an online persona (whether intended or not). As a result these frequent users of the listserv have mastered this particular space enabled by a particular technology (in this case, email technology) and through confidence and constant participation in this online community, possess a certain amount of social capital[2] as 'Elders', 'Leaders' or 'Regulars.' Often, those students that fill these roles (who are, more often than not, PhD students) are viewed as community members with knowledge to bestow and are respected as such by other community (in this case, listserv) members.[3]

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[2] I use the term social capital here as Bourdieu defines it: "the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources" that are directly linked to a durable network of relationships that provides "membership in a group"" (Bourdieu as cited in Lawton, p. 112). "...Bourdieu notes that the "volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize"" (Bourdieu, as quoted in Lawton, p. 112). In other words, a member who possesses social capital can effectively mobilize several other community members, for example, when this member sends an email over the listserv, many other members take note and respond. A discussion almost always ensues from a post or email sent by a member of the community with high social capital.

[3] The unofficial roles held by listserv community members mirrors the unofficial roles held by MetaFilter community members and correlates with Kim's Membership Life Cycle of an online community. This Membership Life Cycle, according to Kim (2000), involves Elders; long time Leaders and Regulars of the community who share their knowledge and pass along the culture of the online community, Leaders, and Regulars; all of whom work to set group boundaries (such as which topics can be discussed by the community) and also reify group norms and behaviour (such as permissible language and conduct) also

I sent the announcement about the ComCult blog and accompanying research study over the listserv, however, the announcement was not immediately circulated via email by the program assistants. It was important to ensure that the program assistants forwarded this information on to the rest of the program as not everyone in the program received listserv email (subscribing to the listserv was not mandatory). I followed up my initial email to the program assistants (sent on September 27th), on October 1st with a slight adjustment to the announcement, making the fact that the ComCult weblog was a research study more prominent. In the October 1st email, I carbon copied both directors of the program and my thesis supervisor. The program assistant at Ryerson was having technical difficulties with her own ComCult listserv list (further attesting to ComCult's communication woes) and the announcement was not getting out to the student body. A couple of days later, I used an old email from the Ryerson program assistant that had included the entire Ryerson ComCult student email address list in the recipient space in order to forward the announcement myself. I got in touch with a fellow ComCult student registered at York to confirm that the York program assistant had, indeed, sent out the announcement.

4.4. Registration: The Blog and the Study after the Launch

Users began to register on the ComCult blog and the ComCult blog community and I began to contribute content to the site. During this time, I added a blogroll, which is simply a list of blogs in the blog's sidebar. I also posted a request on the ComCult blog asking ComCult community to contribute their own blogs and sites to this list and began

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known as 'self-policing'. The Membership Life Cycle also involves Lurkers (those who do not contribute to the group's sense of community), Visitors (those who have not yet established a persistent identity for themselves within the community) and Novices (new members who need to learn the ropes, presumably from Elders, Leaders and Regulars, and are adapting to community norms and behaviour (Kim, 2000).

to privately email ComCult students that I knew maintained blogs and/or websites for permission to add their blogs and sites to this list. At the end of the study, there were a total of five sites including my own blog on the ComCult blog's blogroll.

I sent out the first ComCult blog questionnaire on November 15, 2005. I posted it on the blog and to the ComCult GSA listserv. Additionally, I asked the program assistants to forward the link to the ComCult student body – to reach those students not visiting the blog or subscribing to the listserv.

In February 2006, I announced changes to the blog that included a link, directly under "Write a Post", to a page titled, "About this weblog" (Appendix 11). This new page introduced the weblog as a space for ComCult students and outlined the blog's role in the research study. This page also outlined brief instructions on how to become a contributor (how to register), how to post a comment, how to use the html quick tags (i.e.: how to include a link, how to bold text, and so on), as well as providing some easy-to-use html codes, and how to upload photos to the weblog (a newly added feature after several weeks of trying to synchronize a popular web photo application, flickr, with the ComCult blog – resulting in the unfortunate realization that flickr was not compatible with the blog's code, a significantly modified version of WordPress, an open source code).

A number of features were added to the ComCult blog as per suggestions from the first questionnaire or students' posts to the blog itself. These new features included the ability to upload photos, as mentioned above, and a link back to the front page of the blog from any of the category or monthly archive pages. I posted these changes in a front page post on the ComCult blog (See Appendix 12).

On April 24, I sent out the second ComCult questionnaire via the GSA listserv, program assistant dissemination and posted the link to the second questionnaire on the blog.

4.5. Further Response to the ComCult Blog via the Listserv

Short bursts of discussion on the listserv regarding the blog occurred a couple of more times during the course of the research study. Both discussions were sparked by ComCult blog contributors encouraging members of the wider ComCult community to visit and contribute to the blog. The first discussion about the blog occurred in early November – the blog had been live and running for over a month – when ComCult blog contributor, Member15, suggested that a particular conversation going on via the listserv would be perfect for the blog. This email to the listserv was part of Member15's ongoing frustration with what he saw as overuse of the listserv, which he made public, over the listserv and the ComCult blog. His main complaint was that his Inbox was perpetually flooded with listserv email. One member of the listserv community immediately replied suggesting that the ComCult blog was underused for a reason – adding that he is much more inclined to check his email everyday than add another website to his list of regular sites. Another students chimed in echoing the first students' feeling (ironically, a oft-stated complaint of the listserv; that it serves as an echo chamber while inundating the community's Inboxes with a series of emails that read, in effect, "I agree"), remarking that his list is so long with daily reading that the blog is a pretty low priority. The other listserv discussion regarding the blog included a ComCult weblog detractor (and frequent user of the listserv) in March, with just over a month left of the weblog study period. The discussion was again was sparked by a weblog contributor, this time, Member28,

requesting that students go over to the blog to join him in a debate about a topic that he had brought up on the site. The weblog detractor wrote back sending the email over the listserv, with a subject line that referred to the 'façade of the blog/community', questioning the research study's goals, maintaining that Member28's request for participation would skew data with unnatural activity on the blog, thus spoiling the study's results. This student continued pointedly stating that the blog was introduced with no initial request for a blog by the community of targeted users. He concluded with a request for further clarification as to the study's objectives, the benefits of participation for ComCult students and why I expected that ComCult students would use a blog. I replied to the listserv, restating the initial goals of the study and my thoughts on the matter (Appendix 13). These exchanges over the listserv while upholding the true spirit of an online community (offering the opportunity for open discussion) also served to discourage participation on the blog program-wide (at least, listserv-wide) and cast the study in a negative light. Though I think I answered most of the community's questions about the blog and the accompanying study each time I was asked for clarification, I felt that I had to defend the blog's existence over the listserv, mainly to listserv proponents, and offer justification for a research study that was proposed and approved by both the program directors and the Ethics Review Board. This is where an advance survey would have helped me – I could have rallied and organized those most interested in a blog initiative into a small group of supporters who could have helped me post seed content to the blog and spread positive word of the blog on- and offline throughout the research study. Instead, I had one or two people rallying to the blog's cause infrequently and most visibly through the listserv – the 'other' communication medium that was viewed from

the beginning as oppositional to the blog. Those who were most negative about the blog and most critical of the study used the listserv frequently to communicate with the ComCult community about a wide-range of topics, including their displeasure over the introduction and existence of a ComCult blog.

4.6. Summary of Key Themes

There were a number of themes that emerged from community interaction over the listserv regarding the ComCult blog, first over its launch and then over its ongoing existence. One theme oft-repeated was that of confusion. Confusion was expressed several times in listserv communication regarding the role of the blog within the community – as well as confusion regarding the objective of the accompanying study – resulting in repeated requests for clarification (in September and again in March). I believe the fact that the blog lacked a clearly defined and unique function within the community – a community that already had a method of mass communication – contributed to this confusion. Another theme that emerged was that the blog would or should replace the listserv; that the two communication methods could not co-exist. From the blog's launch to its closure, the blog was viewed as oppositional to the listserv, by several students, and mostly those that used the listserv most frequently. Those who were interested in raising the blog's profile in the community were shut down quickly and publicly by its opponents. Another theme was the fractured state of communication and the lack of community or a sense of community within the program, as perceived and voiced by the students and exemplified early on by the difficulty the Ryerson program assistant had in sending out the announcement of the ComCult blog's existence. Another key theme that emerged from listserv discussion was that of time – moreover, a lack of

time. Several comments suggested that visiting the ComCult blog was time-consuming or an inefficient use of time, one student referring to the need to *go* to the blog (completely disregarding the fact that the blog featured an RSS feed) and another student plainly stating his unwillingness to add another site to a long list of daily reading. Every undertaking is a negotiation of time and value is assigned to the activity accordingly. It seems as though every school-related activity a student performs must have a function that is not only perceived as useful (be it personally or professionally) but also time efficient as well. In this case, students' reactions to the blog reflect a transmission view of communication – that the program's method of communication serves an instrumental function, to be solely utilized for the sending and receiving of messages. Comments such as those outlined above lead me to suspect that the blog's value as a space to interact with other ComCult students or as a medium in which ComCult students could exchange understandings out of the need for communion was not enough to motivate many ComCult students to participate, especially those who were used to the listserv culture and its low-to-no demands on time or effort.

Chapter Five: Analysis of Multiple Data Sources

5.1. User registration

Between September 27, 2005 and March 19, 2006, a total of twenty-nine people registered to be contributors of the ComCult weblog, including one faculty member, who did not contribute any posts or comments. Of the twenty-nine members of the ComCult community, twenty-six registered between September 27, 2005 and November 15, 2006. The remaining three registered January 31, 2006, February 14, 2006 and March 19, 2006. The most participants registered in the early months of the study. Subsequent participant registrations correlated with listserv discussion regarding the blog, most noteworthy in November and March. In total, twenty-eight of 209 ComCult students registered as ComCult blog contributors suggesting a low level of overall community interest and engagement with the blog.

5.2. Questionnaire #1 and #2 Findings

On November 15th, notification of the first of two online questionnaires was sent out to the ComCult community. ComCult students were informed of the questionnaires via the listserv, the blog and through the program assistants (email) (Appendix 14). On December 8th, I sent out a reminder email via the ComCult GSA listserv requesting participation, including the questionnaire link. A total of 26 students responded by completing a questionnaire. Questionnaires were submitted between November 15, 2005 and December 20, 2005. This questionnaire included a total of 22 questions designed with preformed answers, and a space at the end of the questionnaire for additional comments and/or suggestions. Two questions requested for the respondent's answers to

preceding questions to be further explained. Three questions provided a space in which the respondent could give alternate answers (Appendix 1).

The second questionnaire was sent out via email on the listserv and to the rest of the program by the program assistant on or around April 24th, 2006 (Appendix 15). The second questionnaire was also posted on the ComCult blog on April 24th, 2006. It was posted again on the ComCult blog on April 30th, the last day the blog was open to contributions. Only 20 students submitted questionnaires, several incomplete, from April 24th to May 16th, 2006. This questionnaire while featuring many of the same questions also expanded on several questions, to include a total of 34 questions with several open-ended questions, seeking comments or explanations in the respondents' own words (Appendix 2).

5.2.1. General Blog Awareness and Online Participation

Most of the respondents of both questionnaire #1 and #2 can be described as actively online; all respondents in Questionnaire #1 reported using email daily, and all of the respondents reported participating in online communities, (all but one reported subscribing to the listserv), with the most popular online communities being listserv and instant messaging (Tables 1 - 2).

Table 1: Respondents report the types of online communities in which they participate
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

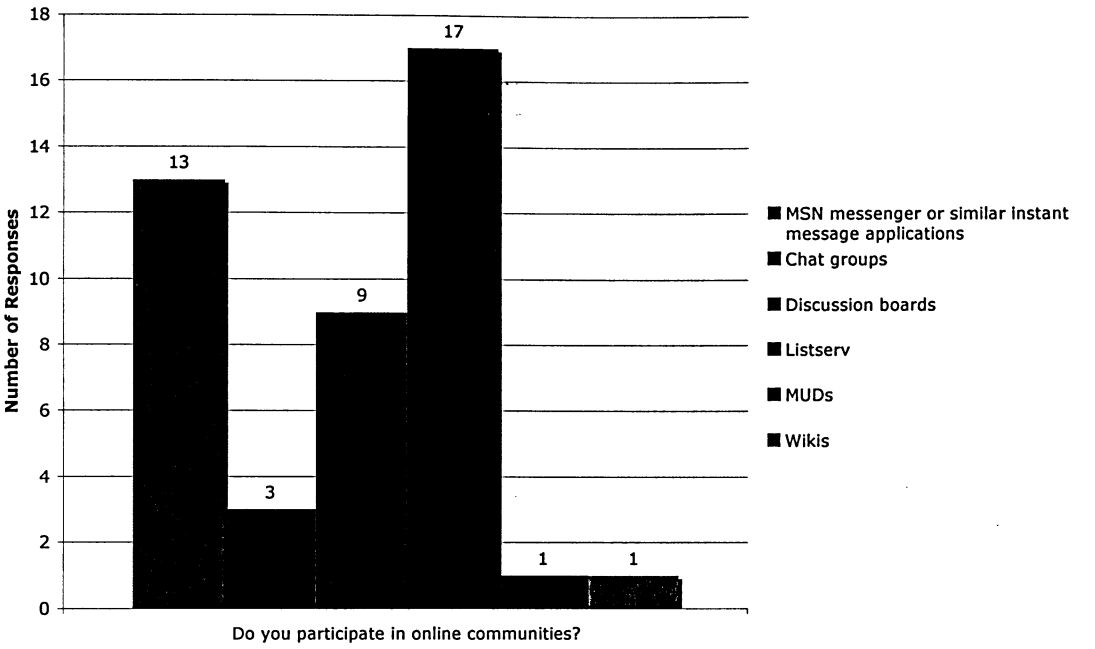
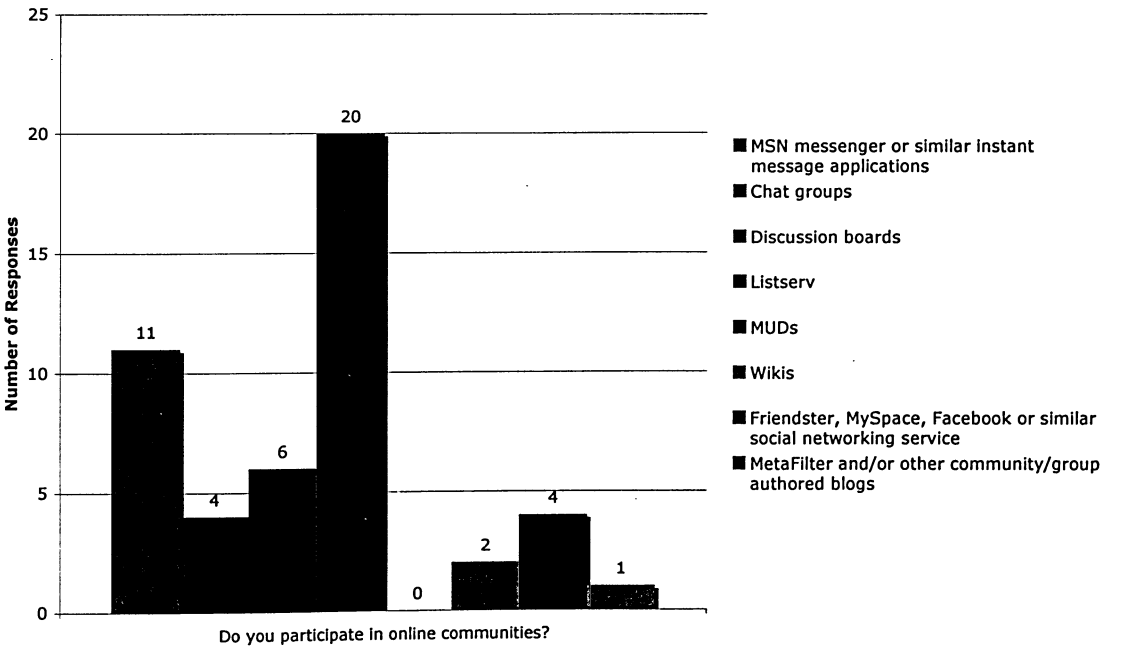


Table 2: Respondents report the types of online communities in which they participate
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



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In Questionnaire #2, only 4 respondents reported participating in online social networking sites. Late in 2006, the popularity of online social networking site, Facebook, soared when it opened its door to non-students; the site's membership currently at 24 million and counting. With Facebook's explosion into the mainstream, I assert that several more participants would report participating in online social networking communities now as opposed to April 2006. Several respondents did not include the listserv when reporting in which online communities they participate but later reported subscribing to the listserv – possibly because they simply read listserv email but did not participate in the listserv community by sending email and contributing to discussion. Those respondents' who did not initially report that they participated in listserv communities, but later reported subscribing to the ComCult listserv, were added to the listserv numbers. The majority of respondents reported knowing about, and reading, blogs, with a surprisingly large number of respondents only learning about blogs when the ComCult blog was announced. While most respondents reported reading blogs, the majority of respondents reported not maintaining a blog of their own (Tables 3 – 8).

Table 3: Respondents report when they first learned of blogs
Responses from Questionnaire #1 November 15, 2005

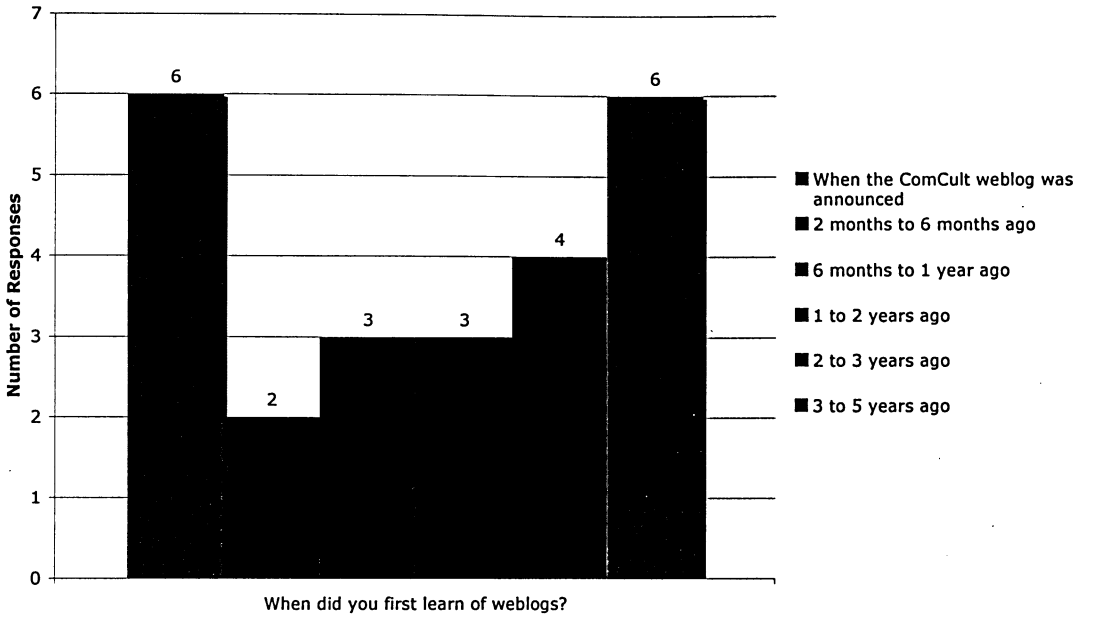


Table 4: Respondents report when they first learned of blogs
Responses from Questionnaire #2 April 24, 2006

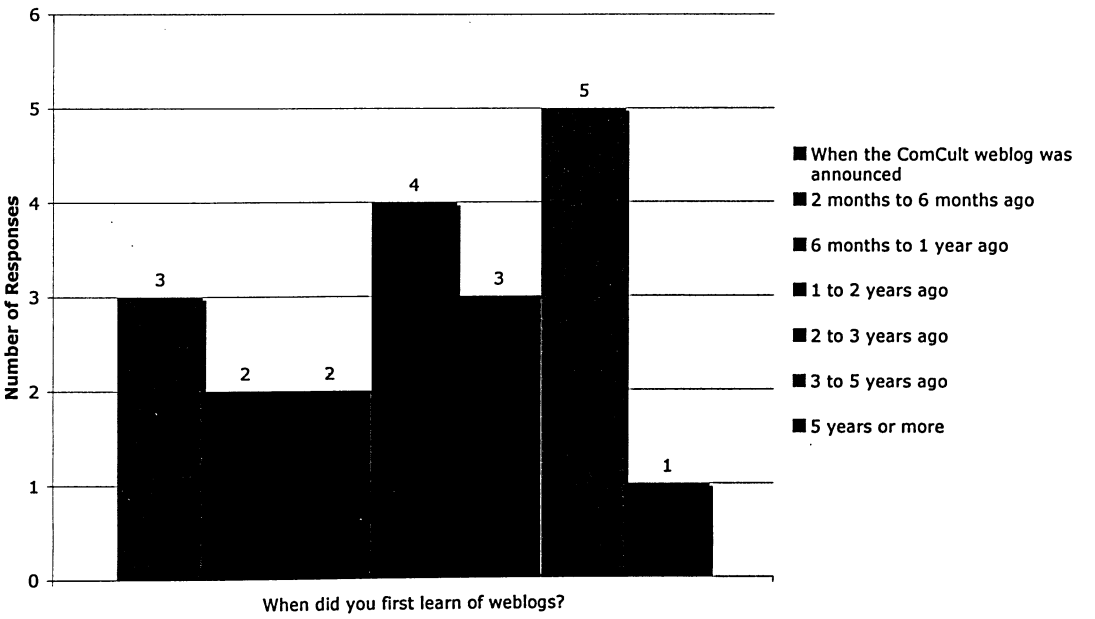


Table 5: Respondents report how often they read blogs
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

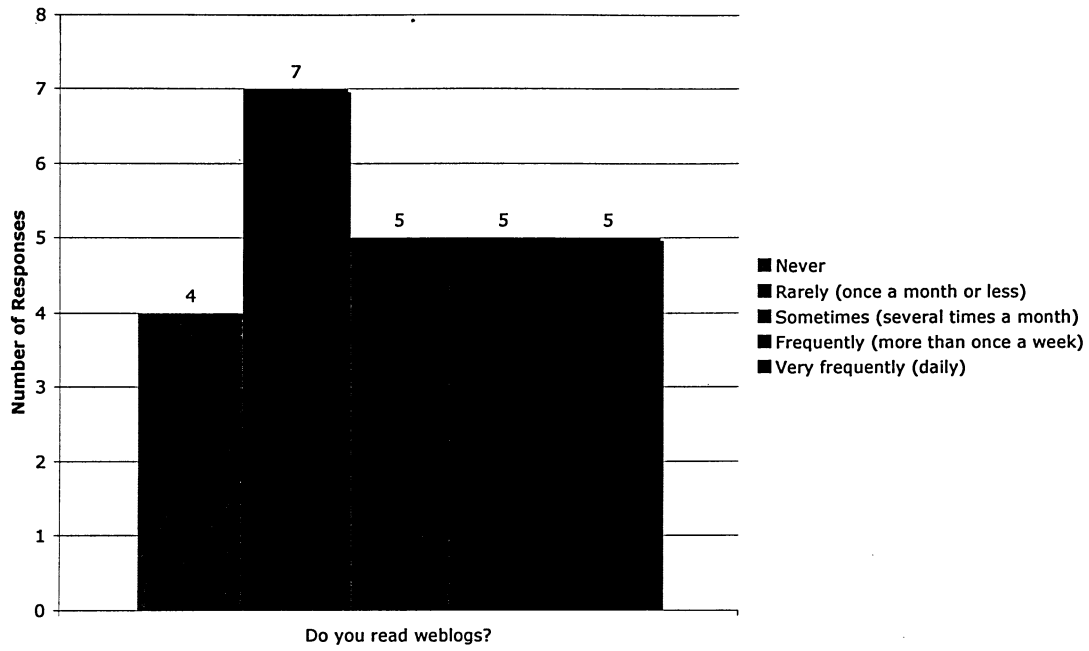


Table 6: Respondents report how often they read blogs
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006

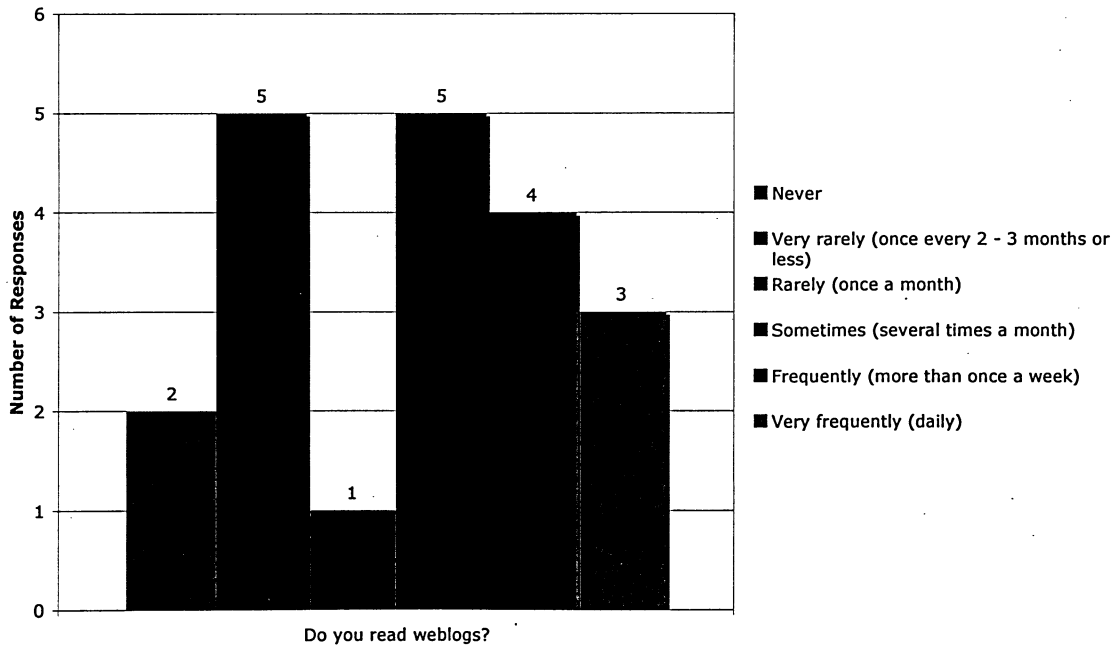


Table 7: Respondents report if they maintain a blog of their own
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

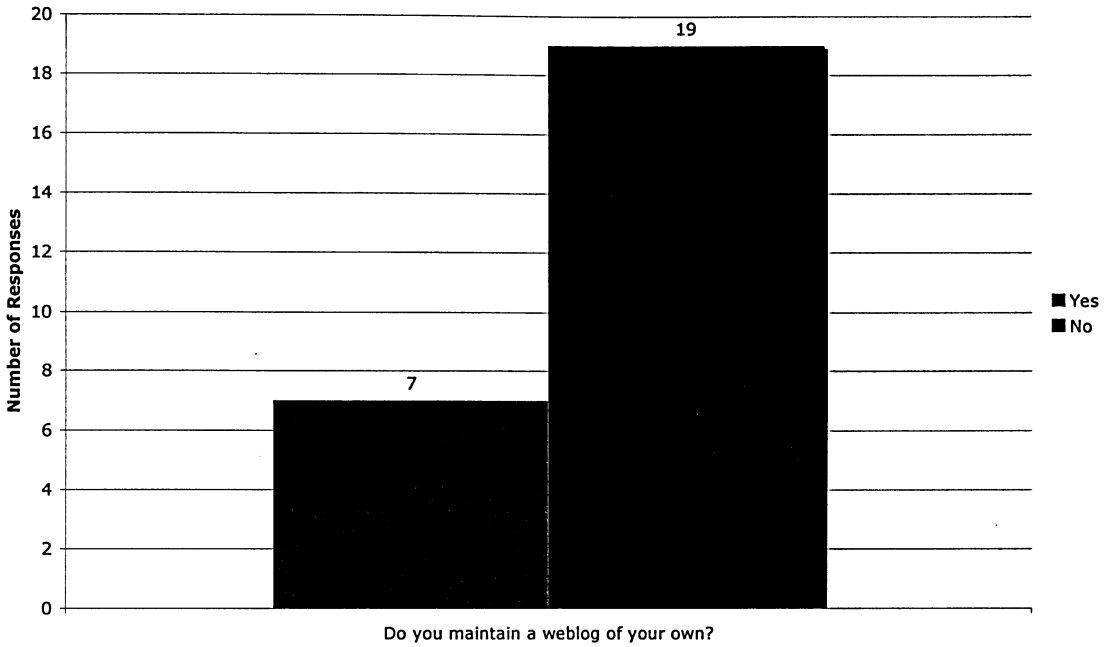
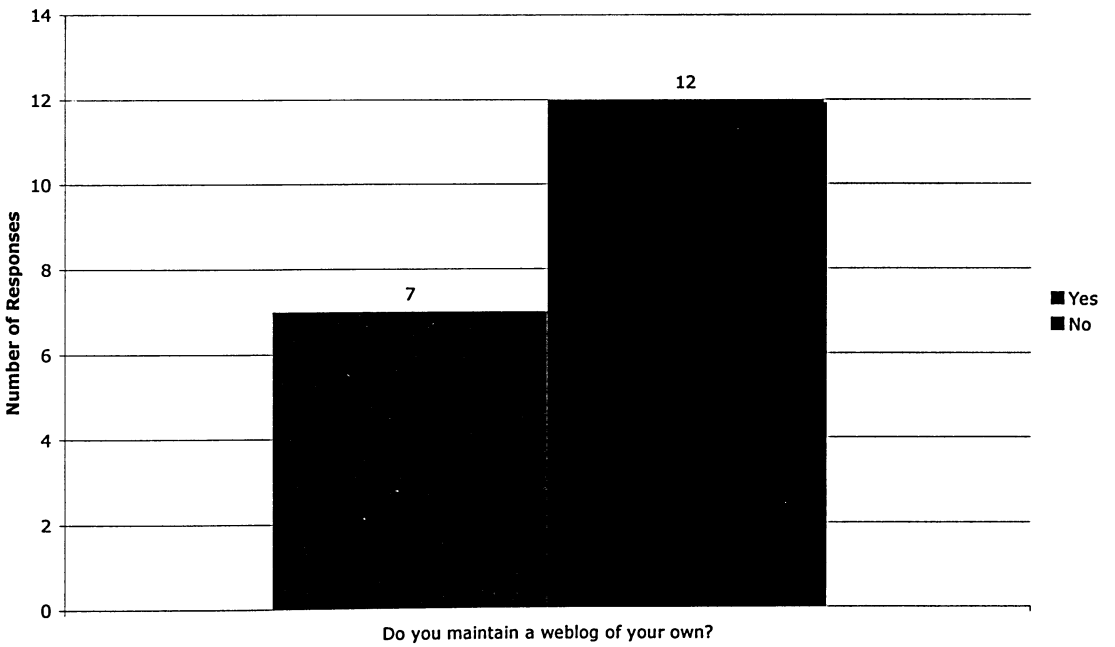


Table 8: Respondents report if they maintain a blog of their own
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



The numbers in general blog awareness and online participation did not change drastically from one questionnaire to the other (November 2005 to April 2006). Although a majority of respondents reported participating in online communities, at the same time, for a majority the frequency in which respondents reported participating in these communities by posting contributions (to blogs or the listserv) was medium to low; most responses ranged from 'never' to 'sometimes (several times a month)' (Tables 9 – 12).

Table 9: Respondents report how often they contribute content to blogs
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

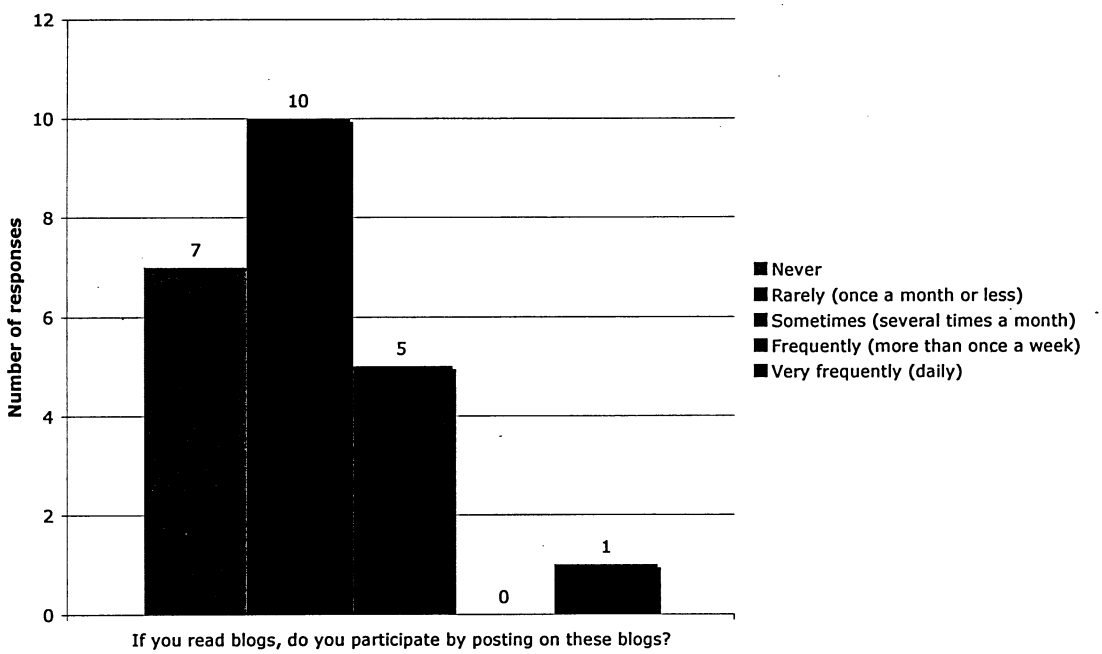


Table 10: Respondents report how often they contribute content to blogs
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006

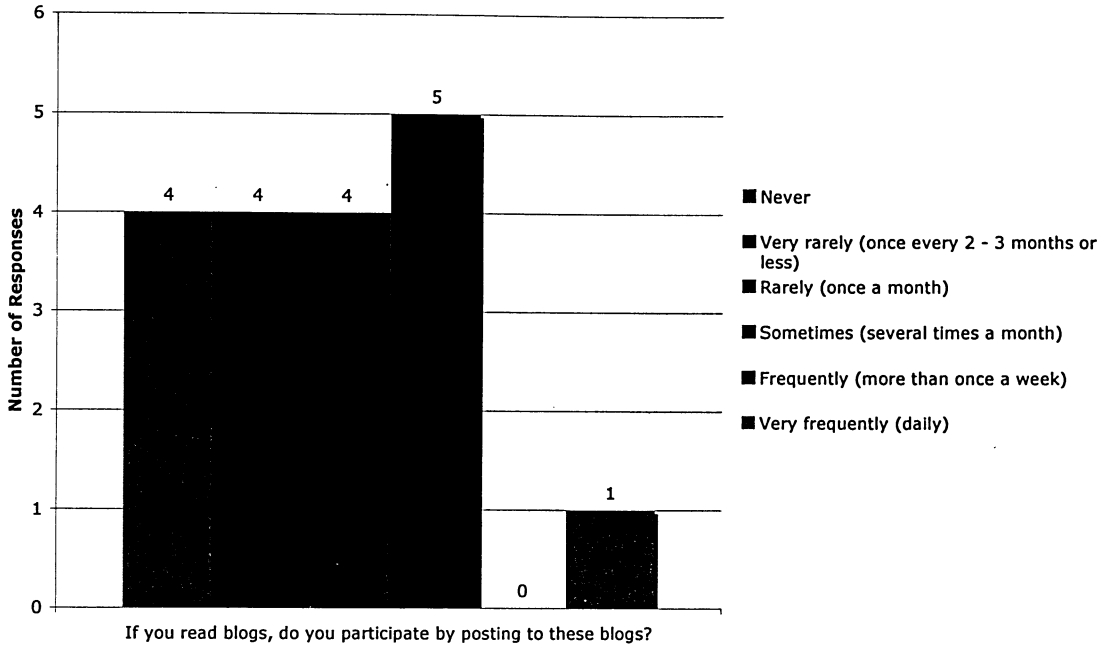


Table 11: Respondents report how often they send email over the listserv
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

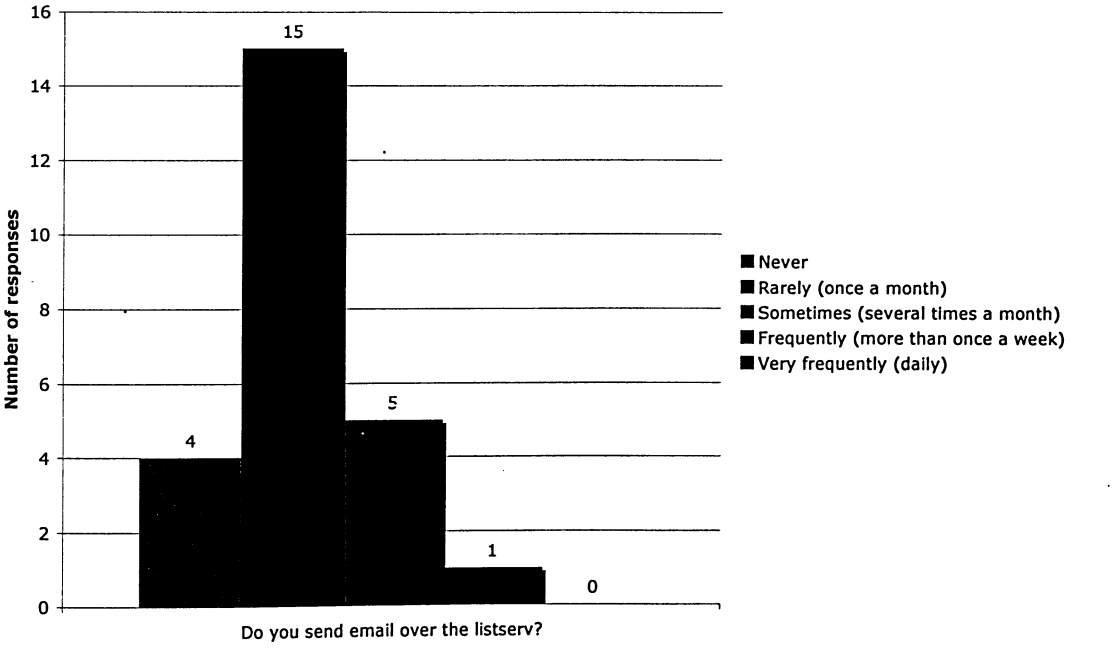
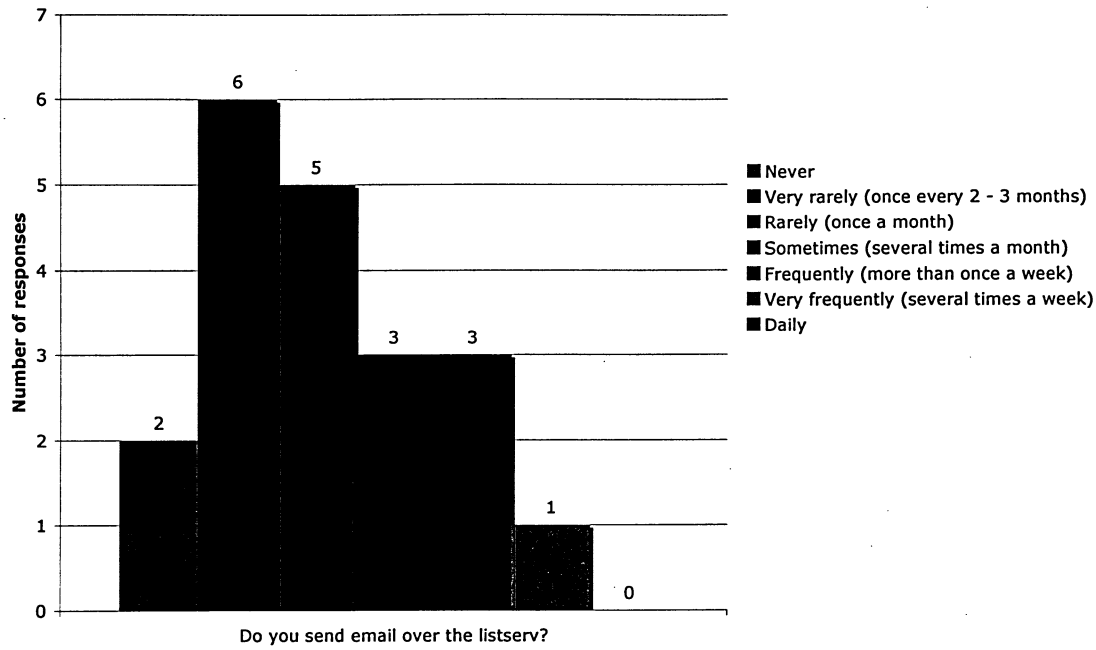


Table 12: Respondents report how often they send email over the listserv
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



Respondents who maintain a blog of their own reported contributing to their own blog more often with the frequency of contribution increasing from Questionnaire #1 to Questionnaire #2 (Tables 13 and 14). Most likely these online participants feel most comfortable contributing to a blog that is marked out as their own space where a sense of ownership is highest.

Table 13: Respondents report how often they update their blog
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

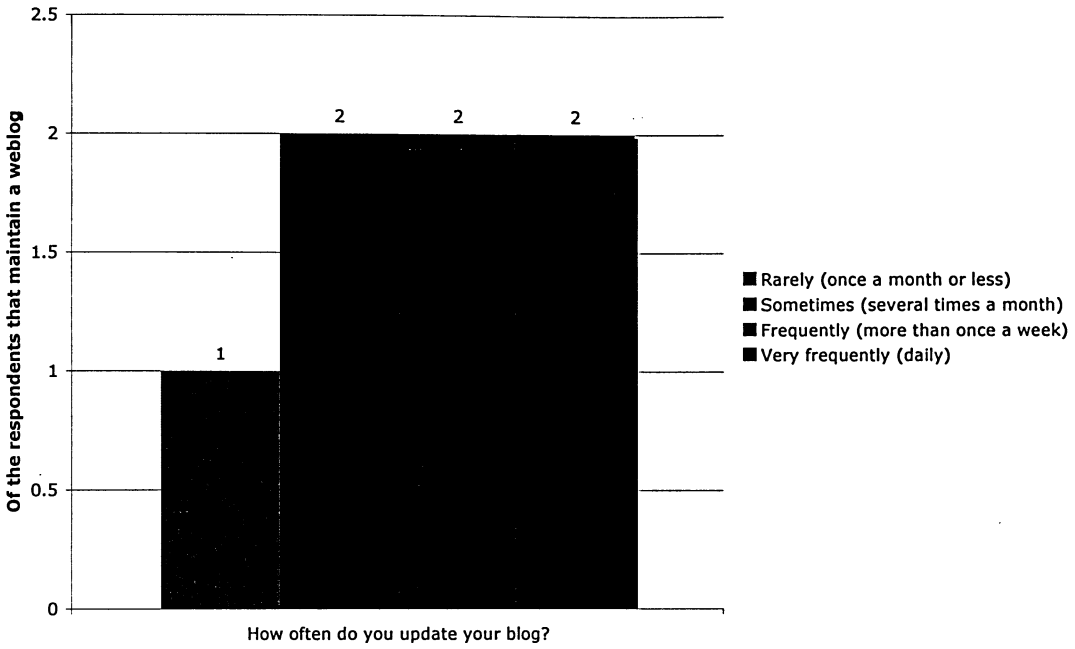
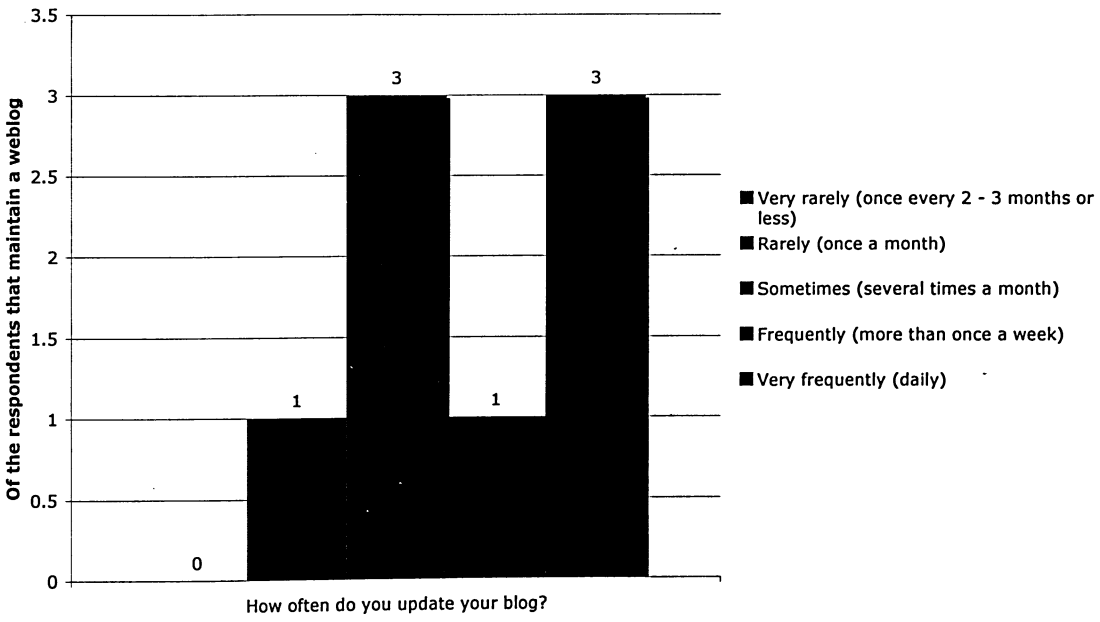


Table 14: Respondents report how often they update their blog
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



Learning about the individual community members' blog awareness and online participation habits such as their participation in specific online communities including their own and other people's blogs was important in predicting and later gauging the level of community interest and engagement in online communities and specifically in the ComCult blog. Pew Internet & American Life asserts that bloggers are "enthusiastic blog readers" reporting that 90% of bloggers read someone else's blog, compared with only 39% of all Internet users who report having done so (Lenhart, 2006). Furthermore, Pew Internet & American Life reports that "frequent updates to one's own blog seem to beget frequent reading of others' material" as 61% of daily bloggers (those who post new content to their blog everyday) report checking in on other blogs on a daily basis (Ibid). Very few respondents maintain a blog and if they do, even fewer post content to their blog on a daily basis, which could explain the low level of regular traffic and participation on the ComCult blog. Not enough community members are interested in reading blogs on a regular basis (daily or several times a week) while fewer contribute material to blogs (through comments to someone else's or content to their own blog) on a regular basis (daily or several times a week).

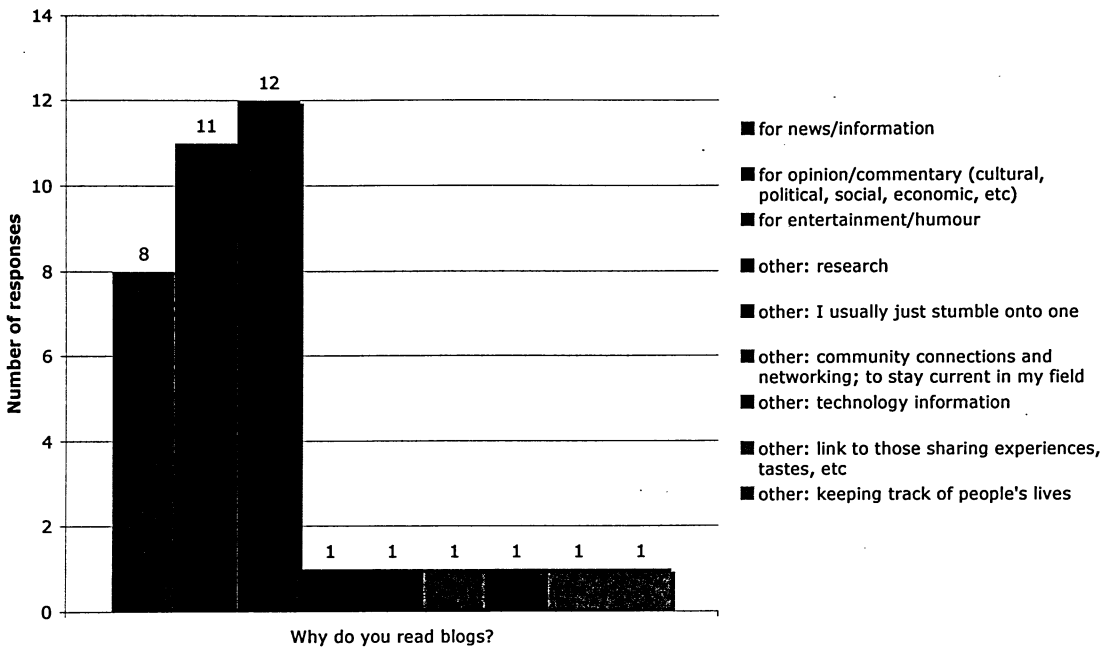
5.2.2. The Blogs People Read and Why

In the expanded Questionnaire #2, I asked respondents to list the blogs they visit most often. Almost 7 months had passed, and the blog was experiencing very limited participation from the community. I wanted to find out what types of blogs the community was reading, if at all. A total of 13 respondents cited 21 different blogs – and only 3 were community blogs or team-written blogs (the ComCult blog, the Dance Current, and BoingBoing). While the ComCult blog and BoingBoing did receive

multiple mentions, the most read blogs were single-authored blogs that featured a links and commentary format with a total of 8 mentioned, while 7 blogs cited were primarily online journals also written by one person of varying degrees of profile or fame. Two blogs could not be viewed or found to verify the type of blogs they were and the other blog site mentioned was MySpace, not a traditional blog site but a social networking site that incorporates blogs as part of the service/site. The findings suggest that the community does not make a habit of visiting and participating on community blogs – in fact, only 1 respondent reported participating on MetaFilter and/or a similar community-written blog.

The most popular reason for respondents reading blogs was for entertainment and humour, while opinion and commentary on culture, politics, and/or economics closely trailed as the second most cited reason for reading blogs. Other reasons that respondents gave included 'research', 'to stay current in my field', 'community connections and networking', and 'keeping track of people's lives' (Figure 15). These findings support Bowman & Willis' (2003) assertions that people participate in online communities to connect with others, to be entertained and to be informed.

Table 15: Respondents report the reasons they read blogs
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



The ComCult blog's content cannot be categorized as entertainment/humour or news/information and only rarely offered opinion and commentary on culture, leading to a failure to meet the needs of its potential audience.

5.2.3. Two groups emerge from the questionnaires

Examining both questionnaire results, two groups emerge; one group that is not interested or against the idea of having a ComCult community blog and the other, smaller group, that is interested in or for a ComCult community blog.

In Questionnaire #1, 19 out of 26 respondents thought that having a community blog would be helpful as an information resource, while only 13 of 26 respondents reported reading it. Even less respondents, eleven of 26, reported participating on the blog by posting content, while the remaining 15 did not. Respondents who took the time to explain why they did not post on the blog (14 of 15 elaborated) reported planning to

participate, not having the time (3 cited this reason for not participating), not having much to say, needing to see more responses or that an issue had not yet come up (about which to post). A couple of respondents stated that the blog was not the most direct method of getting an answer and several respondents referenced the listserv stating that the blog seemed to replicate the listserv, did not fulfill any new or unique function not already being served by the listserv or that there was already enough information exchange on the listserv.

Only ten respondents stated that they had objectives they wish were met by the blog suggesting that the majority of the group either was indifferent to the blog's function within the community or did not know what function the blog could perform within the community. Of the objectives that were given, some respondents believed that the ComCult weblog could be used for "information and events"; to "[preserve] resources/knowledge shared for future comcult student *(sic)* that is easier to access than a listserv archive"; as "way to create community – meet new people"; as a "calendar like event list"; "just sharing information relevant to the program and the fields we study"; "less cattiness than the listserv, more dialogue that is less irritating than email streams"; "sell stuff; get people to come to events", and one respondent elaborates this way: "I think it would be best to be more socially or opinion oriented, I get required stuff through email or on website". Another respondent explains his objective for the blog by expressing his frustration with the listserv, "I find that people use the listserv to have conversation that are mailed out to EVERYONE. I once got 32 emails in one day and there were all about the same issue (the york strike)." Another respondent gives this

explanation: "[the ComCult blog is] not sanctioned by the program, so apllying *(sic)* community/program objectives to it would be silly."

The suggestions made by the community for the blog ranged in function – and sentiment – reflecting both ritual and transmission views of communication. Some respondents thought the blog should be a community bulletin board while others believed the blog should feature opinion as opposed to information. Still others (one respondent in particular) demonstrated a staunch refusal to accept the blog as a valid community/program endeavour. Most suggestions were positive and constructive, but a few, like the one above, were puzzling in their strong resistance to the blog. Why the respondent felt this way, while the thesis proposal went through the usual university approval process, is very puzzling, indeed.

While ultimately, faculty was never invited to participate on the blog, only 3 respondents objected to the idea of inviting ComCult faculty to register and participate on the blog. The remaining 22 respondents who answered this question reported that they did not object to this idea. Paired with an earlier call for the introduction of a listserv that included both ComCult students and faculty, this finding suggests that students are interested in increased communication and interaction with faculty.

Comments were welcome at the end of Questionnaire #1 and 5 respondents offered their additional thoughts regarding the blog. One respondent thought, "[the blog] is nice to have but it would be better if more student *(sic)* utilized the blog." Another respondent felt that the blog needed a group to be "in charge of it" and went on to talk about the lack of conference postings on the blog when she/he received several a day via email. This respondent failed to understand the collaborative nature of the blog and did

not seem realize that she could have contributed these conference invitations to the blog herself, instead of waiting for a central group or person to do it. This respondent continued by suggesting a program wiki in which information could be collaboratively collected and written and integrated on one site. I wonder if this respondent's view is indicative of a view held by most students in the program that 'traditionally' a blog is written by one author and is as one respondent put it an "individual hub" as opposed to a community space in which members can contribute content. Another respondent discussed the multiple sources of information available to ComCult students listing the listserv, the ComCult blog, and the two program websites on both Ryerson and York sites and the need for one central site for program information. He also believed that inviting faculty to contribute to the blog would have helped to increase the blog's value as an experience again suggesting that ComCult students welcomed increased communication with faculty. Another respondent thought,

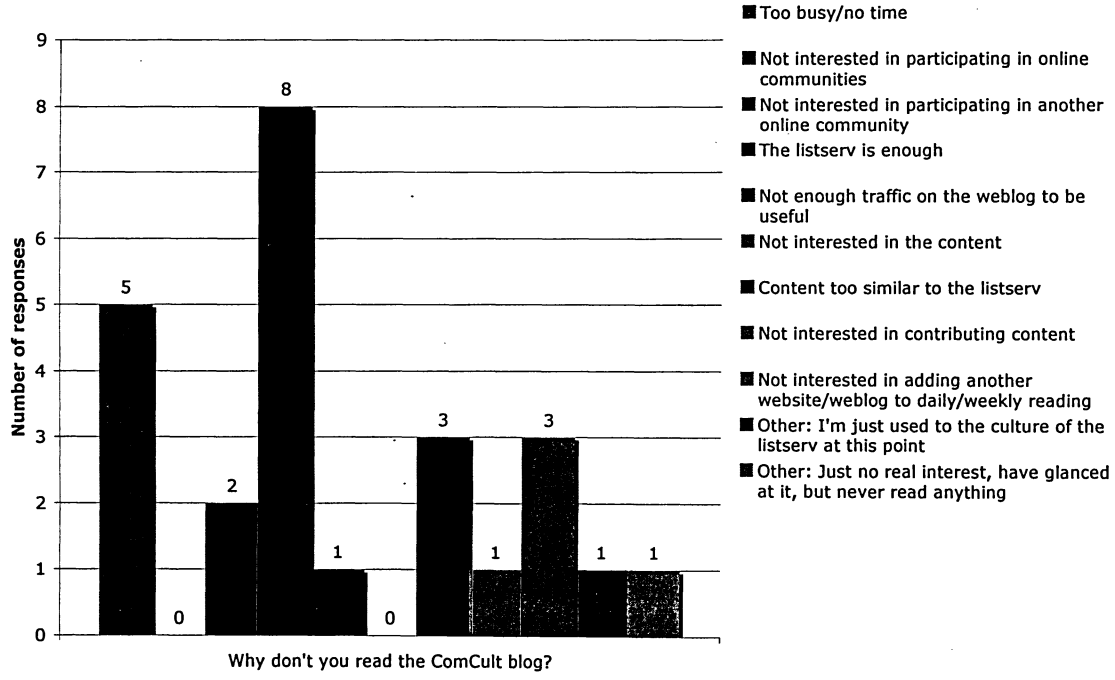
> [the blog] is great for community forming, sharing experiences about recent successes or humourous stories about instructors and research but no more. I am a part-time student working full-time, so I am positive that my feelings of unity with the program are affected negatively and relying on the program assistant (straight from the horse's mouth, for lack of a better saying!) is just more useful to me. (Respondent M, Questionnaire #1)

This student's comment echoes the sentiment that the blog is a less direct/more time consuming method of communication and therefore is a less effective method of obtaining information.

In Questionnaire #2, 11 of 20 respondents reported reading the ComCult blog. Of those that did not, 8 of 9 respondents reported that the listserv is enough and 5 of 9 reported that they are too busy or do not have the time to read the blog (Table 16).

Students who are not engaged or interested in participating in the blog reported findings that echo the issue of time constraints. The most popular responses speak to concerns of time – "listserv is enough", "too busy/no time" and "Not interested in adding another website/weblog to daily/weekly reading" – suggesting an inability or unwillingness to commit time or effort to a community-building endeavour, which also suggests that most respondents hold a transmission view of communication, at least in this specific case of communicating with fellow classmates in ComCult.

Table 16: Respondents report why they do not read the ComCult blog
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



Of those that did read the blog, only 2 respondents reported visiting the blog daily or more than once a week (Table 17). This finding reveals an overall lack of community engagement and commitment. Eight of 11 respondents who visited the blog reported participating by posting comments or replies (Tables 18 – 19).

Table 17: Respondents report how often they visit the ComCult blog
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006

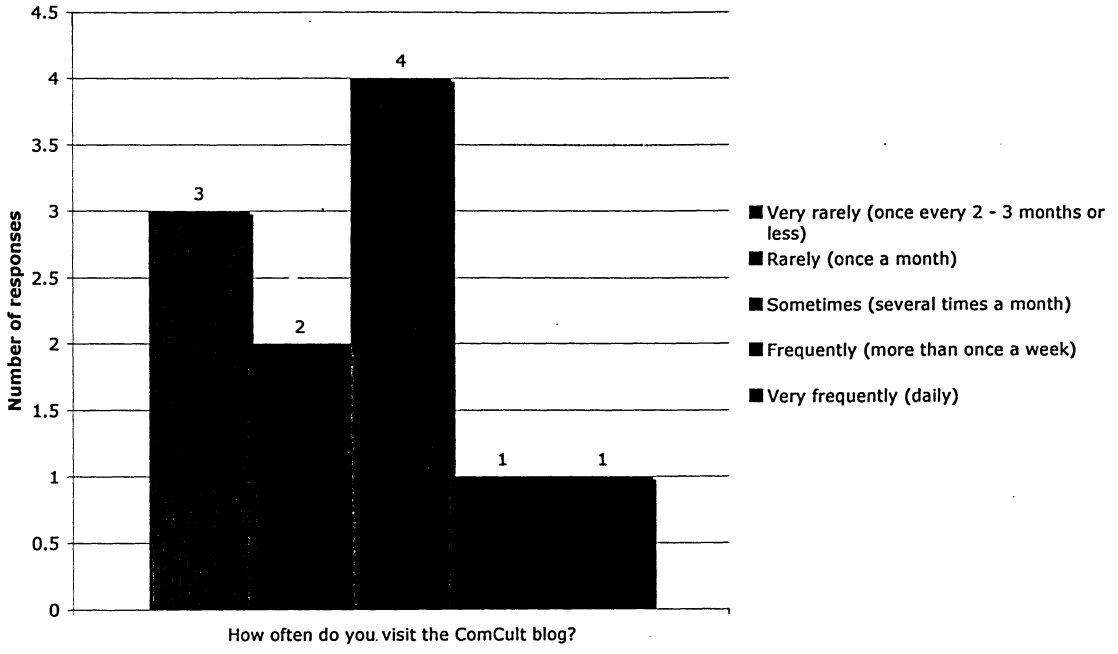


Table 18: Respondents report whether they participate on the ComCult blog

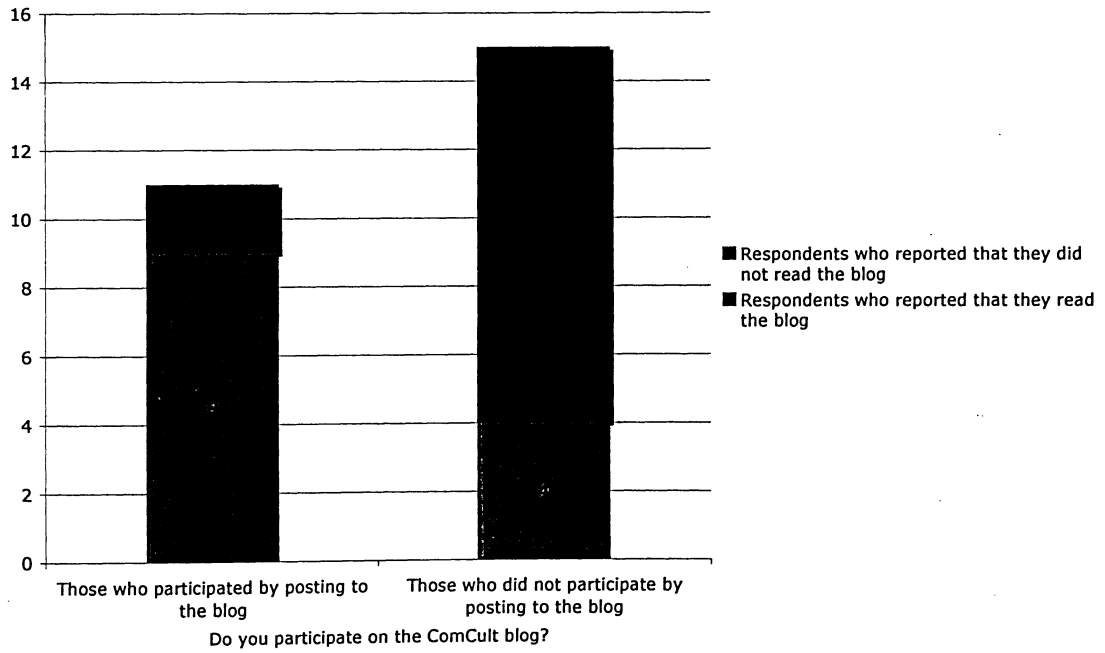
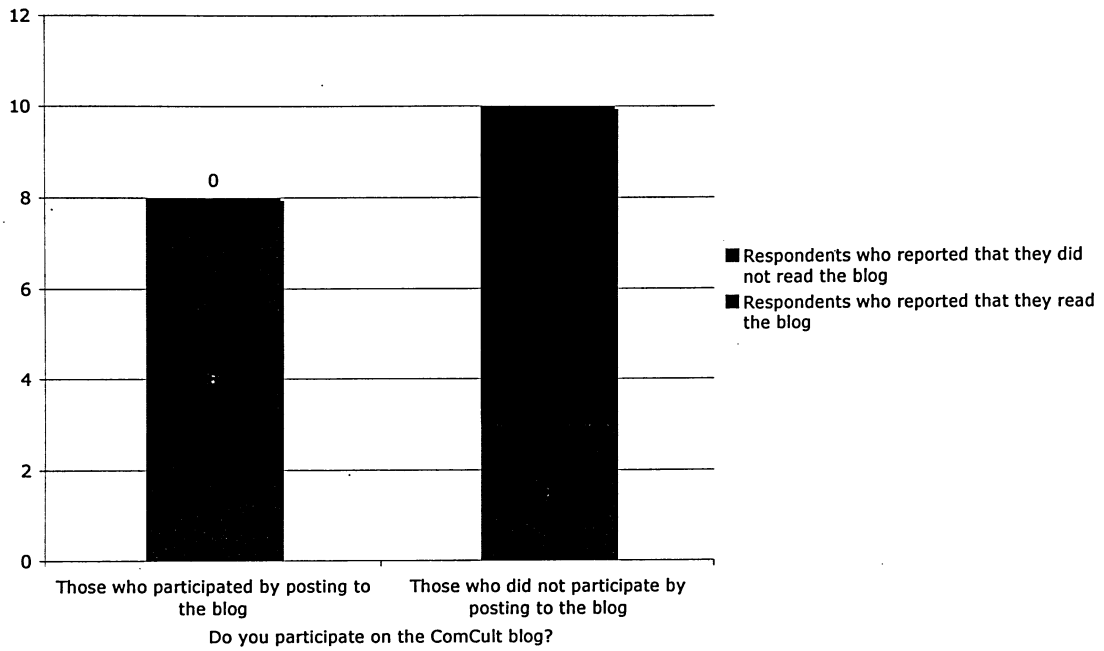


Table 19: Respondents report whether they participate on the ComCult blog



There was again a space for comments at the end of Questionnaire #2 and several respondents gave their thoughts and suggestions regarding the blog. One respondent stated, "It could have worked. Maybe if it been announced at the information session in August (?) at the same time as the GSA letter telling us how to get onto the listserv it would have been more top of mind." Another respondent contemplated the possibility of the blog being re-tooled based on possible findings that others may use it for a specific purpose. Another suggestion was that "the weblog should be integrated with the GSA website". One respondent commented that the blog is a good idea and hoped it would not get shut down, while another respondent pondered the problem of keeping people interested once they are done their coursework and have moved on to thesis work.

5.2.4. Sense of Community

No longer split fifty-fifty amongst respondents as was reported in Questionnaire #1, 15 people felt there is a sense of community within the ComCult program while only 5 did not in Questionnaire #2 (Table 20 - 21). While fewer respondents reported feeling that there was no sense of community within the program, only 2 more respondents felt that there was a sense of community within the program, from the first questionnaire to the second.

Table 20: Respondents report whether they feel a sense of community within the ComCult program
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

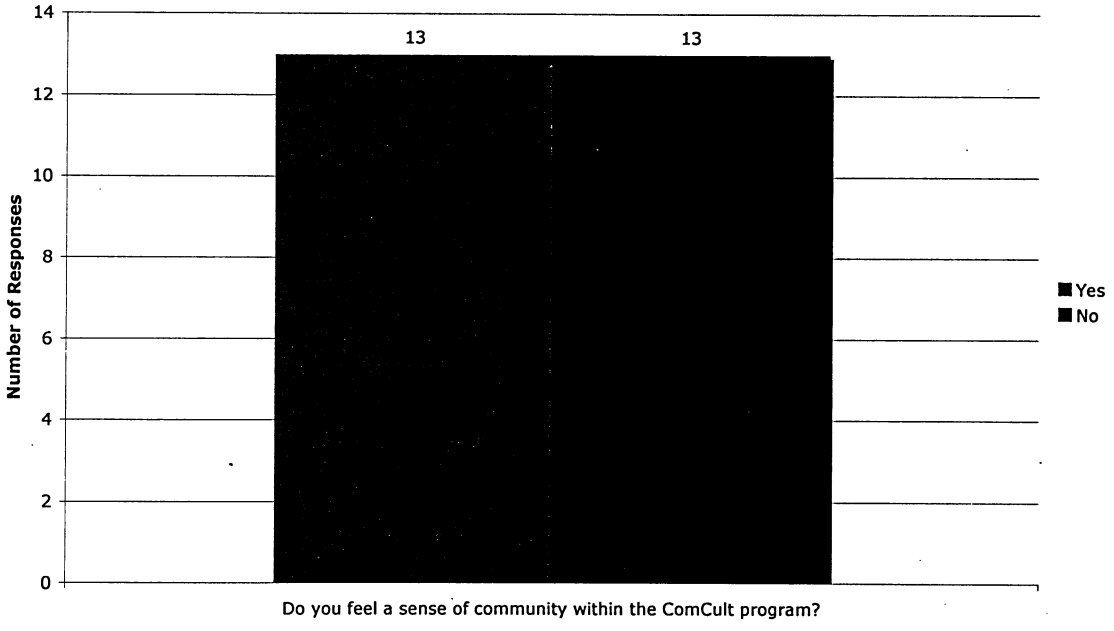
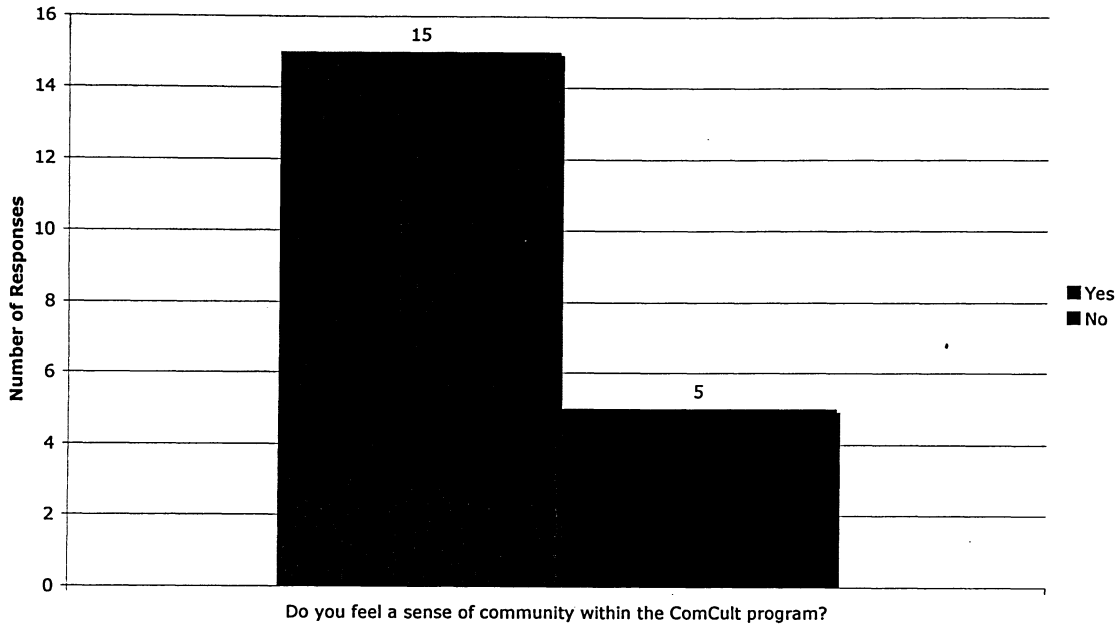


Table 21: Respondents report whether they feel a sense of community within the ComCult program
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



In Questionnaire #2, respondents were asked to elaborate on their response, answering what they thought contributed to this sense of community or what they thought would foster a sense of community within the program. Of the 20 respondents who gave an answer to the question, 13 mentioned experiences that require face-to-face interaction. Specific answers included two mentions of conferences, one of them specifically citing the ComCult conference as contributing to the sense of community within the program. Two mentioned the ComCult Creative Night, a gathering that showcases and celebrates ComCult students' creative/academic works. One mentioned the Friendly Friday pub nights. One respondent cited class time. One respondent claimed that "common experiences" contribute to the sense of community, another cited, "shared courses, faculty, resources, problems" – group affiliation contributing to these students' sense of community within the program. One respondent cited "people meeting in person and

following through on activities" - presumably activities that have an in-person component. Other answers included seven respondents citing the listserv, and four respondents citing the GSA or an active student government contributing to the sense of community within the program. Two respondents cited the ComCult blog as contributing to the sense of community. Another respondent described the sense of community he feels as a micro sense of community "in that when I go to a gathering I feel like there are a few persons whom which I share common interests and outlook, but as these gatherings are few and far between, it's not enough to say I feel a sense of community wholeheartedly" (Respondent F, Questionnaire #2) echoing Holmes' (2005) observations of the emergence of 'micro-communities', 'sub-communities' and the miniaturization of community in the face of an increasingly urbanized and privatized society. Of those respondents who reported not feeling a sense of community within the ComCult program, all seven respondents suggested various activities or spaces in which face-to-face communication/interaction would or could occur. For example, 'a better grad lounge' was put forth; another suggestion was 'more social events'. Another stated a need for more opportunities for ComCult students "to discuss, meet and socialize." One respondent suggested a weekly blocked time when students do an 'activity', but did not elaborate on the nature of the activity whether it be social, academic, community volunteer work, etc. One stated briefly "more compulsion to exchange academic info face-to-face" (Respondent P, Questionnaire #2). Another contemplated the nature of ComCult's weak social ties, musing,

> difficult to say, most students within ComCult don't come out to events, no matter what form they have taken in the past. When you don't know many people, it is hard to convince yourself to go to an event where you might not know anyone. While Friendly

> Fridays are a good idea, that's the main problem: you don't want to show up and be the only new one to the group (Respondent B, Questionnaire #2).

Another suggestion put forth was more information dissemination in general and specifically for part-timers, "more awareness of who's out there, more connectedness with what others are doing" (Respondent O, Questionnaire #2, 2006).

Overall there is a strong belief that whatever sense of community that does exist within the program is fostered by its social and academic gatherings in which students and members of the ComCult community can interact face-to-face; and that what sense of community lacking could be fostered, again, by more social and academic events in which ComCult community members have the opportunity interact face-to-face.

But respondents noted in their comments an unwillingness to attend face-to-face functions because of time constraints or the perceived social risk involved. This problem suggests to me an online social network solution where everyone in the program has an online profile accessible to everyone else in the program. In this profile, a student can display information about themselves such as photo, student status (full-time, part-time, MA, PhD, etc), research interests, past ComCult courses taken, and current ComCult courses. By browsing student profiles, ComCult students can familiarize themselves with fellow classmates and their research interests and/or activities and connect with those who share similar research interests or activities without the social risk involved of going to a pub night or some other social function and not knowing anyone.

5.2.5. Community on the ComCult blog

Eight of 11 respondents who read the blog thought the blog was a useful space in which to connect with other ComCult students, while overall, only 9 of 19 thought so.

Nine of 11 respondents who read the blog and participated by posting comments and replies reported feeling more involved in the ComCult community/program.

Ten respondents gave suggestions as to what function they thought the weblog could/should perform in the context of the ComCult community, ranging from "it should replace the listserve (*sic*)", "informing students about any issues that may arise", "providing an archive of discussion and information", "reinforce existing channels...may form a new outlet for those who do not come to event or like the listserv", "making the listserv content a little lighter", to "maybe a faculty forum of some kind" (Questionnaire #2, 2006). Again some key themes are repeated here; that of the listserv vs. the blog and increased communication with faculty.

Four of the 14 respondents who answered this question stated the blog should have no function in the ComCult community. To read that communications and cultural studies students feel that a specific medium of communication has no role in a communications and cultural studies setting – even in the interest of expanded communication or academic scholarship – is quite an unexpected finding. Again amongst the mostly positive responses from those who read and participated on the blog are those who were staunchly opposed to the blog.

Ten of 11 respondents who read the blog reported feeling that they could turn to ComCult blog community members for information about the program. While the overall general feeling amongst blog participants is positive, only 6 respondents who read the blog reported telling others about it. Kang et al (2004) report that community commitment is critical in ensuring the survival and growth of the community, further stating that members with strong commitment to the community "are more active in

spreading more positive word-of-mouth messages and recruiting potential participants, in sharing their information and expertise with other and creating positive changes for the community" (p. 124). Low community participation on the blog coupled with the low number of blog participants telling others about the blog strongly suggests a low level of commitment to the blog from the community.

5.2.6. Collective Identity

Only 3 of 11 respondents who visited the blog reported that they made connections within the program through the blog. This low number is most likely a result of the low level of participation on the blog. On the other hand, 7 of the respondents who read the blog reported that participating on the blog worked to reinforce existing social ties (in spite of blog participants' anonymity). Only 4 respondents that visited the blog were encouraged to participate in an event, lecture, screening by a post they had read on the blog. Few front page posts functioned as opportunities in which collective identity could be constructed or upheld via community discussion or debate about common interests, shared values or beliefs held by the community.[4] All of these suggest that the ComCult blog did not help construct or maintain a collective identity amongst blog community members or ComCult students in general.

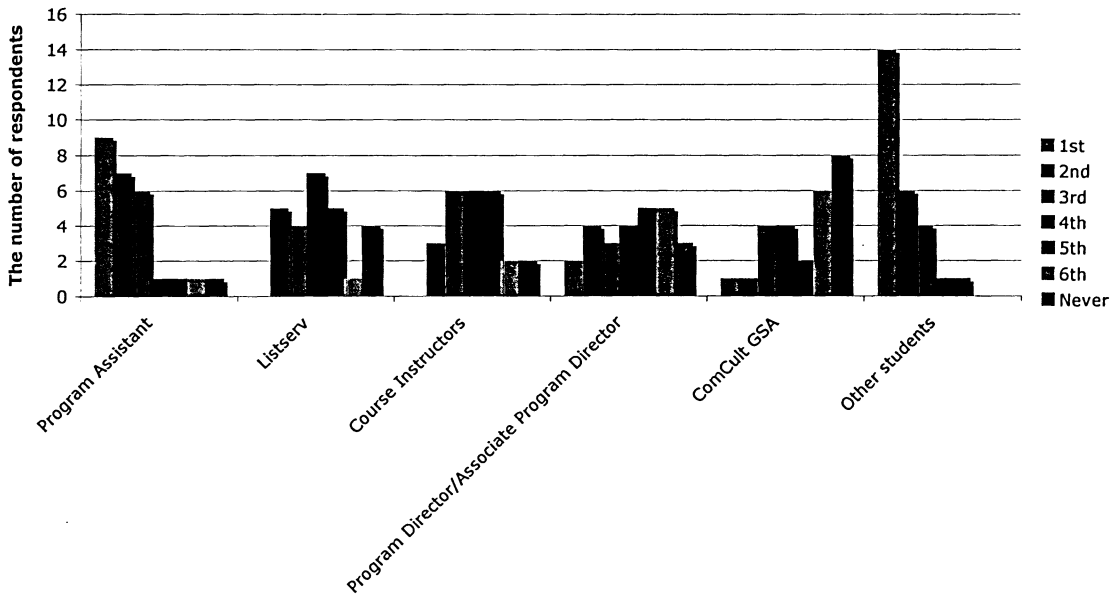
5.2.7. Where students turn for information

Fourteen participants reported turning to other students first when needing information about the program. Nine participants reported turning to the program

[4] Relational posts (in which posts are addressed to specific community members) or posts that are addressed to the entire ComCult community, referring to the entire ComCult community as a group or giving students of the group a label (for example, calling ComCult students "ComCulters" or "ComCulties", etc), and in which a set of core values or a system of beliefs is debated and discussed (if not necessarily agreed upon), are exchanged over the listserv with much more frequency, most notably in the 2006/2007 school year.

assistants first when needing information about the program. Overall, the largest group of participants would turn to other students, with the second largest group turning to the program assistant. Twenty four participants ranked other students in their top three places to go. Twenty two participants ranked the program assistants in their top three places to go. The GSA ranked lowest as a place to turn with 8 respondents reporting that they never turn to the GSA for information. Four reported that they never turn to the listserv, while 3 reported never going to the program directors and 2 reported never turning to their course instructors for information about the program. Only one respondent reported never going to the program assistants (Table 22).

Table 22: Respondents report who they would turn to turn first for information about the program
Respondents ranked the following according to who they would turn first (second, third, through to 'never')



The finding that has respondents ranking other students as the first place to turn for information about the program suggests the existence of a network of (at least) weak ties. It is within this network that students exchange support and resources.

5.2.8. The Listserv vs. The Blog

According to both questionnaires, everyone but one respondent reported subscribing to the ComCult GSA listserv while over half never or rarely send email over the listserv. The listserv is used, according to the respondents, primarily to send event announcements to the community as well as to reply to other students' emails (Table 23 - 24).

Table 23: Respondents report what they have emailed the listserv community about
Responses from Questionnaire #1 - November 15, 2005

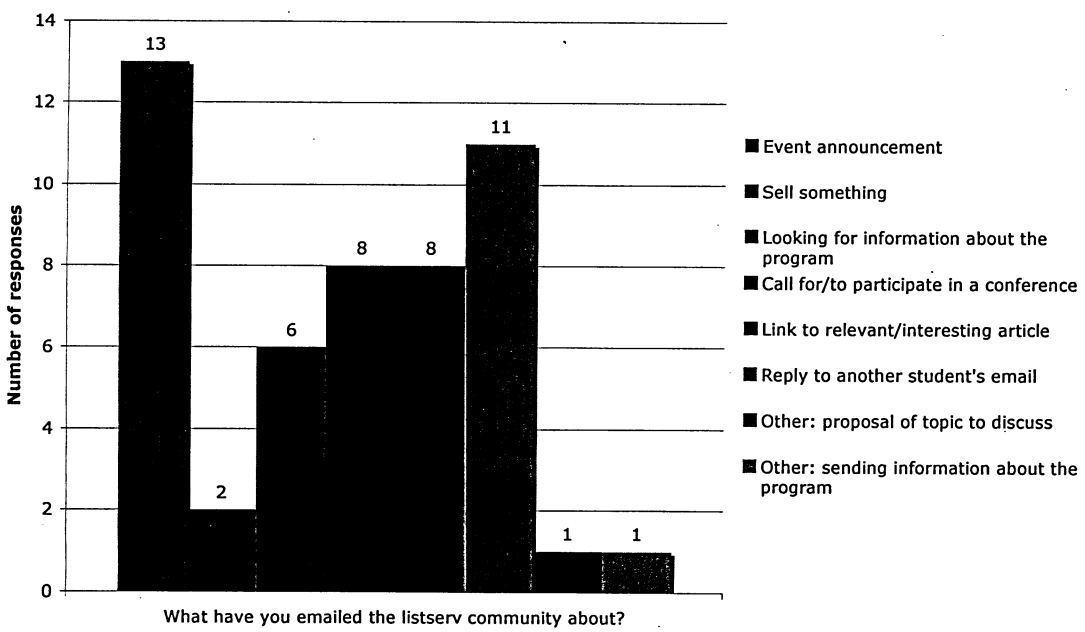
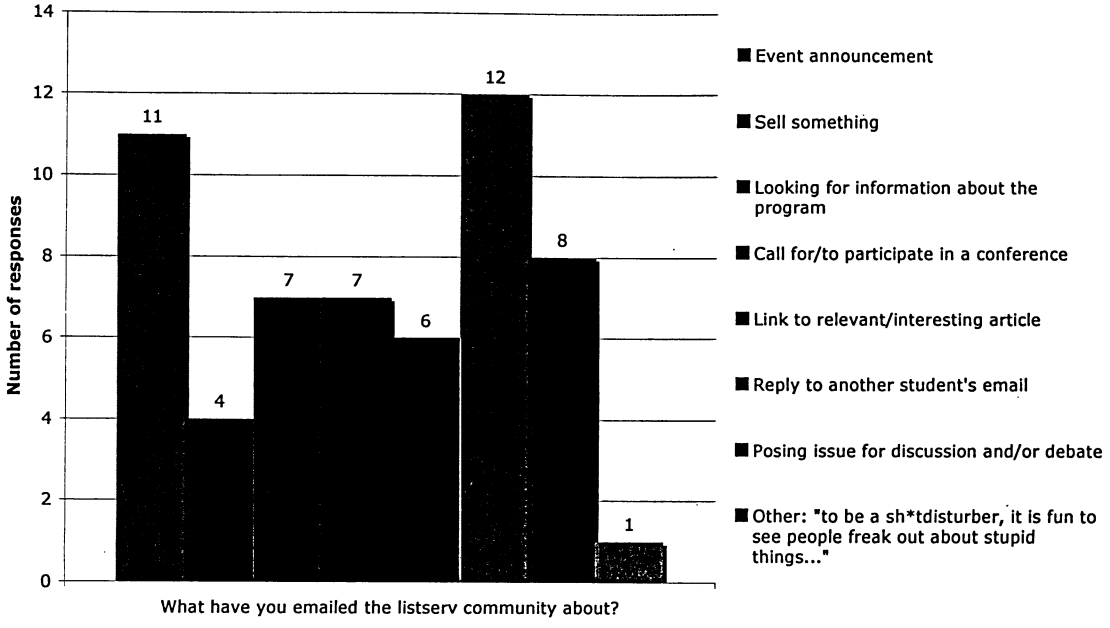
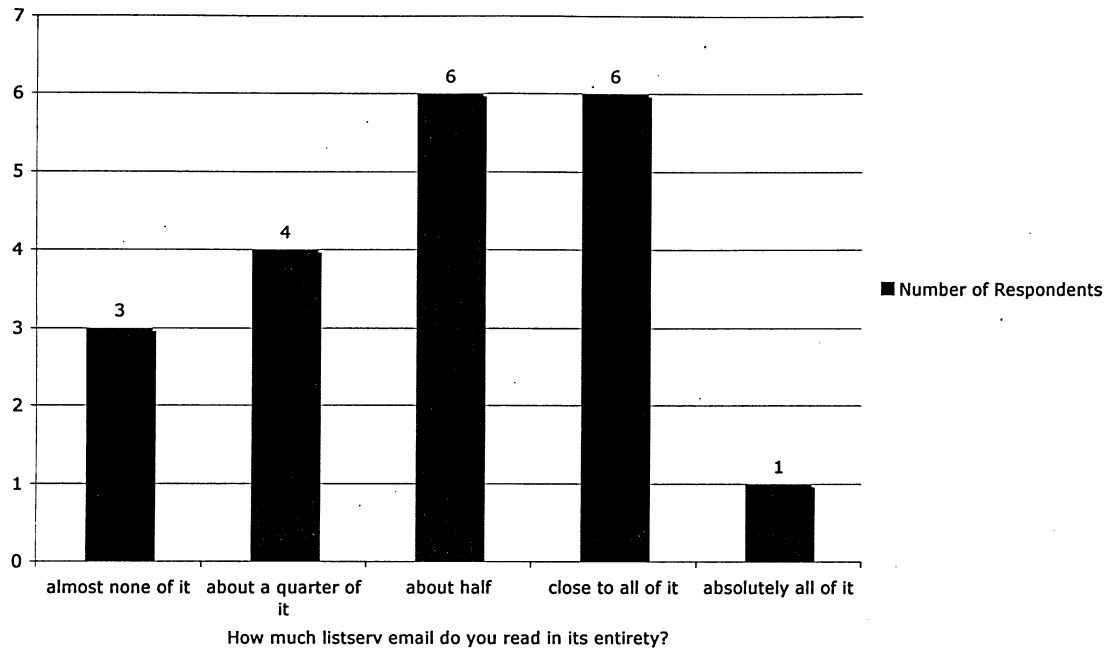


Table 24: Respondents report what they have emailed the listserv community about
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



In the second questionnaire, respondents reported how much of the listserv email they actually read. Seven of 20 reported that they read 'close to all' to 'absolutely all of it', while 6 read about half of all incoming listserv email (Table 25).

Table 25: Respondents report how much listserv email they read in its entirety
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



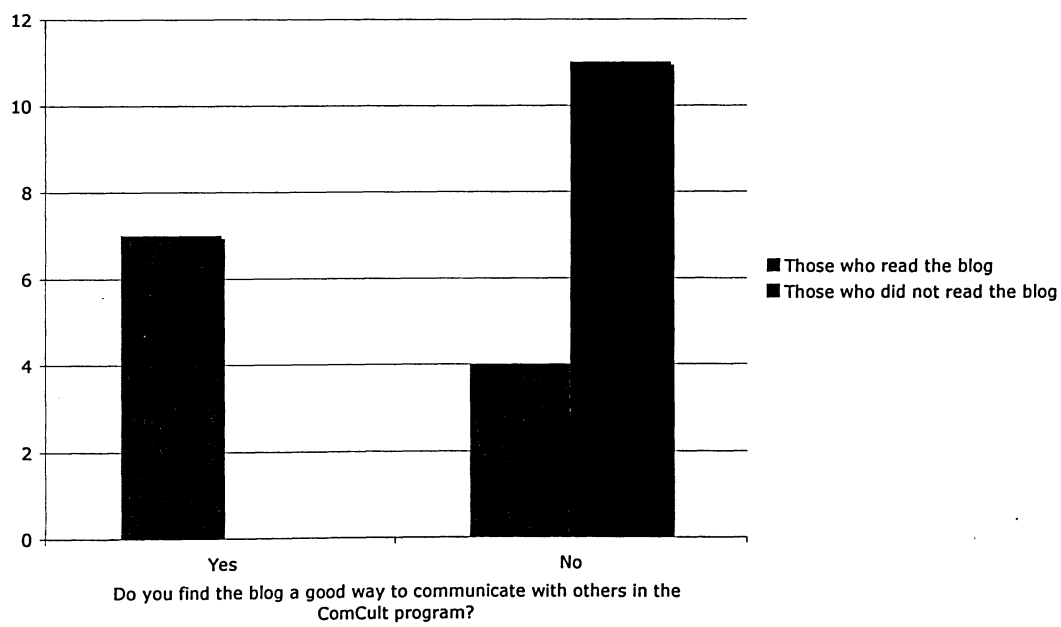
This finding supports a medium to high level of community engagement with the listserv community and a medium to high level of effectiveness of listserv communication, even if participation (sending email over the listserv) is medium to low. For the most part, respondents reported reading listserv communication and participating most often to reply to another students' email.

I also asked the respondents what their overall impression of the listserv was to which I received eighteen (of 20) responses. Of the 18 respondents gave their opinion, 6 were wholly positive comments such as "useful", "important tool for information and community despite complaints about amount of email...", "perfect", "pretty good", "very useful", "useful for certain things like conference calls, hearing the opinions of others in the program...". Two respondents gave the following wholly negative comments about the listserv, "it is overwhelmingly annoying..." and went on to explain that the listserv is

annoying because of the email onslaught, and "generally annoying – way too many messages". The remaining 10 comments were a combination of negative and positive feelings about the listserv, such as "perhaps overused, but in general useful, engaging", "useful but overused...", and "sometimes irrelevant but overall useful". Perhaps because I used this phrase as an example of an opinion, "annoying but necessary" came up in 3 respondents' opinion about the listserv. Despite the listserv's acknowledged weaknesses, respondents/listserv subscribers seemed resigned to its inherent downfalls, but for the advantage of a low-maintenance method of mass communication.

Seven of the 11 respondents who read the blog thought that the blog was a good way to communicate with others, while overall, eleven of 18 respondents who answered this question thought that the blog was not good way to communicate with others (Table 26).

Table 26: Respondents report on whether the ComCult blog is a good way to communicate with others in the program
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



Of the 4 blog readers that felt that the blog was not a good way to communicate with others, all 4 also participated by posting on the blog. This suggests that those who contributed content to the blog found its method of communication lacking most likely due to an absence of community response to their contributions. Even though several blog participants felt the blog was a good way to communicate, findings support that overall, the lack of community participation prevented the blog from being an effective method of communication.

Respondents were asked to elaborate on their answer to the above question and 16 respondents did so. Not surprisingly, several respondents thought the blog's lack of traffic or popularity was an issue – "If more people were on it, the blog might be more useful, but, for some reason, there are a lot of people who are very adament (*sic*) that the listserve (*sic*) is superior (which it SO isn't)", "not sure anyone's reading it", "it can only improve with time and more participation", "I think it has potential, but it would have to gain a lot more popularity", "It would work I think. But indeed, the Listserv would have to be...disbanded, or just have not (*sic*) in our inbox "X number of post have been added to the weblog this past week" – indicating that this respondent was not familiar with the RSS feed for both front page posts and comments. Several respondents commented on what they liked about the blog: "I didn't participate as much as I wanted to but I think the community based blog is a good way to open another channel for collaboration and commentary", "I get to focus on issue *(sic)* more on the weblog", "I see who is interested into (*sic*) the same subject that I am." Others discussed what they do not like about the blog, reiterating key themes, "It's not as direct. Email provides a form of communication that allow for more direct feedback. The blog broadcasts and allows for discussion, but

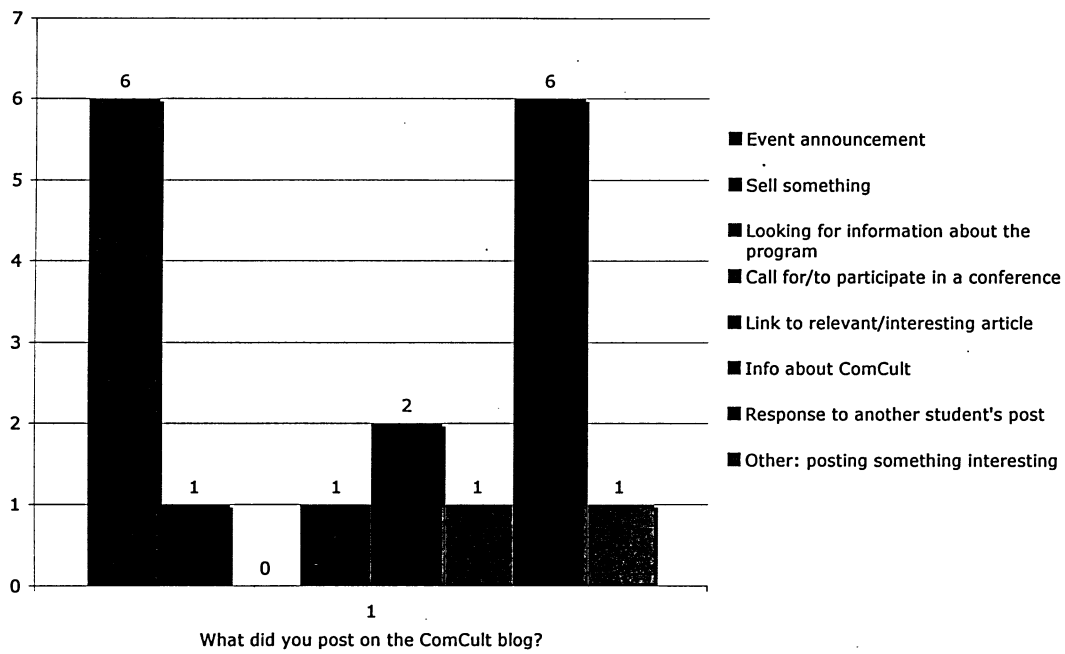
does a post (*sic*) must return to the site in order to continue the conversation. They are not communicated with directly," themes that work to reinforce a transmission view of communication. These responses are despite the fact that the blog featured RSS feeds for front page posts and comments as well as a direct email to one's Inbox if another community member replied to one's comment. This belief in the indirectness or inefficiency of blog communication leads me to wonder if there should be an instant message application for the ComCult community so that students and/or faculty could instantly interact with one another as was possible on The Well. Another respondent elaborates on the blog's ability to reinforce already existing social ties in the face of the anonymity of its contributors,

> I do not believe that a blog can as you state, "reinforce already existing social ties" in the sense that there's no context in a blog. Unlike MSN or even the listserv, on the blog you hide under a moniker...it's easy to hide behind a mask or in this case a name and say whatever you want, but saying things in a forum, like say the listserv, might make you pause and think, "do I want people to know that I'm being the bitch or the asshole or the intellectually constipated?" But then again, maybe it won't. (Respondent K, Questionnaire #2).

Other feelings conveyed included: "listserv is sufficient." Another respondent believed "[the blog] is an even more segmented aspect of the program not oriented around topics of interest, but around willingness to engage with a particular technological use." This argument could be used against any type of technology, even the listserv and its dependence on email technology. Another respondent discussed how he has met two people through the blog, but many more through the listserv, most likely because the listserv is utilized by many more people.

Like the reasons respondents reported sending email over the listserv, those respondents who reported participating on the blog – by posting front page posts or comments to the blog – did so mainly to post an event announcement and respond to another student's post (Table 27).

Table 27: Respondents report why they posted on the ComCult blog
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



This finding suggests a willingness on the behalf of respondents to reach out and lend support which strengthens community ties (weak or strong) which suggests a sense of community where students form a network based on affiliation and similar goals (getting through school!) and this network is formed in order to support one another and exchange resources. This finding also suggests that those who contribute to ComCult's online communities – the listserv and the ComCult blog – do so primarily to share personal news and accomplishments and invite community members to functions in

which face-to-face interaction may occur which would lead to the strengthening of community ties.

Respondents found relevant and interesting discussion or information on the listserv more often than on the blog – but many more respondents answered the listserv question, while many respondents did not answer the blog question, most likely due to a lower blog participation rate than the listserv (Table 28 - 29).

Table 28: Respondents report how often they find discussions and information disseminated by the listserv interesting and relevant
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006

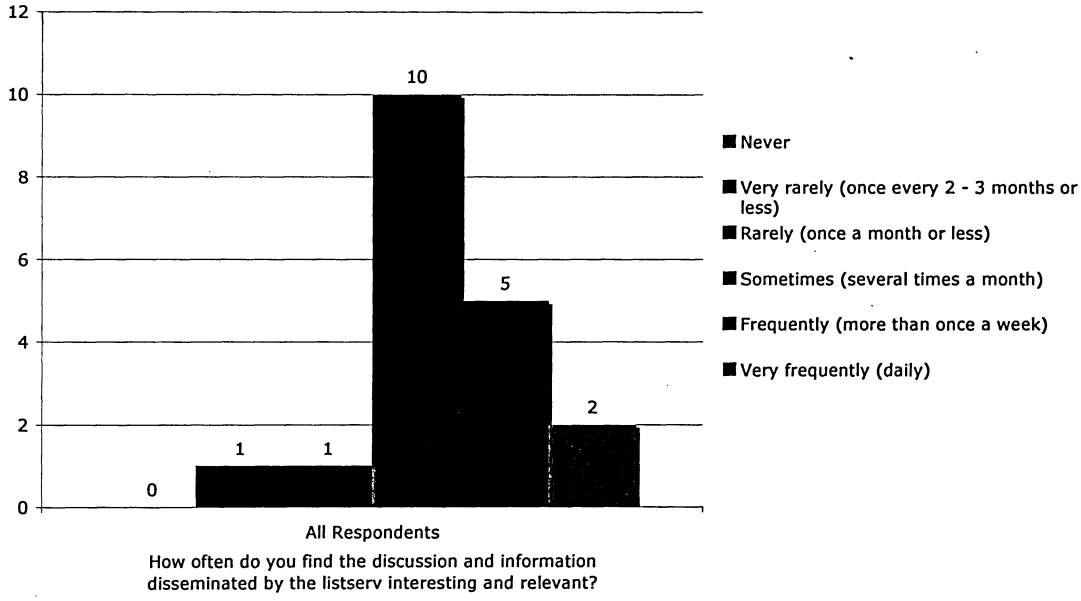
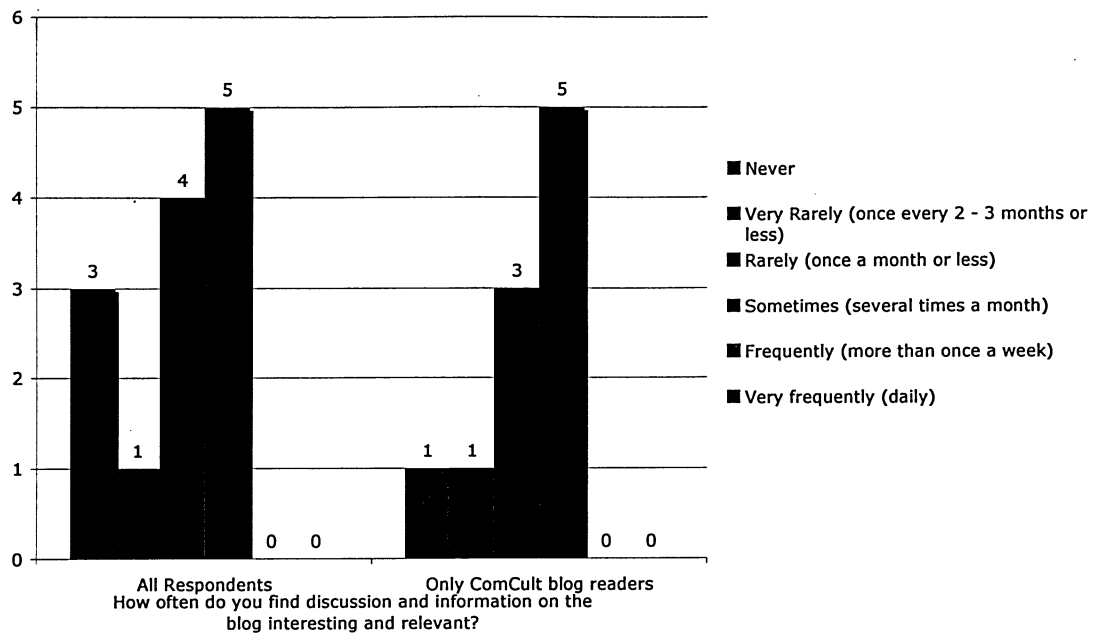
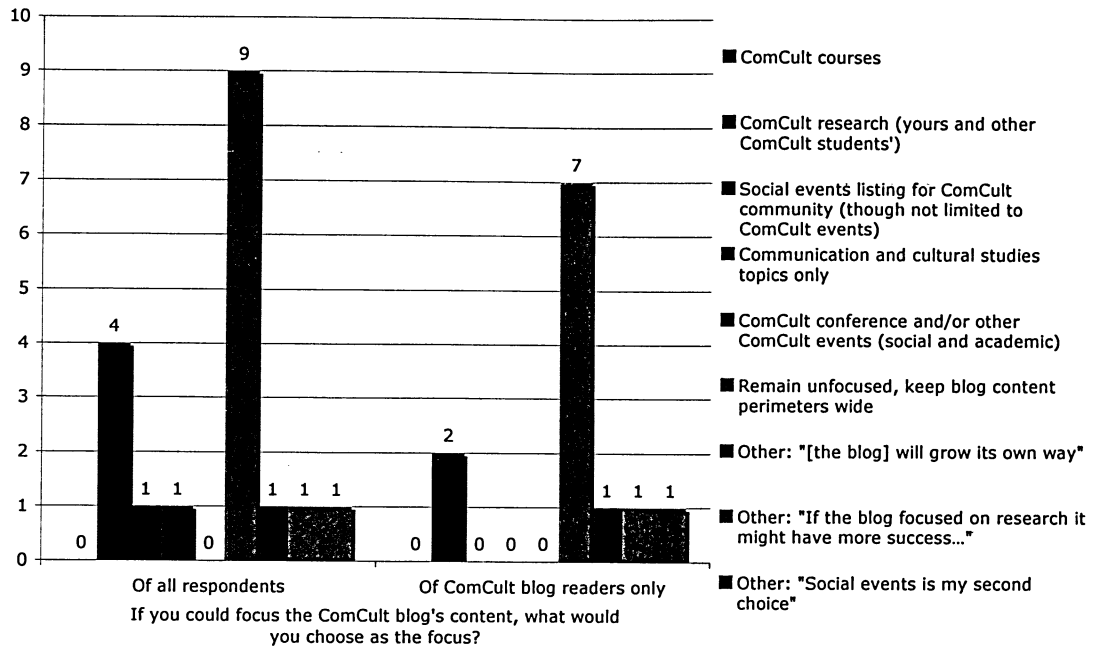


Table 29: Respondents report how often they find discussions and information on the ComCult blog interesting and relevant
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



Seven respondents who read the blog reported that they would have the content on the blog remain unfocused, keeping the blog's perimeters wide, while overall, 9 of 15 respondents thought the same (Table 30). The second, though distant, choice was to focus the blog's content on ComCult research, 4 respondents choosing this focus for the blog.

Table 30: Respondents report what they would choose as the ComCult blog's focus
Responses from Questionnaire #2 - April 24, 2006



5.2.9. The Publicness and Politics of the Blog

The following questions were in part inspired by the need to find out what factors may have significantly influenced blog interest and participation and in part inspired by a lengthy front page post on the ComCult blog, following the heels of the last listserv discussion regarding the blog, that occurred in March (Appendix 16: Screenshot of Member26's front page post, March 19, 2006). From this discussion and subsequent post, arose questions regarding the blog's introduction and how calls for blog participation by other blog participants – or me – would skew results of the study as participation encouraged in this way would lead to 'unnatural' activity. I also began to wonder about the public nature of the blog as well as the accompanying study and if these factors discouraged community participation. Therefore some questions were specifically included to explore Member26's suggestions that the blog's perceived failure

lay in its publicness and in a failure to engage other ComCult communities in the blog's inception, implementation and maintenance.

Thirteen respondents reported that they would *not* be more inclined to visit the ComCult blog and participate in its community if it were maintained by the ComCult GSA or another ComCult group. Only six of 19 respondents reported that they would be more inclined to visit and participate if the blog was maintained by the ComCult GSA or another ComCult group. All 6 who answered that they would be more inclined to visit and participate were respondents who reported already reading the blog and 5 of the 6 blog readers also reported contributing content to the blog despite the fact that the GSA or some other ComCult group was not involved. Therefore, of the respondents who did *not* read the blog or participate in the blog community, zero reported that they would be more inclined to go to the blog or participate if it were run by the GSA or other ComCult group.

Perhaps if the inception, design and implementation of the blog were carried out by a core group of ComCult students (as mentioned earlier, a blog initiative of supportive students), the ComCult blog would have enjoyed more traffic. But by the results of this question, it is very possible that the blog would just be more popular with the group of people that had a hand in its design, construction and introduction. It is possible that a situation similar to the listserv would emerge where a core group of students would visit the ComCult blog and would be responsible for the majority of its content.

When asked, only 4 respondents reported being interested in taking part in a group that would be responsible for redesigning, administering and maintaining the ComCult blog. All 4 respondents read the ComCult blog. Of the group of respondents

who had not visited or read the blog, zero would be encouraged to participate if invited to a blog committee.

Half of the respondents reported that the study had no influence on their decision to participate or not which lay to rest the thought the study had a negative impact on participation. Eight of the 20 respondents were encouraged to participate in the blog community because of the study, while only 2 were discouraged from participating because of the study.

Of all twenty respondents, 18 reported that they would *not* being more inclined to visit the blog if it were only accessible to members of the ComCult community and not to the greater public. Only 2 respondents reported that they would be more inclined to visit and participate if the blog were not public. It would seem from these findings that the publicness of the blog was not a factor in participating (or not participating) in the blog community.

5.3. Summary of the Questionnaires' Main Findings

5.3.1. Building and Fostering Community

The respondents' reports on the sense of community within the program was mixed, with the number of respondents feeling a sense of community increasing from Questionnaire #1 to Questionnaire #2, but only by two people, overall. A majority of respondents felt that face-to-face interaction either contributed to or would foster a sense of community within the program. Over a third of the respondents cited the listserv as contributing to the sense of community and two respondents cited the blog as doing the same. The respondents' reports support a community building strategy that focuses on face-to-face interaction. This suggests that while ComCult's online communities do

contribute to a sense of community, respondents put more value on face-to-face interaction and feel it is face-to-face interaction that must take place on a more regular basis for its members to feel a strong sense of community. Having said this, communication that takes place online (via the listserv or the blog) can work (and does in many instances) to encourage face-to-face interaction by familiarizing members of the community with each other which can work to lessen the perceived social risk involved in taking part in face-to-face interaction.

5.3.2. Collective Identity

The questionnaire findings suggest that there is some semblance of a collective identity within the program, but it is a weak one. Several respondents reported participating on the listserv or the blog to post invitations and information about events or respond to another student's post. These reports suggest that ComCult students want to involve fellow ComCult students in activities that they are involved in or are interested in as well as wanting to keep other ComCult students updated with the latest call of papers or conferences – events and activities that involve face-to-face interaction – suggesting a shared sense of 'we' amongst the students in the ComCult program. As well, respondents reported turning to other students first when in need of information about the program. A network of support and resources does exist within ComCult which I think is supported by the students' affiliation with the program and therefore each other which suggests some sense of collective identity, but this sense of identity is not strong enough or continuous enough to encourage ComCult students to attend face-to-face functions or participate in the online communities in large groups or with high frequency.

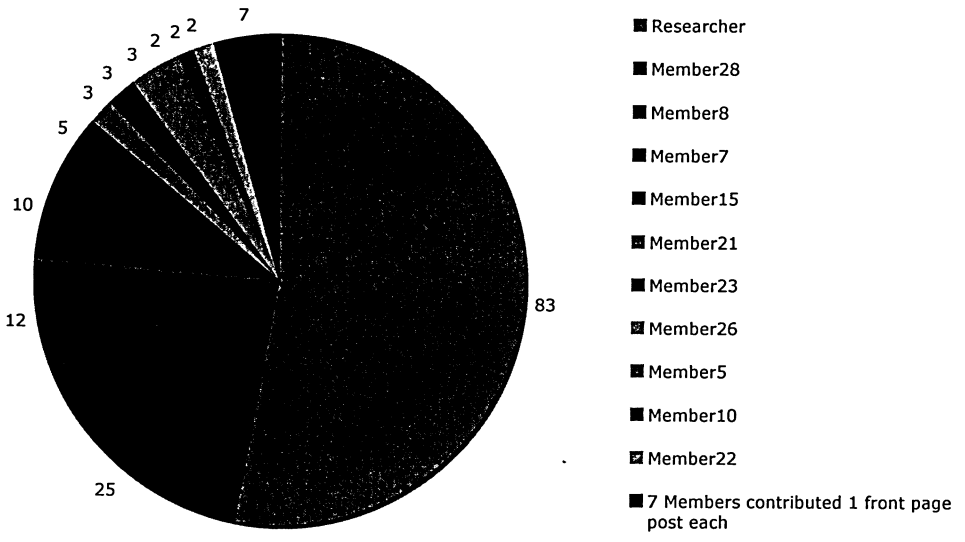
5.3.3. The Blog as an Effective Method of Communication

While a majority of blog participants felt that the blog was a good way to communicate with others in the program, overall, the majority of all respondents did not feel the same. The main reason cited for its failure as an effective method of communication was the blog's lack of traffic and/or low community participation however, responses suggest that neither the publicness of the blog nor the accompanying research study negatively impacted the community's level of participation. Furthermore, the fact that the blog was not affiliated with the GSA or another ComCult group did not seem to have a negative impact on the level of participation, as reported by the respondents. Many respondents who did not participate on the blog felt the "listserv was enough" or that blog content replicated listserv content. The perceived indirectness of the blog discouraged some from utilizing the blog as a resource for information gathering – despite the fact that there was an RSS feature included on the blog as well as direct emails sent to the original poster if another participant replied to their front page post.

5.4. Weblog Content Analysis

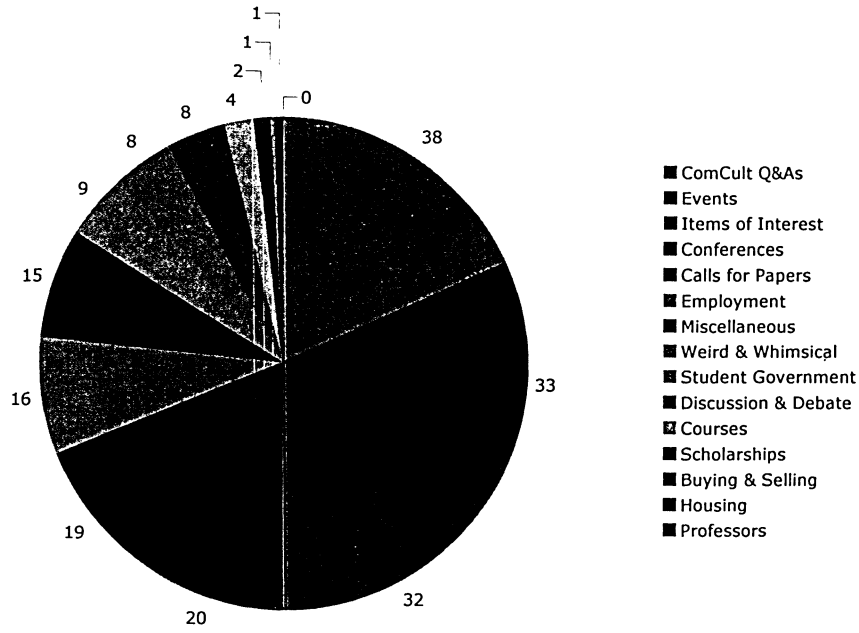
Between September 27, 2005 and April 30th, a total of 157 front page posts were contributed to the weblog. Of these 157 posts, I posted 83 in an ongoing attempt to seed and build content on the site. The remaining 74 front page posts were posted by a total of 17 members of the community (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Front page posts by community member (including researcher's contribution)



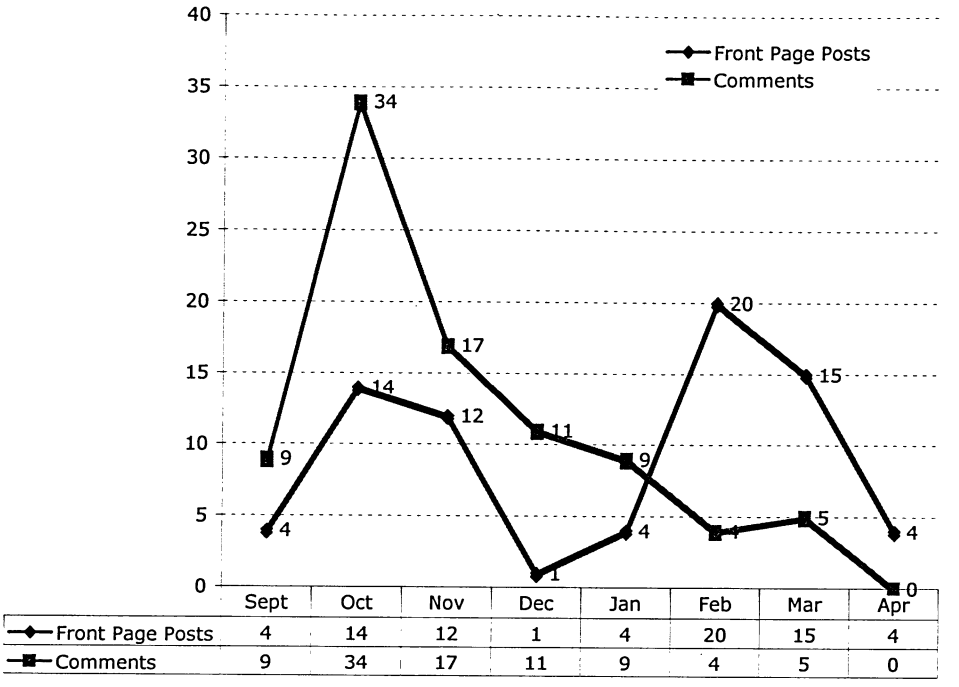
There were categories in which contributors could categorize their posts for clarity and simpler archive search. The categories included: Announcements, Blogs (a late addition to the list of possible categories), Buying & Selling, Calls for Papers, ComCult Q&As, Conferences, Course, Discussion & Debate, Employment, Events, Housing, Items of Interest, Miscellaneous, Professors, Scholarships, Student Government, and Weird & Whimsical. Multi-categorization was an option, the top three categories garnered 103 front page posts; 38 front page posts categorized in ComCult Q&As; 33 front page posts in Events; 32 front page posts in Items of Interest (Chart 2).

Chart 2: Front page posts by category type (including researcher's contribution)



The busiest month of participation, with the highest amount of front page posts and comments combined, was October, the first full month of the blog's operation (Graph 1).

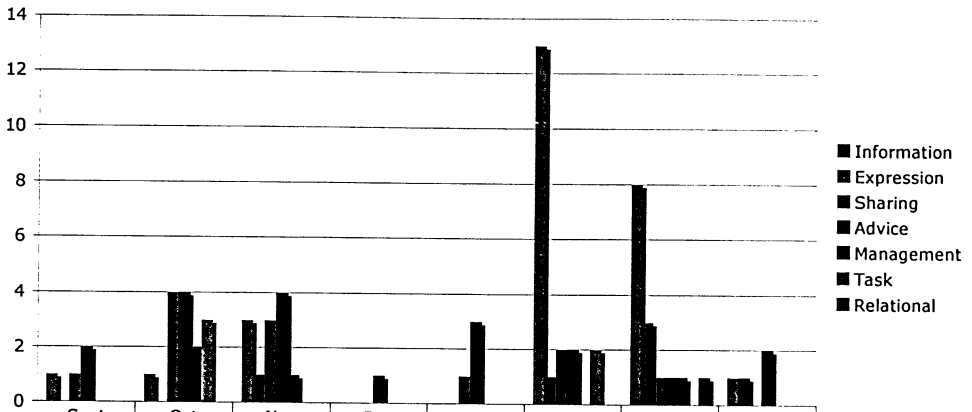
Graph 1: Blog Activity September 2005 - April 2006
(not including researcher's contribution)



	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Front Page Posts	4	14	12	1	4	20	15	4
Comments	9	34	17	11	9	4	5	0

In an attempt to track what type of posts were effective in generating a response from the community, front page posts were categorized according to a coding scheme slightly modified from Nip's (2004) ten-categories, including Information, Expression, Sharing, Task, Management, Advice, Relational and Discussion (only comments were categorized as Discussion posts). Not including my contributions, the community posted the most front page posts in February, with 13 of 20 categorized as Information posts – posts that were devoid of opinion or commentary from the contributor (Table 31). Conversely, February saw the second lowest rate of participation in terms of comments generated by community members.

Table 31: Types of Posts By Month
(not including researcher's contribution)

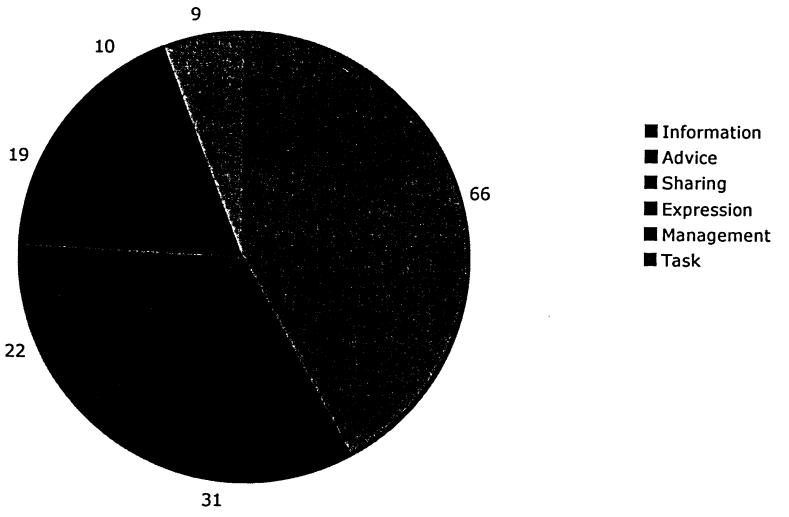


	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Information	1	1	3	0	0	13	8	1
Expression	0	0	1	0	0	1	3	1
Sharing	1	4	3	0	1	2	1	0
Advice	2	4	4	1	3	2	1	2
Management	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0
Task	0	3	0	0	0	2	0	0
Relational	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

Months of Study: September 2005 - April 2006

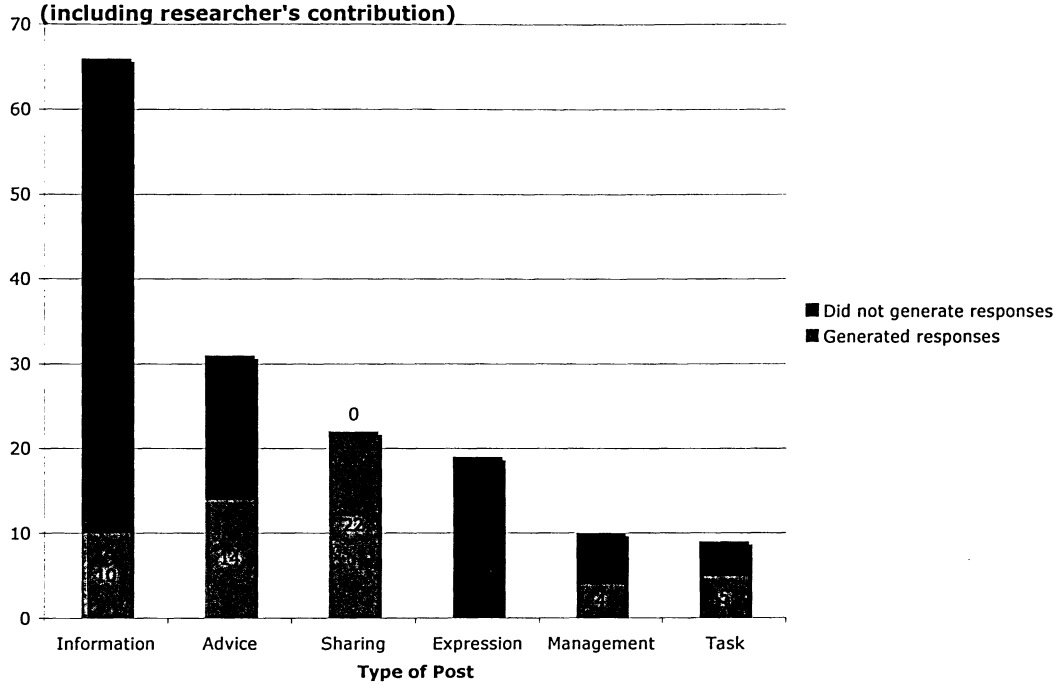
Of 157 front page posts including my contributions, 66 were Information making up 42% of the blog's content (Chart 3). There was very little evidence that the blog was utilized as an opportunity to form, shape, discuss, debate, in an attempt to agree upon, a set of shared beliefs, interests or values.

Chart 3: Front Page Posts by post type (including researcher's contribution)



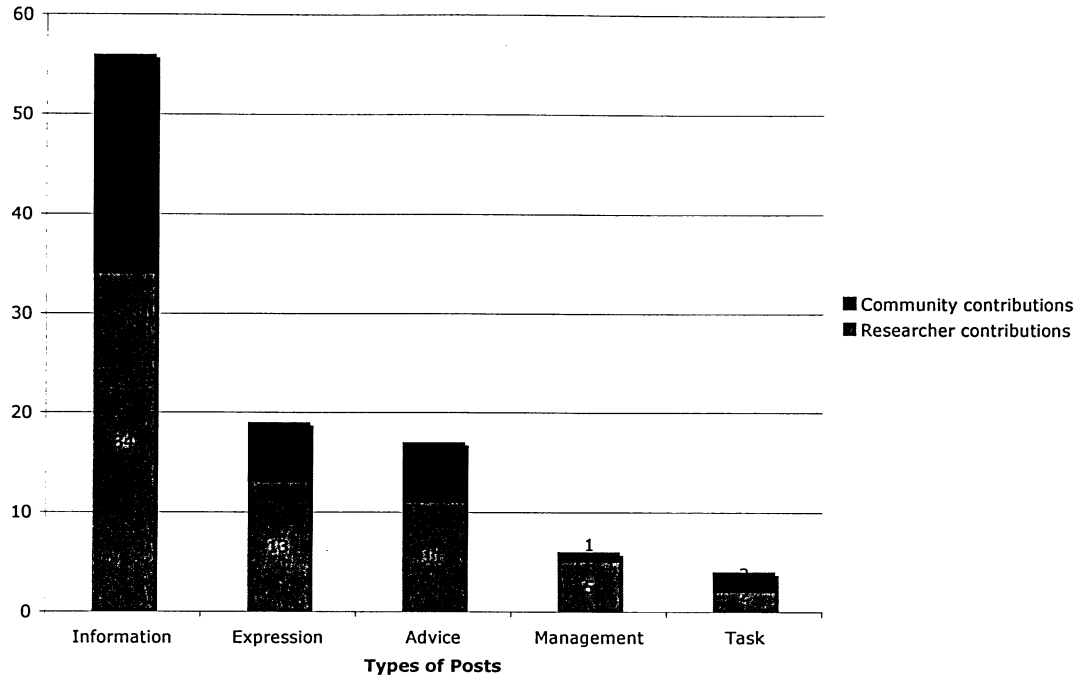
One hundred and two front page posts generated zero response from the community, including my contributions. Of those 102 front page posts, the type of post with the highest non-response rate was Information with 56 Information posts failing to provoke response from the community. Of the remaining 55 front page posts that did garner a comment or comments from the community, the type of post with the highest response rate was the Sharing post – with 22 Sharing posts initiating a response or responses (Table 32).

Table 32: Front page posts by post type and whether a response was generated (including researcher's contribution)



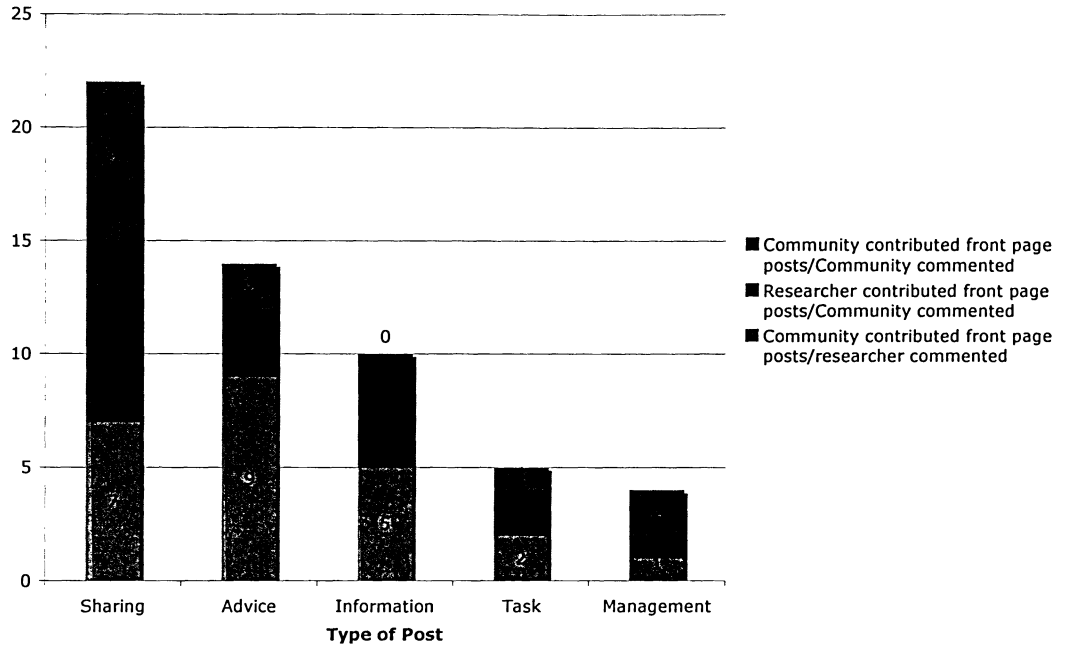
I wrote a number of front page posts and commented on a number of front page posts in an attempt to seed content and encourage member traffic and participation. Adding new content on the site was an attempt to attract repeat visitors, and answering any questions I could was an attempt to ensure the effectiveness of the blog as a communication tool. Because I did not want to impose my own 'voice' onto the blog, the majority of my posts were Information posts. The downfall of this strategy was that I led by example and the community posted more Information posts than any other type of post to the blog (Table 33). Information posts had the highest rate of non-response in proportion to the number of Information posts that existed on the blog when compared to the other types of posts on the blog.

Table 33: Front page posts that generated zero response by post type



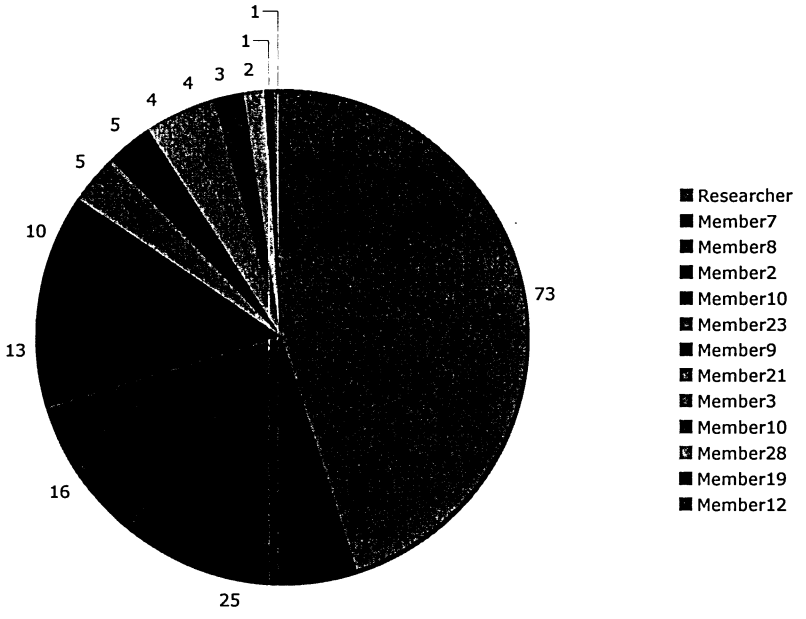
Sharing posts had the highest response rate, as well as the highest number of posts contributed and commented on by the community – numbering 7 out of 12 posts (Table 34).

Table 34: Front page posts that generated responses by post type and by type of interaction



Of the 162 comments to front page posts, 73 of them were written by the researcher, while the top three contributors (Member7, Member8, and Member2) posted 25, 16 and 13 comments respectively (Chart 4). A total of twelve members of the community contributed comments.

Chart 4: Comments by community member (including researcher's contribution)



The top three most active members of the ComCult weblog community, posting front page posts and comments, were ComCult students I interacted with face-to-face at ComCult events and outside of ComCult.

Of 319 front page posts or comments, 61 included external links. Comparing the low number of links with the high number of Information posts, these findings suggest that the blog was not a links and commentary format blog but primarily used as a bulletin board for events and other information.

5.5. Summary of Main Findings from Blog Content Analysis

Of all the blog content including front page posts and comments, I wrote almost half (49%) of it. The top three most active members were ComCult students that I interact with face-to-face regularly or semi-regularly in class, at ComCult events and activities or socially outside of ComCult. This finding suggests the possibility that if I

knew more people personally within the program, more people would have participated or at least felt obliged to participate on the blog. Of 157 front page posts, only 12 were contributed by and commented on entirely by the community, the rest were either posted by me or commented on by me in an attempt to ensure that there was a consistent stream of new content on the front page of the blog as well as to ensure that questions posted on the blog did not go unanswered. This is evidence of a very low level of engagement and participation on the blog by blog participants.

Of the blog posts, the largest number of posts was categorized as Information posts. It was found that these posts generated the least amount of response from the community. The possibility of building and fostering a sense of community through regular interaction amongst community members failed to materialize on the blog partly due to the lack of member participation possibly exacerbated by the large amount of the type of posts that generated the least amount of response.

5.6. Web logs of the ComCult blog

The web logs indicated a very low number of page requests and a high percentage of page requests from the same two domains (my home and work domains). My activity on the site accounted for the majority of traffic registering on the both web log reports.

5.7. Low participation and traffic on ComCult blog

While there was a very small group of people who visited and contributed to the blog on a semi-regular basis, the blog failed to attract a large group of regular visitors and contributors from the ComCult student body evidenced by the lack of active discussion occurring on a regular basis (daily or several times a week). A question going unanswered on the ComCult weblog, which happened a few times, worked to erode the

fragile sense of community the blog worked to build and foster. In the Findings section, I attempt to answer why the ComCult weblog failed to attract a group of regular visitors and contributors from the ComCult student body.

Chapter Six: Findings

There are a number of factors that influenced the outcome of the ComCult community blog. The first is obvious: the blog lacked user traffic and participation, evidenced by the fact that I wrote the majority of front page posts and comments and several questions posed on the blog, when I was unable to answer them, went unanswered by the rest of the community. At times, I did not answer a question posted on the blog's front page right away, deciding to wait in order to give the blog community a chance to respond, but this was to no avail. Very often questions would go unanswered if I did not answer them or I did not know the answer. The low level of participation and engagement has led me to focus the second half of the discussion on understanding the limited uptake of the blog, but first, I will begin by addressing the research questions.

6.1. Discussion of Research Questions

6.1.1. RQ1: Do blogs encourage a sense of community?

Evident in the general lack of engagement and participation by a majority of the student body, the ComCult blog failed to encourage a sense of community on a program-wide scale.

Findings suggest that the ComCult community may not actually participate in online communities by contributing content, posting to blogs or forums or sending email over the listserv, on a frequent basis. Lack of participation could be attributed to the fact that most respondents reported that they do not contribute to blogs or the listserv on a regular basis (daily or several times a week). Findings also show that many of the blogs that students do read regularly are not community blogs but blogs that are a combination of links and commentary and diary format, and written by a single author, of varying

degrees of fame or infamy, suggesting that a) a blog's pull is neither the possibility of contributing nor the perceived 'function' or 'utility', but instead the blogger's personality and unique voice, the humourous and/or entertaining content found on the blog or the opportunity to follow someone else's life (and indulge one's inner voyeur), which supports Bowman and Willis' theories that people participate in online communities to be entertained, to be informed and to gain status or build a reputation in a given community (i.e. belonging to the community that reads a particular actor or actress' blog); and b) that many ComCult students are not accustomed to the culture and practice of a community blog.

Findings also suggest that students do not turn to the listserv first for information about the program but turn to other students and the program assistant first for assistance. The blog did not serve this purpose and the respondents reported that the listserv does not necessarily serve this purpose either. Despite common perception or popular belief, findings suggest that the ComCult community does not utilize its online communities as the primary method of obtaining information about the program. More recently, however, the listserv has been the space of debate between ComCult community members regarding the program's sense of community, program issues, collective identity, where the program and the universities should stand on certain political issues as well as being the place in which activism and social responsibility are discussed and debated heatedly (but without the flaming of years past).

Beyond the initial flurry of discussion on the listserv, findings also suggest that the blog lacked buzz, the majority of respondents not telling anyone about the blog. The busiest month of posting and comments was its first full month, October, with 14 front

page posts and 34 comments, not including my own contributions. The numbers fell steadily from that month on, April being an especially slow month with the community contributing only 4 front page posts and 0 comments. Participation spiked in February when Member28 began posting – the number of community-contributed front page posts reaching a high of 20 while comments only numbered 4, the second lowest number of comment contributions in one month. The majority of February's front page posts were Information posts which accounts for the low response rate. Information posts, while numbering quite high, also featured no opinion or commentary, resulting in the lowest response rate of all types of posts.

6.1.2. RQ2: Do blogs help construct and maintain a collective identity within this community?

The community's low level of participation on the blog affected the blog's ability not only to build and foster a sense of community but also its ability to construct and maintain a collective identity within the ComCult community. Very few respondents reported going to an event or function posted on the ComCult blog suggesting that the blog failed to encourage any collective 'action' which would have worked to encouraged a shared sense of 'we'. As well, there was very little evidence on the blog (save the one discussion about the listserv, its role in community-building and online communication) of the group working out a shared set of beliefs or shared perspective.

Because of the lack of participation, the blog failed in this regard. Contributing to the blog's inability to attract repeat and frequent visitors was the absence of a strong engaging 'voice' on the blog.

I was identified as the person who started the blog by the rest of the community. When talking to other ComCult students, I got the impression that the community very closely identified the blog with me (by repeated comments like "oh you're the one doing the blog"). Because of this, there was a sense the that the blog was 'mine', in part due to the fact that the most popular and widely-read blogs are usually written by one person but also because going to a blog is like going to someone's website, the content most often does not get delivered to one's personal Inbox (unless the member uses the RSS feed) but is viewed elsewhere. In the beginning, I tried posting all types of posts, but found I was posting more Information posts in order to keep my own 'voice' out. I did not want the blog to be viewed as my own online corner so I worked to keep my opinion out of most of my front page posts. Because of this strategy, the majority of the content I contributed was in the form of Information posts that were devoid of any opinion or commentary. As a result, most of the front page posts on the blog were Information posts. For the most part, straight information (about a screening, a job opening, a gallery exhibit) did not initiate discussion or provoke opposing view. These posts lacked any voice or personality of the poster. This lack of personality worked against attracting readers as Blood (2002) asserts that "the best blogs convey the strongest personality" (p. xii). As Matt Haughey (2002) learned through building MetaFilter, "seed content sets the stage" (p. 204). Haughey maintains that ensuring good content, optimal comments and audience interaction are critical, not only in attracting new members to the community but in conveying a code of conduct as well, as "others reading the site [will] get a feel for how they are expected to act" (Ibid). Other community members took their cues from what they were seeing on the blog and contributed their own posts devoid of opinion or

commentary. The lack of frequent and lively interaction on the blog did not help to construct or maintain a strong collective identity within the community.

Though 'social events' was the most cited factor in both contributing to a sense of community and fostering one, social events were not well-attended the year of this study (2005/2006). Creative Night in 2006 was the most popular event as well as the Christmas party and year end party, while weekly pub nights were sparsely attended as was the program's own conference. When online communities are successful, active and exciting places to interact, several community members take time to meet face-to-face for example The Well held monthly office parties and MetaFilter members regularly organize Meta 'Meet Ups' demonstrating and emphasizing the evolutionary transition from computer-mediated communication to face-to-face interaction (Ali-Hasan, 2005). Hampton and Wellman (1999) maintain, "Relationships are rarely maintained through computer-mediated communication alone, but are sustained through a combination of on-and-off line interactions" (p. 489). Community-building depends on a combination of opportunities for face-to-face and online interaction and the respondents of this study reported that community-building resides primarily in the opportunity to engage in face-to-face interaction with other ComCult community members.

I argue that because of the interdisciplinary nature of the program as well as the disparate research interests, differing academic paths (full time students as well as part time students) and various professional and personal commitments of the student body, ComCult is mostly made up of a number small common bond groups as a opposed to existing as one common identity group and as a result is a less continuous, less stable

community.[5] Both the lack of frequent and lively online interaction on the blog and the lack of engagement and/or willingness to attend events and activities that permit face-to-face interaction prevent the construction and maintenance of a strong collective identity, moreover, the lack of both of these characteristics in the community – especially ComCult students lack of commitment to regularly attend ComCult functions in large numbers – speaks to the weak nature of ComCult's collective identity.

6.1.3. RQ3: How is a blog more effective or less effective than previous online communication mediums such as listservs or bulletin boards?

Based on both questionnaire findings and the content analysis, the ComCult blog was less effective as a communication medium in comparison to the already established listserv (but acted very much like a bulletin board without the advantage of a regular audience). Without a unique role to fill and set the blog apart from the listserv, the blog could not compete with the already existing, institutionally 'sanctioned' and entrenched method of communication. From the beginning the blog was viewed as in opposition to the listserv evident in public discussions on the listserv regarding the blog's purpose. For many reasons, but mainly because they had mastered the culture of the listserv, many community 'elders' of the listserv – and arguably of the program – did not cross over to the blog to participate and share their knowledge with others in the blog community, which would have increased the value of the content found on the blog and which may have worked to increase traffic and participation thereby increasing the overall value of the blog as an experience. The blog community suffered because of the absence of a large group of people willing to participate in what online community designers often

[5] As mentioned earlier, characteristic of a common identity group is a group of people bound together by a common goal or purpose. While ComCult students share the common goal of degree completion, that is the only goal they share – ComCult students have several differing goals and purposes.

refer to as 'the gift economy' – in which every member has some expertise to share and by doing so, benefits other community members and enriches the entire community as a whole.

6.2. Further discussion on the limited uptake of the blog by the ComCult community

In this section, I expand on some possible reasons why the blog experienced such limited adoption by the ComCult community in an attempt to understand the blog's failure as a community-building tool, an aid in the construction and maintenance of a strong collective identity and an effective method of communication.

6.2.1. The role of disagreement and dissent in an online community

The ComCult blog was never the site of flaming or trolling – but nor was it a site where exciting discussion took place on a regular basis. Perhaps the seemingly frequent flaming and sometimes harsh clashing of opposing views on the listserv was necessary to provoke people to respond and participate within the online community or perhaps how the listserv elders, leaders or regulars policed the community ensuring that content contributed was worthy of sharing. If someone contributed content that was below community standards, then that contributor was made an example of and everyone was made aware that this was not the type of content to post to the entire community (which includes past and present ComCult students). Perhaps the harsh listserv policing of 2005/2006 school year (and earlier) was a way to keep listserv contributions low despite common perceptions that the listserv is overused. MetaFilter maintains a completely different section of its site, called MetaTalk, devoted to the discussion of member contributions and whether a member has violated community standards or site rules by posting unworthy content or posting in the wrong section of the site. As Ali-Hasan

(2005) reports "grumblings about the quality of posts made by new members and their impact on the community are well documented in numerous MetaTalk threads" (p. 14). MetaFilter has become so known for its members' frequent fighting that for a time the site's tagline was "You're wrong! No, you're wrong!" (Ali-Hasan, 2005). Several scholars assert that disagreement is good for the community. Wenger argues that "disagreement, challenges and competition can all be forms of participation. As a form of participation, rebellion often reveals a greater commitment than does passive conformity" (as cited in Ali-Hasan, 2005, p. 24). Papacharissi (2004) argues that "the absence of 'face-to-face communication fostered a more heated discussion...that actually promotes Lyotard's vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy" (p. 267). While online communication may make it easier for community members to be rude to each other because of the absence of immediate repercussion, Benson asserts that the "desire for a civility that focuses on well-mannered discussions may lead to censorship and certainly downplays the value of dissent" (as cited in Papacharissi, p. 270). The Well is an example of an intensely dynamic and lively online community where quarrelsome sparring was the norm (Hafner, 2001). But finding the perfect balance of civility and incivility is difficult; self-censoring is a possibility in overly polite or civil communities, as it is in an environment where intense disagreement is part of the culture, members self-censoring out of fear of recrimination or reproach. Ali-Hasan (2005) describes posting on MetaFilter as a "rather intimidating experience" and characterizes this fear of posting as an informal barrier to entry that is stringently enforced by the MeFi community (p. 9). Either way, a culture that fosters and promotes intense disagreement or enforces strict guidelines to ensure civil discourse, excessive or restrictive control over

content/member contribution can lead to a loss of members' participation and erode members' commitment to the community (Kang et al, 2004). These very topics were discussed by ComCult blog community members in the liveliest discussion on the blog started by Member7 entitled, "The listserv is on fire today...again", in which the nature of listserv interaction, its role in community-building, and the benefit (and detriment) of communication via technological means are all contemplated (Appendix 17: Full transcript of discussion).

> Member7[6] says:
>
> > The intellectual thrashing on [the listserv] simply has to stop. ...I certainly am not going to post a comment on [the listserv] like this then have 100,000,000,000 emails come through about how stupid my comment was or even the "I agree with you comments" who the hell cares if you agree or not, and why does everyone have to hear, "oh I agree...and then $500 words later" your explanation on why you agree.
>
> Member8 says:
>
> > but if no one says anything, how is that creating a sense of community? quiet consensus? that sounds a little scary to me.
>
> Member7 says:
>
> > Member8, I agree, silence is not the answer. But neither is polarization where people are afraid to talk. I just think that if you agree or disagree with someone's comments on the listserv, given the nature of that beast (i.e. everyone will get the email) you should do so privately. Unless, your words are such that everyone would benefit from hearing them. For instance, if a prof has comments or criticisms I should say to make about your writing, imagine if they called them out in front of the whole class then opened up the forum for your peers to comment? That would be completely appauling. So why do we let such behaviour go on the listserv?
> >
> > Is it ok because it's being done through electronic means? Which, on a serious note, makes me think about technology and how it changes or shall I say, desensitizes our feelings of empathy for one another.
>
> Member8 says:

[6] All participants' usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms.

> i agree with you, Member7 — fear of talking is not good; but i wonder if it's a result of an actual polarization (as in "you're right, i'm wrong, end of discussion"), or some underlying psychological or social cause.
>
> maybe i can put it this way: rather than thinking "how can we be so rude to each other on the listserv when we're so polite to each other in class?" — maybe it's better to ask why we're so *polite* to each other in the first place? is the rudeness/aggressiveness a way (albeit inelegantly) of expressing our frustration with our polite in-class communications? not that we want to necessarily tear into each other, mind you, but i'm certain that there are many things that are left unspoken that we want or that we *need* to say to our classmates...
>
> ... i think it's better to interpret ANY message as an attempt at constructive communication, at least at first, because this particular technology allows us to say things we wouldn't/couldn't normally say face-to-face, and that may be it's ultimate value as communication.[7]

The second most popular discussion was sparked by Member7's less than positive response to Member23's announcement that the Christmas party had been scheduled on a Friday night in which Member7 admits, "I'm just trying to stir shit up..." While Member7 admits that she is trying to provoke comments from the community – this provocation seems to work as several comments were posted back and forth regarding the date of the party. The interaction is not necessarily fascinating but there is some playfulness evident between community members which with increased frequency can work to build a sense of belonging and community amongst its members. This type of positive interaction is "essential in generating intended informational benefits and social benefits such as strong interpersonal ties and a sense of belonging that leads to a higher network strength" (Kang et al, 2004, p. 114). Lively, multi-person discussion, had it happened more often on the blog, would certainly have fostered a stronger sense of community amongst the blog's community members.

[7] This is an excerpt of a discussion the ComCult blog, which in full, included 12 responses from a total of 5 community blog members. The full transcript can be found in the Appendix.

6.2.2. Researcher lacked social capital within ComCult online community

Another factor in the blog's lack of popularity can be attributed to my own lack of social capital within the ComCult online community. I was not an active member of the listserv community. I could have built up my social capital by contributing worthy content which would have positively influenced the way others perceived me as a member of the community. I had only ever contributed to the listserv on a very infrequent basis – maybe sending as few as 5 emails over the listserv – and getting flamed quite unexpectedly because of the 'unworthiness' of one of my contributions. Rheingold, a regular contributor to The Well in its early years, related a practice "that had come to be known as "hounding" people off The Well.... newcomers were often attacked" (Hafner, 2001, p. 178). This practice describes in short my experience with the listserv during my early stab at participation. As mentioned above, Ali-Hasan observes the initiation process of 'newbies' to MetaFilter and how they are subjected to harsh criticism if they do not conform to group standards and norms. Matt Haughey, MetaFilter's designer and administrator, has even built a waiting period into the posting process for newcomers to ensure that they observe the culture of the site for at least 24 hours before contributing a comment and making at least 3 comments before being allowed to post on the front page of the site. Ali-Hasan also relates the community's reaction when he announced in a front page post that he was observing the site and its community as research – having no social capital, the community was leery, however, when a longtime MetaFilter member with a great deal of accumulated social capital, announced that he had been studying MetaFilter for his Masters thesis, those same members were unfazed by the news.

6.2.3. Researcher lacked physical presence in ComCult community

Not only did I lack social capital due to my nearly non-existent profile in the listserv community but as a part-time student, I also lacked a real-life profile, as well, very rarely interacting with ComCult students. I was employed full-time, taking one course a semester and because of my schedule I was on campus for a limited time only. I was unable to commit to any ComCult committees which occurred during traditional office hours. To add to this lack of presence, I had completed all of the ComCult courses that would have otherwise put me in direct contact with large or even medium-sized groups of ComCult students – all of my mandatory credits had been achieved, and all I had left to complete was one elective and one foundation course (that I was only able to take as a Directed Reading after the period of this study had passed). The elective boasted a small class size (usually a good thing!) and included a diverse group of students from different programs from both York and Ryerson. Because of my status as a part-time student, I was unable to fully immerse myself in the community before and during the study as Keith Hampton had done during his study of Netville. While conducting his study, Hampton became a Netville resident, renting a basement from another Netville homeowner, actively participated in community events such as neighbourhood barbeques, was physically present in Netville, talked to people face-to-face and subscribed to the community listserv (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Hampton and Wellman (2003) found,

> Living within the field site was important not only for observation, but to encourage trust in the research process, increase familiarity with the researchers, and demonstrate our respect for the community as a place to live (p. 292).

He made sure he was seen by his neighbours and as a result, Hampton and Wellman (2003) observed that "visibility and credibility in Netville was vital in convincing many residents to take the time from their busy lives to respond to the survey" (p. 292). I think this is true of participation in general – those students that participated most frequently on the blog were students that I saw on a regular basis in- and sometimes outside of class. These students knew me and because of this, may have felt obliged and/or encouraged to participate and more comfortable in doing so.

6.2.4. The ComCult blog lacked a defined goal, mission or function

Another weakness that may have contributed to the failure of the blog was its lack of purpose. Several members of the ComCult community openly and publicly questioned the role of the blog in listserv communication and even on the blog itself. Several online community designers stress the importance of a clearly defined goal or mission for the community (Haughey, 2002; Powazek, 2001; Kim, 2000). Kim (as cited in Kang et al, 2004) argues the importance of supporting member communication through the implementation of bulletin boards, chat rooms, mailing services, member search functions, which all work to,

> stimulate more active communication and interaction among members, enhance the opportunity for members to develop close relationships, facilitate members' sense of belonging in the community, and lead to the increased level of member commitment toward the community (p. 114).

But none of this works if the online community, itself, does not fill a void for potential community members. As Kang et al (2004) state further,

> For successful evolution, growth and maintenance of an online community, the community value (benefits) must be communicated clearly to potential participants. When presented

> with a clear purpose, potential members can assess the match between their needs and what the community offers. The match between community's interest and potential participants' interest will promote stronger desire to participate and interact with other members, leading to shared feeling of belonging, responsibility and commitment to the community (p.114).

Several questionnaire respondents stated that "the listserv was enough" suggesting that ComCult students were not interested in looking elsewhere for interaction with other ComCult students, rendering the blog unnecessary. From the beginning, I strongly believed that there was a void in communication not filled by the listserv (mainly an absence in a space where communication that was less 'topical'/more open to a wider range of topics and contributions could occur) – and I also believed that the community should shape the content. Powazek (2002) asserts that giving the community the power to decide what content appears on the site gives users ownership of the site. Unfortunately, the community (in large numbers, anyway) did not necessarily welcome the blog or another channel of communication.

The blog also lacked a set of rules or guidelines, which several online community designers stress as critical in building an online community (Kim; 2000; Dalhberg, 2002; Haughey, 2002; Powazek, 2002; De Cindio, Gentile, Grew & Redolfi, 2003). Powazek states plainly, "like it or not, every community site comes with a set of rules. There is behaviour that is welcome and behaviour that is not..." The blog was never host to malicious posts, flaming or trolling so arguably I was not forced to set rules for appropriate conduct, but coupled with the lack of a clearly defined goal or mission statement, the lack of guidelines or rules worked to confuse people – most potential participants could not see why the blog could or would be useful and so did not even visit the blog, let alone participate. On the other hand, the listserv has a specific goal to discuss

ComCult related topics, deadlines and issues and has an etiquette guideline[8], which was posted to the listserv by the GSA president, once in the 2004/2005 school year and another in the 2005/2006 year, as ComCult students were apt to violate it by either over posting, posting to the entire group by mistake, or flaming other community members. Matt Haughey and others maintain that rules are paramount in running a successful community in order to set an example for the desired content contributed to the community site.

In addition to lacking a specifically defined goal, the blog lacked a space in which people could blog about online communities, online communication and/or specifically the ComCult blog. Matt Haughey states that giving the community a space in which to discuss the site on the site is critical to ensure that the front page of the site does not turn into senseless navel gazing but also serves as an opportunity for community members to reinforce community identity, ideals and shared meaning of the site. As previously mentioned, the most popular discussion on the blog contemplated the nature the listserv interaction, community and computer-mediated communication.

6.2.5. The blog replicated the listserv

Because of the blog lacked a clearly defined function or clearly set guidelines, its content often mirrored the listserv. Very often I posted conference calls or event announcements from the listserv on the blog for those ComCult students that did not subscribe to the listserv, however, I never found out if there was a significant number of students in the community that did not subscribe to the listserv and if these students were looking for an alternate channel for communication like the blog.

[8] Though emailed to the community in 2005 and in 2006, the listserv etiquette is not on the program's websites or in the GSA constitution and does not appear to be posted anywhere online.

6.2.6. Members' anonymity a hindrance to community-building

Because of nature of study, members were anonymous to each other and therefore the blog could not act as a springboard for further communication/further connection. Member profiles could not be public, usernames were usually (but not always) pseudonyms, and members could not email each other as contributor's email addresses could not be featured, as once planned, to facilitate further communication between ComCult students. Features such as member profiles, persistent identities (the use of real names online as is practice on the listserv) and giving the members the opportunity to email one another privately would have worked to encourage further connection amongst community members and foster a sense of belonging and community (Kim, 2001; Powazek, 2002).

Chapter Seven: Contribution to ComCult Community

7.1. ComCult Community

Despite the low participation and traffic of the blog, among the small group that did participate on the blog several times a month, findings suggest that the blog did contribute to a participant's sense of community and worked to reinforce existing social ties. As well, blog participants felt the blog was a good way to communicate with others in the ComCult program. Although the blog was not widely popular amongst the student body, those that did participate were enthusiastic about the potential of the blog by adding, as one respondent put it, "another channel for collaboration and commentary" (Respondent K, Questionnaire #2). Despite these findings, a majority of blog participants also reported not making connections within the program through the blog. This may be because members already knew each other or were familiar with each other from class, teaching assistantships, listserv communication, or program social or academic functions. Ultimately, on a micro-level, the blog did manage to foster a sense of community for those few individuals in the program that participated.

7.2. ComCult Collective Identity

Again, among the small group of students that participated on the blog, the majority thought the ComCult blog was a useful space in which to connect with other ComCult students. A majority of the blog participants also reported that by posting on the blog, they felt more involved in the ComCult community and program. All of the blog participants felt that they could turn to other blog community members for information about the program suggesting a strong level of trust amongst the community members. Despite this increased feeling of involvement and apparent trust, the majority

of blog participants were not encouraged to participate in an event that they had read about it on the blog. Only 4 of 11 blog participants reported going to an event because they read about it on the blog. There was some semblance of a program collective identity with those that participated on the ComCult blog simply by having the opportunity to interact with other ComCult students, but ultimately, like The Queer Sister's electronic bulletin board, the ComCult blog fell short of building a strong collective identity amongst the blog community.

7.3. The Blog as an Effective Communication Medium

Despite the fact that blog participants reported positive findings regarding their participation on the blog, the potential effectiveness of the blog as a communication tool was never realized due to the very small number of regular or semi-regular participants. Because the blog lacked a unique role in the community, its content replicated the listserv which dissuaded potential participants. Very few people visited the blog on a frequent basis – several unanswered questions provide stark evidence that the blog was not effective in obtaining information. If a larger group participated on a more frequent basis, there may have been more front page posts ranging in opinion, experience and areas of expertise, while community comments may have reflected this diversity as well, which would have increased the value of participating on the blog.

7.4. A return to medium theory and social integration through ritual

Findings suggest that ComCult students may achieve social integration (in this context 'with' the program and their peers) through the daily practice of checking their email. The ritual of checking email (something that every questionnaire respondent reported doing every day) becomes the practice in which ComCult students interact with

others in the community, and therefore integrate themselves within the community. Social integration is achieved not by interacting with others but with the medium (email) which may be enough for some to experience some sense of communion with an imagined ComCult community, one that is not dependent on other people but on the knowledge that other people are enacting the same rituals (in this case, downloading, but not necessarily reading, listserv email and assuming that most ComCult students are doing the same). From the findings, however, if members of the ComCult community are, indeed, achieving some sense of social integration, it is one that does not appear to lead to a particularly strong sense of community.

7.5. Future recommendations for online community-building for ComCult

Although questionnaire respondents reported a desire to keep the blog content wide and unfocused, due to the possibility of the blog simply replicating listserv content, the blog must have some specific focus and/or specific content guidelines. It must either revolve around a ComCult event such as the conference or a ComCult group such as the GSA, or more in keeping with the respondents' preference of keeping the blog open to a wide range of topics, there must be specific rules or guidelines in regards to the type of post that should appear on the blog. For example, event announcements, buying, selling, housing information, employment opportunities can all stay part of the listserv's domain whereas as only posts with commentary, opinion or specific questions can be posted to the blog. This does not necessarily guarantee that front page posts will always initiate community response or lively discussion but will increase the chances that someone in the community will have something to add or oppose. This may also ensure that the blog does not become a static bulletin board or replicate the content communicated via the

listserv – which is what ultimately happened in this study – but function as a space where students can count on finding *opinion* and *commentary* – one of the most popular reasons respondents reported reading blogs – or to share their own opinions and commentary.

If there is to be a blog at all, a core group of interested ComCult students would have to be appointed to work on it, to ensure a wider sense of belonging, ownership and commitment to the blog. Like Matt Haughey's MetaFilter, this core group of students could be responsible for seeding content and spreading news of it, through email but more effectively, through word of mouth. One, or more, of these students should be well versed in computer coding, in order to change the blog at will to fit a growing community's needs and requests. Another option is to hire a communication officer from ComCult that is a paid position. The communication officer could act as an administrator to all program sites, which could include a program blog and/or wiki. This person could also ensure that program websites are up-to-date and because this would be a paid position there would be more of a chance that this type of work would actually be done. All program-affiliated websites, blogs, wikis, etc, should be linked to each other. Another possibility is having the blog be part of the GSA website where meeting minutes and other program updates can be organized by category or key terms and therefore, easily searched.

In order to build a community, the blog needs more time to pick up. Matt Haughey and a group of his friends had been contributing content to MetaFilter for nine month and only saw real traffic after winning a web award. Months of posting, recoding, posting some more and winning a high-profile web award boosted MetaFilter's profile resulting in community membership skyrocketing to 20,000 members. I am not

suggesting the ComCult blog needs to win a web award but what it does need is more time, a proper introduction that includes being announced and explained at orientation in the summer before Fall semester and being supported by public and 'sanctioned' program groups like the ComCult GSA, and of course, positive word of mouth. The blog needs to be talked about and promoted in order to get people to the site.

The blog could be part of a larger ComCult online social network much like the wildly popular Facebook and MySpace (as of the summer of 2007!) where members have persistent identities throughout ComCult's online world. ComCult students would use their real names on the listserv, on the blog, and on community-viewable member profile pages. This type of network involving several different types of communication methods (email, bulletin boards, blogs, instant message, even chat) would allow for a sense of familiarity amongst community members which would encourage communication. As sites such as Facebook and MySpace, work as a springboard for further communication, further connectedness and a widening of social networks (requiring low maintenance) so would a ComCult online social network. Two critical success factors of a program blog in the context of a larger ComCult online social network are full integration and high visibility. For example, to encourage student ownership, involvement and commitment to the blog, the blog should appear on a student's profile page, where it is in constant view. Having the blog on a student's own profile page encourages the student to feel as though the blog is part of her or his own personal online space ('profile page' or 'homepage') and eliminates the extra time and effort perceived in going to yet another site which would alleviate concerns over time.

Chapter Eight: Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study included the low level of participation on the blog. Although 29 students (plus one faculty member) registered as contributors, only 17 contributed front page posts and less (12) contributed comments. I contributed over half of the front page posts influencing the type of posts contributed to the blog as a whole. I also contributed nearly half of the comments skewing the number of front page posts generating a response because I was often the only community member responding to a front page post.

There was a low response rate with both questionnaires – with 26 respondents of the first questionnaire and 20 of the second questionnaire. Arguably, surveys are self-selecting with only the respondents with something to say completing and submitting them. This would account for the two groups – the pro-blog and the anti-blog group – emerging from the questionnaires.

Participation on the blog was affected by the already entrenched method of communication – the listserv. The listserv made those who were used to its culture (and the ones with social capital in that particular setting) resistant to an additional method of communication, perceived as oppositional and introduced by a person who was most likely viewed as either a newcomer or an outsider with low to zero social capital in the already established culture of the listserv.

The obligation to keep contributors anonymous to each other and the greater public placed restraints on the ability to utilize community-building features such as publicly viewable profile pages that identify ComCult students by their real names, a member directory search, member names linked to their email addresses and so on.

Features such as these would have encouraged and strengthened connections within the community. One questionnaire respondent thought that the use of pseudonyms influenced communication negatively, stating that it is hard to take anything anyone says under a moniker too seriously as they are much freer to say what they please, implying that anonymous communication should be/and is taken much less seriously than communication that is not anonymous. On the other hand, some members really loved the use of a handle or a moniker, for example Member7 made reference to her anonymity several times and Member2 described it as 'freeing'. Despite the positive remarks about the site's anonymity, several members used handles that only thinly veiled their real names (using their initials) or nicknames already familiar from listserv contributions and communication and several more (12) members used their full first names, as I did. Others used their first initial and their last name. Only three contributors used handles that were entirely unconnected to their real names. It is hard to say definitively whether it hindered participation (possibly) or influenced the nature of contributor's front page posts or comments (possibly not), I do believe it hindered the blog's ability to foster further communication, resulting in a diminished capacity to build and foster community.

The public nature of the blog may have hindered the level of participation. The listserv is a private list distributed among students and alumni of the program – most listserv subscribers know this and feel secure with this knowledge. But when the question of the listserv's privacy came up in a recent listserv discussion (in March 2007), several listserv community members were quite distressed that listserv communication was not private and that listserv community members may be forwarding otherwise private email to third-party recipients not permitted to subscribe to the service (such as

faculty members). On the other hand, a majority of respondents did not object to the idea of inviting faculty members to contribute to the blog. As well, according to findings from questionnaire #2, the inherent publicness of the blog was not a problem. Arguably, people think of the listserv as private and so are distressed when they hear otherwise, whereas the blog is known as being accessible to the general public so in knowing this, there is no anxiety attached to the issue of privacy. Presumably, participants know to self-censor according to the level of privacy the online community affords the participant. Ultimately, more students may like the listserv simply for the pretence or semblance of privacy it affords whereas the blog does not afford even the appearance of privacy, which would affect the student participation on the blog.

Findings suggested that students were not necessarily familiar with blogs or used to participating within blog communities, especially that of a community blog. Blogs are still not as widely recognized or utilized as email as a web application; many ComCult community did not necessarily know how to participate and the level of participation may have been hindered by the perceived 'newness' of blogs.

Chapter Nine: Wider Implications and Contributions to Body of Knowledge on Blogs

Blogs can foster a sense of community amongst community members as well as work to build a collective identity amongst a blog community. Blogs are effective communication tools when communication occurs amongst a regularly participating and committed group of people. Findings show that blogs are best suited when the goal is to share commentary or express an opinion – this sort of content tends to generate the most involvement and participation from members of the community which results in a greater sense of community. As Hagal asserts, "For online communities to grow and prosper, member communication and interaction is critical for facilitating the formation of share culture and value" (Hagal as cited in Kang et al, 2004, p. 114). If the purpose of a blog is to build community, it should not be a bulletin board for events or other straight information as this content does not, as evidenced in this study, generate community discussion and interaction.

In general, online communities need time to grow and develop; administrators need to commit to trying several different methods of attracting visitors and setting an example of desired content.

An online community needs to offer the community a mission, set guidelines and offer members several different ways in which to communicate with like-minded members of the community. The online community site needs to fill a role or have a unique function for its potential users or it will ultimately fail as a dynamic community.

To summarize, despite a failure to engage a large group of ComCult students, the ComCult blog did work to foster a sense of community for the small group of ComCult

students who participated on the blog. While the ComCult blog did not help to construct a collective identity with the blog community or greater ComCult community, findings suggest that a weak collective identity did exist within the program at the time of the study as the majority of respondents reported turning to other students first to obtain information about the program as well as participating on the listserv or the blog to email the community about events and activities and to respond to other students' email or posts. The ComCult blog did not prove to be as effective of a communication medium as the listserv due to a lack of community engagement and participation, which in turn, led to a low level of community contribution and traffic. This lack of traffic and community participation worked to devalue the blog as an effective method of obtaining information.

As findings suggest community building efforts within the ComCult community should focus on encouraging higher levels of participation in ComCult events and activities that entail face-to-face interaction. A ComCult online social network, featuring student profile pages and a program blog – or wiki – in which students' real names are displayed would help to familiarize ComCult students with each other, eliminating or decreasing the social risk perceived in attending program functions, which would work to improve attendance levels and ComCult's overall sense of community.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire #1 – November 15, 2005

General Weblog Awareness and Online Participation

1. When did you first hear of weblogs?

When the ComCult weblog was announced
2 months to 6 months ago
6 months to 1 year ago
1 to 2 years ago
2 to 3 years ago
3 to 5 years ago
5 years ago or more
Had never heard of weblogs before this questionnaire

2. Do you read weblogs?

Never
Rarely (once a month or less)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

3. If you read weblogs, do you participate (post or comment) on these weblogs?

Never
Rarely (once a month or less)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

4. Do you maintain a weblog of your own?

Yes
No

5. If so, how often to you update it?

Rarely (once a month or less)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

6. What type of weblog do you maintain?

Links and commentary format

Open diary
Combination of links and commentary format and open diary
Photoblog
Videoblog
Audioblog
Other _____

7. Do you participate within other online communities?

Check all that apply:

MSN messenger or similar instant message applications
Chat groups
Discussion boards
Listserv
MUDs
Wikis
Other_____

8. How often do you use email?

Never
Rarely (once a month or less)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

Current Sense of ComCult Community

9. Do you feel a sense of community within the Comcult program

Yes
No

10. Do you subscribe to the ComCult listserv?

Yes
No

11. If yes, do you send email over the listserv?

Never
Rarely (once a month or less)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

12. If so, what have you emailed the community about?
(check all that apply)

Event announcement
Sell something
Looking for information about the program
Call for/to participate in a conference
Link to relevant/interesting article
Other_____

13. Are there many members of the ComCult community with whom you feel you can identify?

Yes
No

Sense of Empowerment and Self-Sufficiency

14. Do you feel well informed about the program?

Yes
No

15. Do you feel you can turn to other members of the ComCult community for accurate information?

Yes
No

16. Where do you usually turn to for information about the program?
Check all that apply in order of who you would turn to first:

Program Assistant
Listserv
Course Instructors
ComCult GSA
Other students
Program Director/Associate Program Director

17. How do you find the process of obtaining information about the program?

Very inefficient
Inefficient
Somewhat inefficient
Somewhat efficient
Efficient
Very efficient

18. Do you think having a community blog is helpful as an information resource?

Yes
No

19. Do you read the ComCult community blog?

Yes
No

20. Do you participate in the ComCult community blog? (I.e.: Post comments, replies, etc)

Yes
No

If not, please explain.

21. Do you have any objectives that you wish to be met by the community blog?

Yes
No

Please explain your answer.

22. Would you object to faculty being invited to contribute and visit the ComCult weblog?

Yes
No

23. If you have other comments or suggestions regarding the ComCult community, the ComCult weblog or this questionnaire, please give them here:

Sex:
Program: MA / PhD Year of Program:
Status of Study: Part time / Full time
Registered at: Ryerson / York

All information given here is strictly confidential.

Appendix 2

Questionnaire #2 – April 2006

General Weblog Awareness and Online Participation

1. When did you first hear of weblogs?

When the ComCult weblog was announced
2 months to 6 months ago
6 months to 1 year ago
1 to 2 years ago
2 to 3 years ago
3 to 5 years ago
5 years ago or more
Had never heard of weblogs before this questionnaire

2. Do you read weblogs?

Never
Very rarely (once every 2 - 3 months or less
Rarely (once every month)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

3. If you read weblogs, how many do you visit on a weekly basis:

1
2 - 3
4 or more

4. Why do you read blogs?
Check all that apply:

for news/information
for opinion/commentary (cultural, political, social, economic, etc)
for entertainment/humour
for other reasons: _____

5. Please list some of your favourites:

_____

6. If you read weblogs, do you participate by posting) on these weblogs?

Never
Very rarely (once every 2 – 3 months or less)
Rarely (once every month)

Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

7. Do you maintain a weblog of your own?

Yes
No

How often to you update it/them?

Very rarely (once every 2 - 3 months or less)
Rarely (once every month)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

What type of weblog(s) do you maintain?

Links and commentary format
Open diary
Combination of links and commentary format and open diary
Photoblog
Videoblog
Audioblog
Other _____

8. Do you participate in online communities?

Yes
No

Which ones:
Check all that apply:

MSN messenger or similar instant message applications
Chat groups
Discussion boards
Listserv
MUDs
Wikis
Friendster, myspace, Facebook or similar social networking services
MetaFilter and/or other community/group authored blogs
Other_____

Current Sense of ComCult Community

9. Do you feel a sense of community within the ComCult program?

Yes
No

If yes, what do you think contributes this sense of community?

_____

If no, what do you think would foster a sense of community?

_____

I.e.: more social events, more information dissemination about the program and the program GSA, etc.

10. Do you subscribe to the ComCult listserv?

Yes
No

If yes, do you send email over the listserv?

Never
Very rarely (once every 2 - 3 months or less)
Rarely (once every month)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

If so, what have you emailed the community about?
(check all that apply)

Event announcement
Sell something
Looking for information about the program
Call for/to participate in a conference
Link to relevant/interesting article
Reply to another student's email
Posing issue for discussion and/or debate
Other_____

11. How much of the incoming email from the listserv do you read in its entirety?

almost none of it
about a quarter of it
about half
close to all of it
absolutely all of it

12. What is your overall opinion of the listserv?

i.e.: entertaining, intimidating to post, very useful, annoying but necessary to keep informed, would be lost without it, etc., etc.

13. Do you read the ComCult blog?

Yes
No

If no, why not?
Check all that apply:

Too busy/no time
Not interested in participating in online communities
Not interested in participating in another online community
The listserv is enough
Not enough traffic on the weblog to be useful
Not interested in the content
Too similar to the listserv
Not interested in contributing content
Not interested in adding another website/weblog to daily/weekly reading
Other_____

If yes, how often do you visit the ComCult blog?

Never
Very rarely (once every 2 - 3 months or less)
Rarely (once every month)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

Do you participate (post comments and replies) on the ComCult weblog?

Yes
No

If so, for what reasons did you post? (Check all that apply)

Event announcement
Sell something
Looking for information about the program
Call for/to participate in a conference
Link to relevant/interesting article
Info about ComCult
Response to another student's post
Other:

Have you made connections within the program through the blog?

Yes
No

Does participating on the blog work to reinforce already existing social ties?

Yes
No

Do you find the blog is a good way to communicate with others in the ComCult program?

Yes
No

Please explain your answer:

_____

14. If the ComCult weblog were maintained by the GSA or another ComCult group would you be more inclined to visit it and participate?

Yes
No

15. If there were a ComCult committee or group responsible for planning and maintaining the weblog, would you be interested in taking part in such a group?

Yes
No

16. If the weblog were only accessible to members of the ComCult community (and not accessible online to the greater public), would you be more inclined to visit and participate by posting comments and replies?

Yes
No

17. Were you encouraged/discouraged to participate on the ComCult weblog because it was an MA research study?

Encouraged
Discouraged
Study had no influence on my decision to participate/not to participate

Individual and Collective Identity

23. Do you think the ComCult weblog is a useful space in which to connect with other ComCult students?

Yes
No

24. If you read and participated (read and/or posted comments and replies) on the ComCult blog did you find that you felt more involved in the ComCult community/program?

Yes
No

25. Were you encourage d to participate in an event, lecture, screening etc, by a post you read on the ComCult blog – i.e.: volunteer or attend a conference/program conference, attend a screening, discussion or lecture?

Yes
No

Sense of Empowerment & Self Sufficiency

26. What function do you think the blog could/should perform in the context of the ComCult community?

_____

27. Do you feel you can turn to the ComCult blog and other ComCult blog community members for information about the program?

Yes
No

If not, how could the ComCult blog be improved?

_____

28. Have you told other ComCult students about the blog?

Yes
No

ComCult Public Sphere

29. How often do you find the discussions and information disseminated by the listserv interesting and relevant?

Never
Very rarely (once every 2 to 3 months or less)
Rarely (once every month)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)
Very frequently (daily)

30. How often do you find the discussions and information disseminated on the ComCult weblog interesting and relevant?

Never
Very rarely (once every 2 to 3 months or less)
Rarely (once every month)
Sometimes (several times a month)
Frequently (more than once a week)

Very frequently (daily)

31. If you had to focus the ComCult weblog's content, what would you choose as the focus?

ComCult courses
ComCult research projects//dissertations/theses (yours and fellow ComCult students')
Social events listing for ComCult community (though not limited to ComCult events)
Communication and cultural studies topics only
ComCult conference and/or other ComCult events (social and academic)
Remain unfocused, keep blog perimeters wide
Other:_____

32. The ComCult weblog as a study tool for my MA thesis research will close (become a regular static website) at the end of April. Do you want the weblog to remain online after it closes?

Yes
No
Doesn't matter

33. If you have any other comments or suggestions regarding the ComCult community, the ComCult weblog or the questionnaire, please give them here:

_____

Sex:
Program: MA / PhD
Year of Program:
Status of Study (part time/full time):
Registered at: Ryerson or York

All information given here is strictly confidential

Appendix 3

Content Analysis Coding Schedule

Name of Poster:

_____

Subject line:

_____

Date-Month-Year

_____

Function of Post

1. Information
2. Relational
3. Task
4. Expression
5. Sharing
6. Advice
7. Discussion
8. Management
9. Other

Nature of Post

1. Initiation
2. Response/Reply

Communication and Culture (ComCult) program focus

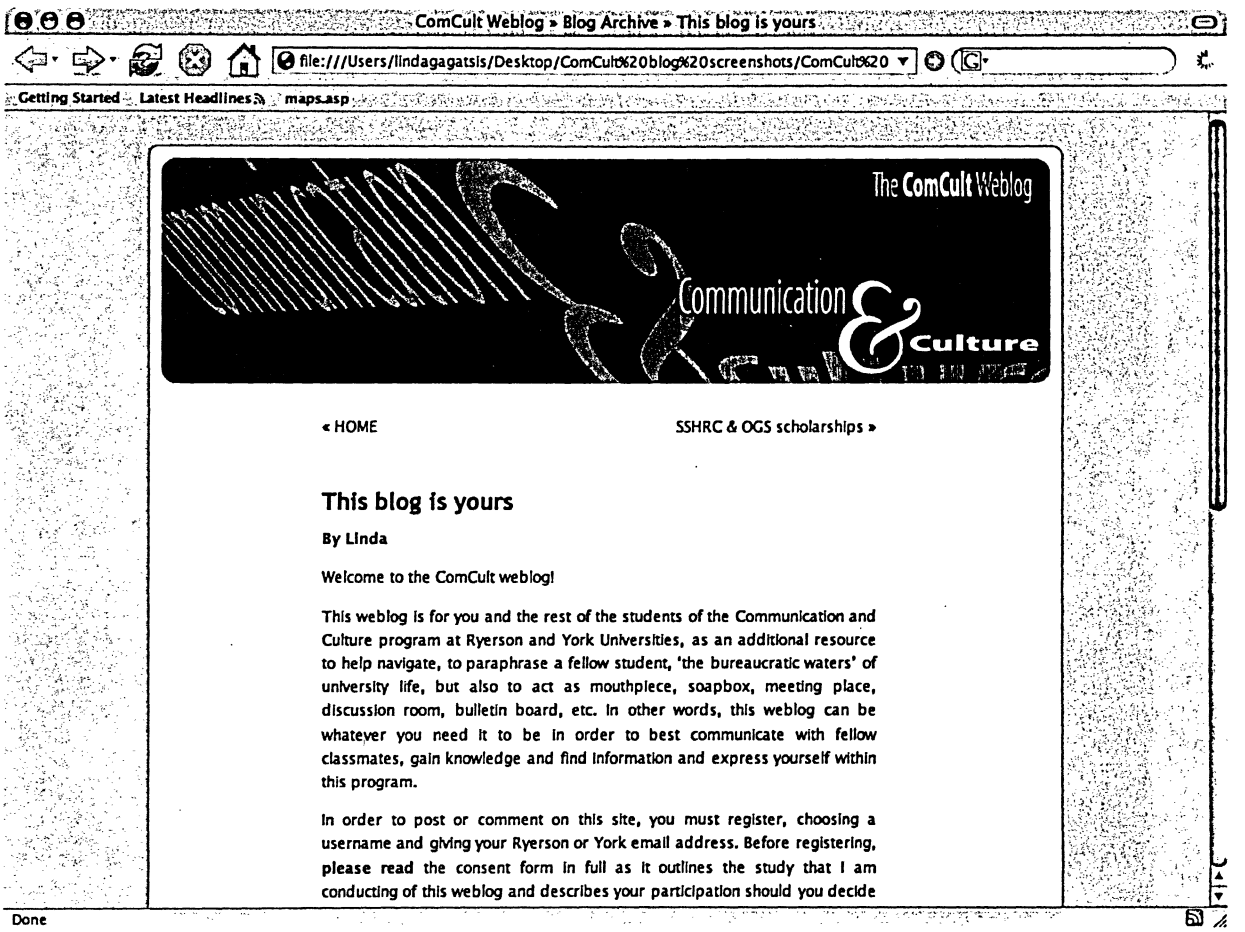
1. ComCult is the main focus
2. ComCult is the secondary focus
3. ComCult is mentioned only in passing
4. ComCult is not mentioned at all

Communications and Cultural Studies as fields focus

1. Communications and Cultural Studies is main focus
2. Communications and Cultural Studies is secondary focus
3. Communications and Cultural Studies only mentioned in passing
4. Communications and Cultural Studies is not mentioned at all

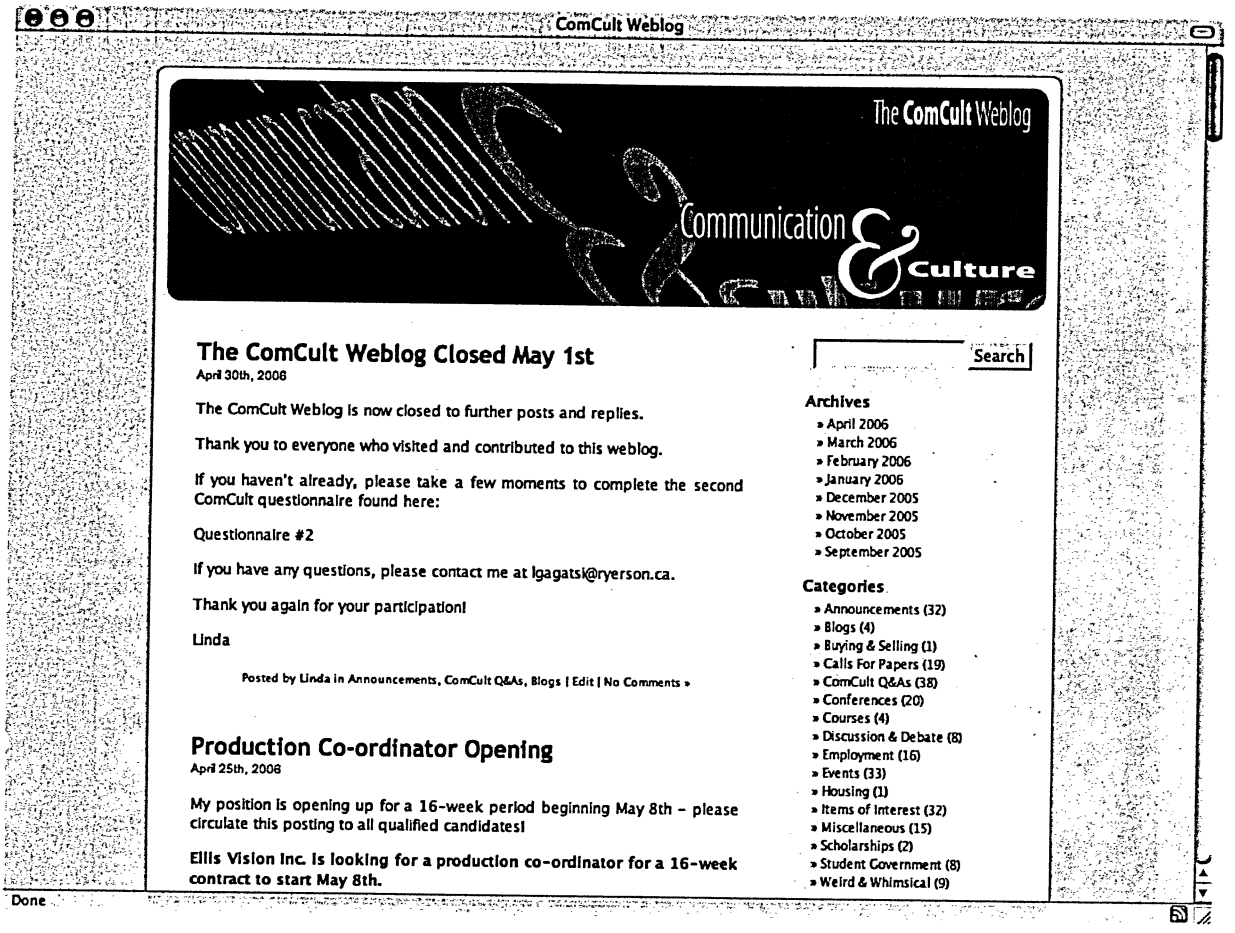
Appendix 4

Screenshot of first post



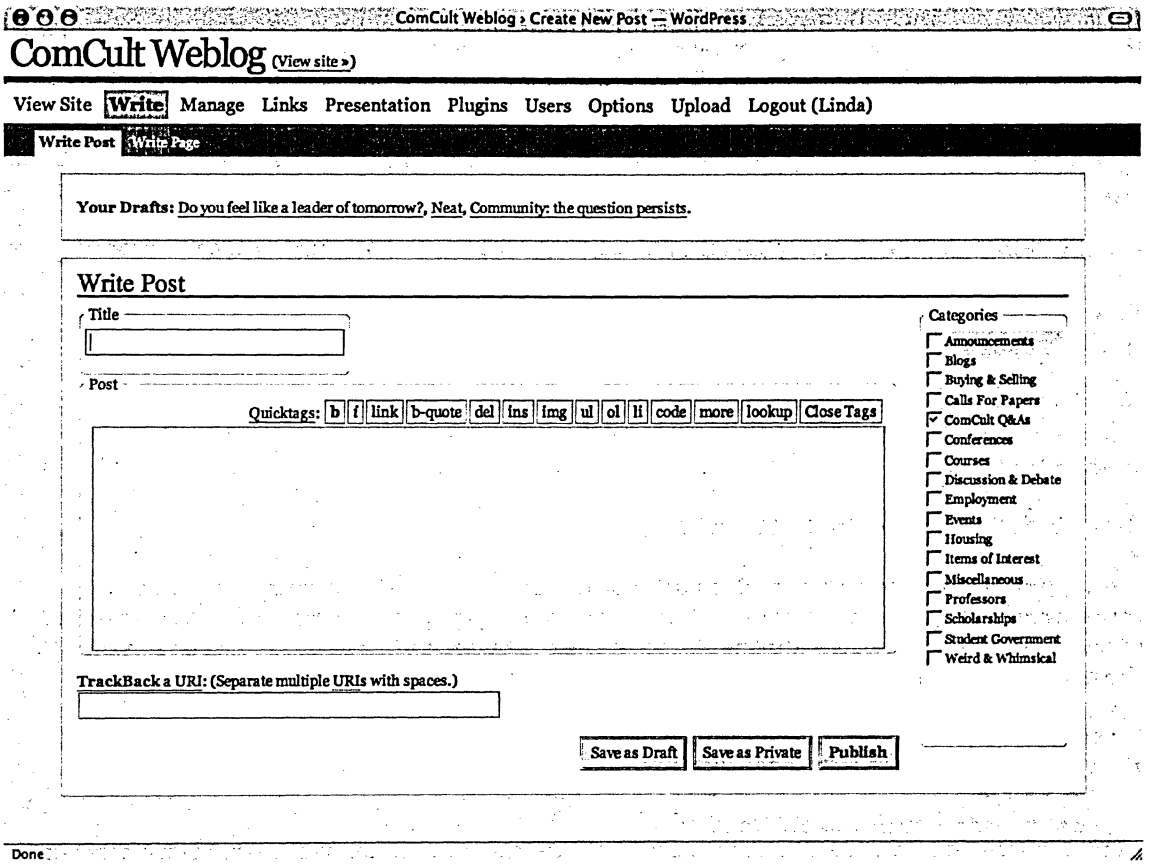
Appendix 5

Screenshot of last page of blog



Appendix 6

Screenshot of 'Write A Post' message box



Appendix 7

Announcement sent to the program assistants regarding the ComCult blog launch

From Linda Gagatsis
Sent Tuesday, September 27, 2005 1:18 pm
To Jo Ann Mackie , Diane Jenner
Cc Fred Fletcher, Bruce Elder , Catherine Middleton
Subject The ComCult weblog - www.comcultweblog.net

Dear Diane and Jo Ann,

Please forward this announcement to the ComCult student body.

Many thanks,
Linda Gagatsis

>>

Announcing....

the launch of the ComCult weblog!

Visit the blog to post and read about ComCult and community events, announcements, conferences, job postings, program questions & answers, ideas, etc - as well, comment to other students' posts. Here's your chance to be heard, be connected, and stay informed.

Become an author to the ComCult weblog (and bask in online writerly glory) by following these steps:

1) Visit www.comcultweblog.net

2) Click Login

- If you're logging in for the first time, you must register as a member to the site

- Read the consent form, if you don't have any questions, please give a username (you choose - it can be your name or you can choose a handle) and your Ryerson or York address.

- If you have questions about the weblog or my study, please contact me.

- You will be emailed a password, that you can later change in your user profile

3) Login with the username you've chosen and the password that has been emailed to your York or Ryerson account

4) Post your comment, event, question, announcement, thought, etc and comment to other posts on the weblog

Anyone and everyone in ComCult can be an author. The blog is what you make it!

Check it out at:

www.comcultweblog.net

Have fun and happy blogging!

Sincerely,

Linda Gagatsis
MA candidate

www.comcultweblog.net

Appendix 8

Consent Form

Title: Weblogs: Creating and Fostering Community, Identity, Empowerment and Self-Sufficiency and a New Public Sphere

Hi there!

My name is Linda Gagatsis and I am a masters student in the Communication and Culture program at Ryerson University. Catherine Middleton, a faculty member at Ryerson, is supervising this research project.

Before you give your consent to be involved with this study, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand the nature and scope of your participation.

You are being asked to participate in a research study that will be used by me, Linda Gagatsis, to complete my Master's thesis. The findings will be discussed in my MA thesis, and may be incorporated into a conference paper and/or journal article. Participants may choose to have their comments attributed to a random pseudonym. This study has been approved by the Ryerson University Ethics Board. All human research ethics regulations will be followed in the conduct of this research.

Principal Investigator:
Linda Gagatsis, MA Candidate, Communication and Culture, Ryerson University

Purpose of the Study:
For my masters thesis, I am interesting in studying questions revolving around weblogs – can a weblog foster a greater sense of community amongst a group participating in it, create a collective identity amongst that group, promote empowerment and increase self-sufficiency and provide the community with a new space in which to debate and discuss relevant issues.

Presently, a weblog has been designed and published on the Internet for the students of the Communication and Culture program where you can participate and contribute online. I hope the weblog provides the student body of ComCult an opportunity to share and exchange ideas, opinions, news. As well, I hope the weblog becomes a resource for information about the program and space for debate and discussion. The weblog can be found at: (weblog's address to be inserted here). To assess the actual function as well as the impact of the ComCult weblog, I am asking for your participation.

Description of the Study:
You are being asked to participate in an online community weblog and to fill out 2 questionnaires, one in September 2005, and one in April 2006.

For those interested, I will also conduct more in-depth interviews with a small number of regular contributors to the weblog after 8 months.

The questions being asked will determine participants' views on ComCult community life, the ComCult weblog, as well as assessing participants' knowledge and participation of weblogs and other online communities.

I will also be conducting a content analysis of the posts on the weblog to assess the actual function of the weblog. While posts may be directly quoted in the study, identification of authors/contributors to the weblog will remain confidential by the use of random pseudonyms or double pseudonyms.

What is Experimental in this Study:
None of the questionnaires used in this study are experimental in nature.

Risks or Discomforts:
The only risk to participants is minor social risk if you are in the same social circle with other persons who disagree with your statements in the study or on the weblog. Participants, if you choose, may remain anonymous via participant-generated and created pseudonyms on the weblog and via random pseudonyms in any publications resulting from the study of the weblog.

Benefits of the Study:
The intended benefits from this study are to explore and examine the positive effects that participating in a weblog have on the creation of a community, individual and collective identity, individual empowerment and self-sufficiency and the creation a new kind of online public sphere where relevant topics can be discussed and debated as the community sees fit. I hope that participants (effectively, the authors) of the ComCult weblog experience a greater sense of community and connection with their fellow classmates, an increased sense of empowerment and self-sufficiency and enjoy a space in which the participants feel free to discuss topics that matter to them.

I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

Confidentiality:
Questionnaires and interviews will be kept confidential and data will be stored for a minimum of 3 years in Toronto, Canada. Note that while confidentiality of the weblog can be maintained by the researcher, its maintenance cannot be guaranteed by the other participants in the blog.

Incentives to Participate:
You will not be paid to participate in this study.

Costs and/or Compensation for Participation:
There are no costs associated with your participation in the study. Lunch will be provided if applicable.

Voluntary Nature of Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary.

Participating in the weblog is not mandatory so should you feel uncomfortable about the public nature of the weblog, you are not required to post to participate. You can be a passive or active participant. The choice is entirely yours. Of course, I do encourage you to actively participate, as I hope to, as well. Doing so will certainly increase the potential (and still untested) success of the weblog as an effective communication model.

Please note that your choice of whether or not to participate will in no way influence your future relations or your academic standing at Ryerson University, York University or with Dr. Catherine Middleton, the research supervisor of this study. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty. Your posts on the weblog will not be included in the content analysis portion of the study and you will not be asked to fill out a questionnaire or take part in an interview.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Linda Gagatsis
416 [phone number removed to retain confidentiality]

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of Research Services
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3
416-979-5042

Thank you for your participation and happy blogging!

www.comcultweblog.net

Please fill out the following to grant your consent in participating in this study, as outlined above.

Agreement:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. Also, if you are asked to be interviewed for this project, your signature indicates your consent to be audio taped during your interview. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

By signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____
Signature of Investigator Date

Appendix 9

Announcement sent to the listserv regarding the ComCult blog launch

From Linda Gagatsis
Sent Tuesday, September 27, 2005 11:13 pm
To THE COMCULT LISTSERV
Subject ComCult weblog: www.comcultweblog.net

Announcement!

The ComCult weblog is live!

Check it out at www.comcultweblog.net

Visit the blog to post and read about ComCult and community events, announcements, conferences, job postings, program questions & answers, ideas, thoughts, what other people are doing, etc., - as well, comment to other students' posts.

Here's your chance to be heard, be connected, and stay informed.

Become an author to the ComCult weblog (and bask in online writerly glory) by following these steps:

1) Visit www.comcultweblog.net

2) Click Login

- If you're logging in for the first time, you must register as a member to the site

- Read the consent form, it describes my study of weblogs

- if you don't have any questions, please give a username (you choose - it can be your name or you can choose a handle) and your Ryerson or York address.

- If you have questions about the weblog or my study, please contact me.

- You will be emailed a password, that you can later change in your user profile

3) Login with the username you've chosen and the password that has been emailed to your York or Ryerson account

4) Post your comment, event, question, announcement, thought, etc and comment to other posts on the weblog

Anyone and everyone in ComCult can be an author. The blog is what you make it!

Have fun and happy blogging!

Sincerely,

Linda

See and post for yourself!
The ComCult Weblog
www.comcultweblog.net

Appendix 10

My initial listserv response

From Linda Gagatsis
Sent Wednesday, September 28, 2005 9:39 pm
To THE COMCULT LISTSERV
Subject Re: ComCult weblog: www.comcultweblog.net

Hi ****, and everyone,

I have some thoughts swimming around my brain about how weblogs are different from listservs, though I think they both serve to keep people informed and connected. The main difference, for me, at least, is that the weblog exists online as a collaboratively written text, in which a narrative or a 'voice' can/may emerge.

Beyond lofty aspirations of increased sense of community, and an opportunity for increased discussion, debate, etc, I'm wondering if the weblog may fill a need that the listserv doesn't fill for everyone. Not everyone digs the listserv, and as a result, not everyone in the program is on it. I'm wondering if the weblog can serve those who are looking for an alternative / additional information resource or outlet to communicate with the student body while at the same time contributing to an online artifact.

Just some thoughts.

It is not my intention to disperse efforts to strengthen community ties in the least, but the exact opposite.

I accept that blogging might not be for everyone and am interested in understanding why certain communication models work - or are more popular - than others.

I don't foresee the blog replacing the listserv, but may act as an additional outlet for thoughts, announcements, hey maybe even poetry, go crazy comculters - in a less formal space.

As well, I'll look into why neither syndication feeds are behaving. Oh wait, I just got ****' email - that's awesome! Thank you, ****!!

Cheers,

Linda

**** indicate names of ComCult students removed to retain confidentiality

Appendix 11

Transcript of ComCult blog page explaining the blog, its purpose, and its features titled "About this weblog"

This weblog was launched in September 2005 as a site for the students of the Communication and Culture (ComCult) joint program at Ryerson and York Universities.

This weblog is also part of a Communication and Culture MA study that Linda Gagatsis is conducting to examine the ability that weblogs may or may not have to foster a sense of community, collective and self-identity, self-sufficiency and empowerment, and a public sphere.

The students of ComCult can register to become authors and contributors to this site.

If, as a ComCult student, you have something you wish to share - an event, an announcement, a review, an interesting article, a question, something to sell, a suggestion, a conference, anything at all - please feel free (and inspired!) to post it here.

This is meant to be a collaborative effort, written by the students of the ComCult program.

To register

To register, click the 'register' link on the homepage. Read the consent form, which outlines in detail the study connected to this weblog, and if you have no questions, please give a username of your own choosing and your Ryerson or York email address.

To post a comment

To post a comment, click ' create a post' on the homepage. Once you've done this, you will be taken to a form field that allows you to give your post a title. There is a larger box in which you can type your message. There are several features (simple html tags) that you can employ in writing your post. The features are lined up at the top of the larger text box. To enable these features, click the box once before the text you want to affect and then a second time at the end of your text to close the html tag.

The following is a quick legend for the features that appear in boxes at the top of the large text box:

b - to bold text
i - to italicize text
link - to include a link
b-quote - to block quote text (usually used when quoting text from other source)
ul - to create an unordered list
ol - to create an ordered list
li - to include a bullet at the beginning of your text
image - to include an image from another site
ins - to underline text

del - to strikethrough text
code - to insert code

If you are using an older operating system or browser, you may not see these quick tag buttons along the top of the message box. You can still use html in your post to bold, italicize, strikethrough, etc, your text, but you will have to key in the html code to do so.

For example, to bold your text you must include the following html tags: Bold text here

To italicize your text: italicized text here

To add a link, use the following code: Text to be displayed

If you're interested and want more more more: Google 'html tags' and find endless links to sites that light the way.

To post a photo

If you wish to add a photo to the weblog, email Linda at lgagatsi@ryerson.ca. At this time, images for upload cannot exceed 3 MB.

Categorizing a post

You will also find on the right side a list of categories. The default category is ComCult Q&As - therefore if you post your message and do not change this category, your post will automatically be categorized as a ComCult Q&As post. You can choose several different categories if your post falls into different headings.

If you have any questions, or something has been left out, please email Linda at lgagatsi@ryerson.ca

Still here?

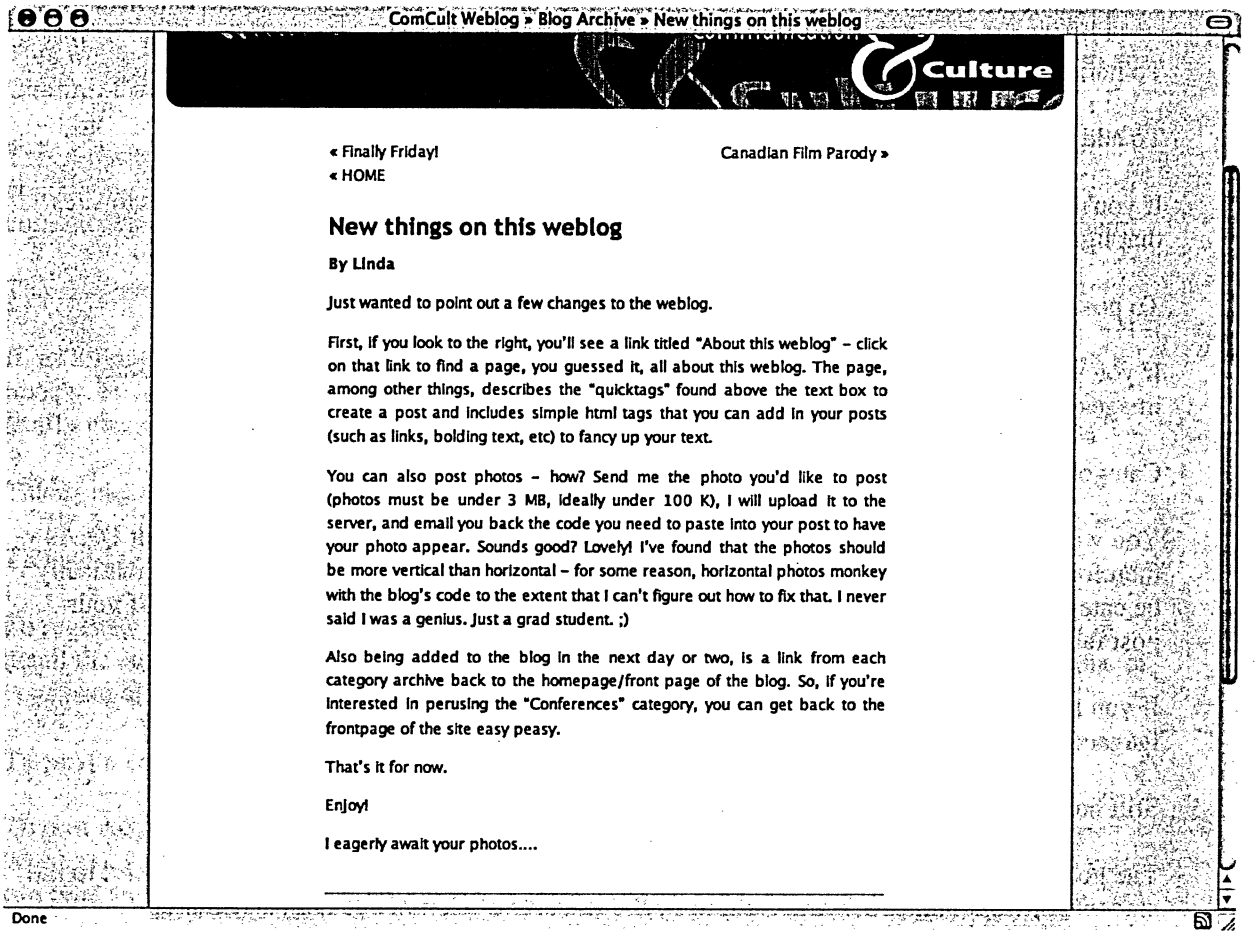
The goal is to create a collaborative work that is dynamic, engaging, interesting and useful to the students of Communication and Culture by the students of Communication and Culture.

Thank you for reading!

Happy blogging!

Appendix 12

Screenshot of post explaining blog's newest features



Appendix 13

My second listserv response

From Linda Gagatsis
Sent Saturday, March 18, 2006 1:30 pm
To THE COMCULT LISTSERV
Subject Re: Creating the facade of a blog/community?

Hi **** and all,

RE: Member28's request for visitors to the weblog - I've grappled with that issue all year - how do I remind the ComCult student body that the weblog exists without necessarily 'advertising'/strong arming students to go to the blog/contribute to the blog, etc? How much is too much?

Needless to say, I do appreciate Member28's positive contribution to and participation on the blog - his response is what I hoped would happen on a larger scale! Alas, it has not and the blog for many reasons, which I am charged with the task of writing about in my thesis, has not taken off and created a flurry of online activity and community that I hoped it would and thought it might. Though, for those of you who have contributed to the weblog and visit it regularly or semi-regularly, I hope you've had fun with it as I have.

I have been fascinated by weblogs, their potential, and with the positive hype surrounding them for years and wanted to see if they were really all that they were cracked up to be. As I've said before, I set up the weblog in hopes of testing its potential to foster community, among other things, in a more informal space - a space in which students could wax poetic about their research interests *or otherwise* without the 'smackdown' that usually comes with rambling too long on the listserv (sharing, I've noticed, is often viewed by some of our colleagues as 'spam'). Though, as an aside, much to my enjoyment, the listserv conversations, as of late, have been positive and interesting... maybe a study on the listserv as online communication/community should be initiated! :)

The initial response to the existence of weblog alone has been fascinating, ranging from public decry to private congratulations from the ComCult student body. It was interesting to note that while negative feelings were aired publicly, positive feelings, on the other hand, were often sent only to me in private.

I'll be sending out the second and last questionnaire for my study in mid-April - I hope that all of you or many of you take the time to respond - it is interesting and helpful to know what all of you think of weblogs, online community and issues of community in general. Community comes up time and time again with our program - if not on a weekly basis, then a monthly one. As a part-time student unable to fully participate in an 'in-person' community, I thought that perhaps a weblog would/could help in building an on-line community that was less formal and intimidating than the listserv in which to foster

connections with other classmates (happily, the weblog has allowed me to do that).

For a more formal explanation of my study, please see the consent form set up on the "Register" page of the ComCult weblog:

http://www.comcultweblog.net/wp-register.php

or a more informal description of the weblog and how to use it:

http://www.comcultweblog.net/about.html

My apologies for rambling. Thank you for reading.

And I hope everyone had a fantastic St. Patrick's Day!

Sláinte!
Linda

**** indicate names of ComCult students removed to retain confidentiality

Appendix 14

Announcement regarding Questionnaire #1 sent out via email, November 15, 2005

From Linda Gagatsis
Sent Tuesday, November 15, 2005 10:40 am
To Jo Ann Mackie, Diane Jenner
Cc Catherine Middleton
Subject ComCult weblog questionnaire

Dear Jo Ann and Diane,
I hope this email finds both of you well!

Please forward the following email to the ComCult student body today.

Many, many thanks!
Sincerely,
Linda Gagatsis

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Hi there!

As most of you already know, I am conducting a study of online communities revolving around weblogs and specifically, the ComCult weblog launched this past September.

Part of the study includes ...drum roll please... a questionnaire!

Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire found at the link below.

**Please note I am seeking everyone's input - including those of you who read the ComCult weblog and participate as well as those of you who don't. Everyone's input and comments are requested and welcome.

Click the link below to go to the questionnaire.

www.comcultweblog.net/questionnaire.html

Thank you very much in advance for your time and participation! Your insight and assistance are greatly appreciated.

I hope everyone is having a successful semester!

Sincerely,
Linda Gagatsis

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Visit the ComCult weblog! www.comcultweblog.net
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Appendix 15

Announcement regarding Questionnaire #2 sent out via email, April 24, 2006

From Linda Gagatsis
Sent Monday, April 24, 2006 10:52 am
To Diane Jenner, Jo Ann Mackie
Cc Catherine Middleton
Subject ComCult weblog questionnaire #2

Dear Jo Ann and Diane,

I hope this email finds both of you well!

Please forward the following email to the ComCult student body today.

Many thanks!

Sincerely,
Linda Gagatsis

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Hi everyone,

As most of you already know, I am conducting a study of weblogs and specifically, the ComCult weblog launched last September.

The study includes two questionnaires; the first questionnaire was launched in November 2005, the second questionnaire is now online and can be found at:

www.comcultweblog.net/questionnaire2.html

Please take a few minutes to fill it out - I'm interested in everyone's input - whether you visited the ComCult weblog or not.

Thank you very much in advance for your time and participation! Your insight and assistance are greatly appreciated. All questionnaire submissions are strictly confidential.

Hope everyone has enjoyed a successful winter semester!

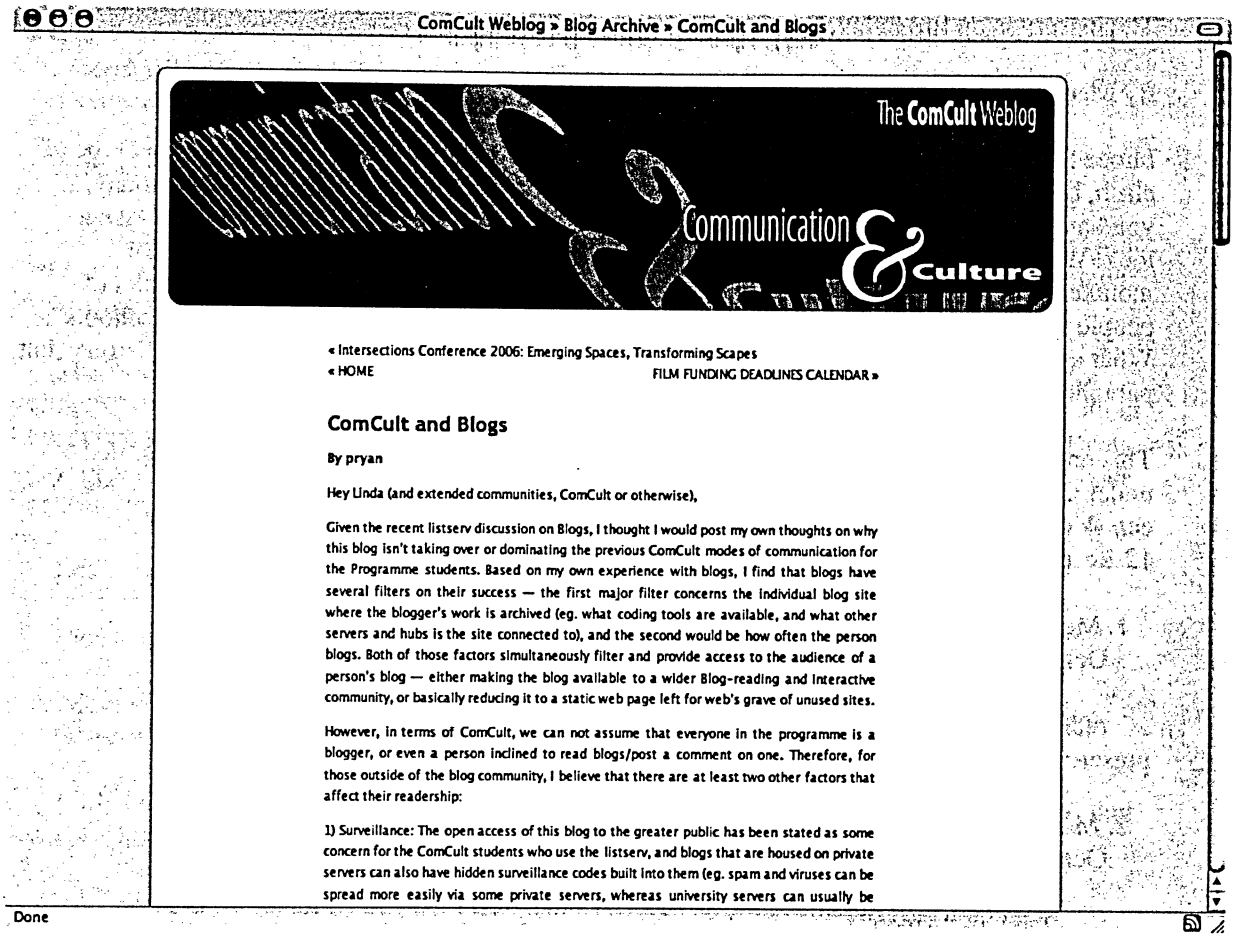
Sincerely,

Linda Gagatsis

www.comcultweblog.net/questionnaire2.html

Appendix 16

Screenshot of Member26's front page post, March 19, 2006



Appendix 17

Full transcript of blog discussion, October 20, 2005

The listserv is on fire today...again

By Member7

I hope this doesn't start a listserv vs. weblog battle, I know the world isn't ready for that type of clash, but nonetheless I just had to share my thoughts on the debate on the ol' listserv today. If you haven't checked it out because you're glued to the blog, stay glued to the blog but take a look. Why can't we all just get along? But more importantly, staying true to my Member7 moniker (I'm loving this anonymity thing), in the immortal lyrics of Curtis Mayfield, alot of people who comment on the listserv are nothing but "educated fools from uneducated schools". What are you really arguing about? Maybe I could and should have posted this on the listserv, but paraphrasing NWA, "F... the listserv" and its all too often futile tautological debates.

This entry was posted by Member7 on Thursday, October 20th, 2005 at 5:08 pm and is filed under ComCult Q&As. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed. Edit this entry.
12 Responses to "The listserv is on fire today...again"

1. Member8 says:
   October 20th, 2005 at 9:30 pm | edit

   didn't they say, "fuck the police"? but if they did say "fuck the listserv", how very prescient...

2. Member1 says:
   October 21st, 2005 at 9:48 am | edit

   Can I get an "Amen"?
   ...
   I did praise the listserv on this blog just earlier today, didn't I? So I will say this: the listserv does correct itself ... eventually. People will stick up for the person who gets burned.

   Defence lessens the sting but maybe doesn't takes away from the damage that the public putdown of that one person does to the community's sense of solidarity or affiliation or, well, for lack of a better word, community.

   Maybe I'm being melodramatic but I just think it does no one good to be mean on the listserv.

3. Member15 says:
   October 21st, 2005 at 12:51 pm | edit

   People tend to get a little "over-excited" about stuff when it is on a list-serve. I think we should be able to have a list serve that has threads or something, meaning that you don't get 20

emails a day about a thread you don't care about. Since I am basically done the program, I couldn't care less about the strike at York.

That is my incredibly humble opinion which, if placed on the list-serve, would surely be cause for 20 more postings about my "anti-unionist" attitude.

Member15

4. Member7 says:
   October 21st, 2005 at 4:57 pm | edit

   Member15,

   You are absolutely right and it's actually quite sad because the end result is a student body that is polarized, and on the defence which is ultimately counter productive if the list serv's intent is to create a sense of community.

   The intellectual thrashing on there simply has to stop. And like you say, I certainly am not going to post a comment on there like this then have 100,000,000,000 emails come through about how stupid my comment was or even the "I agree with you comments" who the hell cares if you agree or not, and why does everyone have to hear, "oh I agree...and then $500 words later" your explanation on why you agree.

   Let's end the insanity. Who's with me????

   Member7.

5. Member8 says:
   October 21st, 2005 at 9:50 pm | edit

   but if no one says anything, how is that creating a sense of community? quiet consensus? that sounds a little scary to me.

   and i don't know about others, but i take pains NOT to be intellectual. if ever i am, feel free to thrash me back... seriously. (call me masochistic, but i think talk is meaningless if no one's ever wrong)

   Member15

6. Member21 says:
   October 22nd, 2005 at 10:12 am | edit

   hm..i tried to subscribe to this said listserv at the beginning of the year (i am in first year) but never got any emails for some reasons...

   anyway, i heard a little bit about what happened and i agree about the merits of a messageboard/threads option compared to a listserv for discussions (rather than straight information dispersal) because it's overwhelming and annoying when there are a lot of replies and you don't have gmail to organize the threads...

7. Member7 says:
October 22nd, 2005 at 7:24 pm | edit

I'm glad to see all your responses, it's good. As to what you said k, I agree, silence is not the answer. But neither is polarization where people are afraid to talk. I just think that if you agree or disagree with someone's comments on the listserv, given the nature of that beast (i.e. everyone will get the email) you should do so privately. Unless, your words are such that everyone would benefit from hearing them. For instance, if a prof has comments or criticisms I should say to make about your writing, imagine if they called them out in front of the whole class then opened up the forum for your peers to comment? That would be completely appauling. So why do we let such behaviour go on on the listserv?

Is it ok because it's being done through electronic means? Which, on a serious note, makes me think about technology and how it changes or shall I say, desensitizes our feelings of empathy for one another. Am I wrong? Or right? Or is there no quick answer?

Member7

8. Member15 says:
October 23rd, 2005 at 1:21 am | edit

Member7,

There are ONLY quick answers!

Interpret intended meaning at will,

Member15

9. Member1 says:
October 23rd, 2005 at 3:18 pm | edit

Member7,

To add my two cents -

The listserv itself would be a fascinating study because like you mentioned people have no qualms about being critical publicly for all to read (and often the criticism seems overly harsh - maybe more so than intended due to the lack of verbal cues (all tone and expression as well as body language is obviously absent so tone and intent are up for the readers' interpretation in online communication)). On the flipside, I think it's interesting to note that while criticisms are aired publicly often expressions of appreciation or support for a fellow classmate are communicated privately (ie: in private emails to that individual).

So bizarre and at the same time, fascinating!

Is it, as you ask above, because 'technology' desensitizes our feelings of empathy for one another? I read this interesting article about how people are more likely to be aggressive, etc., in online communication but the author argues (and k above would, too, I suspect!) this type of 'robust' debate actually upholds "Lyotard's vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy." Here's the full abstract to that article.

I think (hope!) it is be too general to say technology desensitizes us - and too negative (I'm such a technological utopian!).

I can't believe I'm writing this but maybe the point of online communication (the listserv, the blog) isn't to ensure that we all get along but to promote and sustain communication with one another whether it be good, bad or ugly.

Bah-ru?

10. Member8 says:
October 23rd, 2005 at 9:52 pm | edit

woo! these are all great responses. i agree with you, Member7 — fear of talking is not good; but i wonder if it's a result of an actual polarization (as in "you're right, i'm wrong, end of discussion"), or some underlying psychological or social cause.

maybe i can put it this way: rather than thinking "how can we be so rude to each other on the listserv when we're so polite to each other in class?" — maybe it's better to ask why we're so *polite* to each other in the first place? is the rudeness/aggressiveness a way (albeit inelegantly) of expressing our frustration with our polite in-class communications? not that we want to necessarily tear into each other, mind you, but i'm certain that there are many things that are left unspoken that we want or that we *need* to say to our classmates...

i guess i'm saying that i, personally, interpret the aggression as something else — dissension, perhaps — that i try to bracket out if i need to, arriving at a best guess as to what the author is implying.

without doing this, i'd just get my back up; and as another "technological utopian" (or probably "idealist"), i think it's better to interpret ANY message as an attempt at constructive communication, at least at first, because this particular technology allows us to say things we wouldn't/couldn't normally say face-to-face, and that may be it's ultimate value as communication.

but i could be wrong. please refute!
Member8

11. Member7 says:
October 23rd, 2005 at 11:00 pm | edit

These are awesome responses in deed. Finally, something worth thinking about. If I may toot my own horn. :)

I think that we're all on the same page definitely. But here's where I stray. I'm not a technological utopian. I guess I would probably fit in the dystopian category. I think technological discussions (i.e. conversations through technological means) while they do broaden the scope of communication and allow, for example, old friends to keep in real touch where they otherwise would not, there's just too much chatter nowadays. All this talk, I think, ultimately amounts to nothing but wasted air. In my humble opinion, the listserv is an example of wasted air.

But that said, I guess I'm also a bit of a hypocrite because I'm enjoying the interaction that this blog facilitates. Hmm....

Technology is one hell of a conundrum. Too much for my brain to handle, I'm just an analog Member7 stuck in a digital world man!

But you say that ANY message is an attempt at constructive communication. That is just crazy to me, not in a criticizing kind of way but I really don't get that at all. I completely disagree. On some level, is there such thing as too much communication? Rebutal anyone.....

Member7

12. Member8 says:
October 24th, 2005 at 9:21 am | edit

yep, technology sure does confound things. it reshapes how we might interact in person, but it also allows for possibilities that face-to-face interaction doesn't, both in terms of what gets said and how it gets said.

i'll clarify a little, re: ANY message is an attempt at constructive communication. if someone didn't want to communicate, there would be no message. BUT, just how constructive that message is interpreted to be — it's ultimate value — is left to the person(s) interpreting that message.

if we interpret messages as incommunicative (or perhaps even as chatter), we're very likely to be excluding any consideration of communicative intent from the outset.

not that this makes us bad people! you could chalk it up to a combination of *culture* and the *technology* (technology, in this case, perhaps email software : email programs tend to list their items, and we tend to progress through lists rather rapidly, decidedly not dwelling on items unless we're deeply compelled — and i'd say we're rarely deeply compelled! blogs, however, present a distinct aesthetic experience).

culturally, we tend to rationalize things according to time rather than according to intrinsic value. if something's going to take too much time, if something's going to be a waste of time, or we feel like we don't have the time, we typically determine value based on that (in this case what's communicative versus incommunicative).

it seems inevitable. we all have to work; we all have to meet our spouses/friends/lovers; we all have things to do. BUT, this isn't the ONLY way to determine value (nor even the best way).

you're probably right, Member7, there probably is such a thing as TOO much communication. but *how* we determine what's right and wrong for us is (or, i feel, should be) a genuine interest of communication and cultural studies students.

for comcult students not to want this as an interest is a problem. for us not to have this capability is, well, the reason for being in the program. it is here, amongst our peers (both student and faculty), that such interests and interrelated skills can be cultivated.

sorry for going over-long; i hope this is of value to some...
Member8

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