

Third Places in the Blackosphere

C. Frank Igwe

The Pennsylvania State University, USA

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INTRODUCTION

Although times change, there are certain human elements that survive through the ages. These elements include the need for expression, companionship, involvement, connection, and information. The avenues by which humans engage in these social practices have evolved, and with the dawn of the Information Age we are seeing the emergence of new forms of computer mediated communication (CMC), with Weblogs (or blogs) being a manifestation of this transformation. This chapter deals with these Information and Communicative Technologies (ICT), and more specifically, how blogs are being used by African Americans on the positive side of the digital divide to create virtual “third places”, to rebuild aspects of community dialogue that have been lost in the physical “real-world”. These “third places” arise out of a need for individuals to find a dependable, neutral place of refuge to gather and interact, away from first places (home) and second places (work), often conferring or dealing with issues that may be considered too taboo for public discussion by the community at large.

With this in mind the researcher identified an issue within the African American community that was of consequence, and yet was not being addressed due to individual or social pressures. The problem that presented itself was the lack of discussion and social support pertaining to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

BACKGROUND

African American HIV/AIDS Statistics

HIV/AIDS statistics paint a particularly disturbing picture for African American females, due to the fact that they account for a disproportionate number of infections relative to other social groups (Phillips 2005), and 75% of new HIV/AIDS cases within the larger African American population. The Center for Disease Control (CDC), states that HIV/AIDS is among the top 4 causes of death for African American women aged 25–54 years, and the number 1 cause of death for African American women aged 25–34 years (CDC 2006). In 2001, HIV/AIDS was among the top three causes of death for African American men 25–54 years of age, and of persons diagnosed with AIDS since 1995, a smaller percentage of

African Americans (60%) were alive after 9 years compared with Whites (70%) (due in part to late diagnosis) (National Institute of Health 2007). Despite these figures, there is still a deafening silence associated with the discussion of the disease, because contraction of the HIV virus is seen as a consequence of behaviors that are stigmatized within the largely religious and conservative African American community (i.e., promiscuity, homosexuality, or drug use), framed within the context of sin and immorality (Baker 1999).

Communities and Expression

An interesting element of any functional community is that it is self-sustaining. In order to be self-sustaining a community has to possess the ability to address issues that affect members' wellbeing, in either a direct or indirect fashion, to ensure that what members are getting out of the association exceeds the cost. Every healthy community discusses issues that threaten its survival. However, the number of African Americans infected and dying from HIV/AIDS is staggering, and the silence associated with the epidemic is akin to having “an elephant in the room” that nobody wants to talk about. This conflict, and the fear of violating group discussion norms, has created a prevalent silence on the subject, and degraded certain aspects of community, namely: emotional safety, sense of belonging, and positive reinforcement when members of the community engage the problem through dialogue.

It is believed that in an effort to “heal” itself of this silence, and restore aforementioned communicative elements of community that have been diminished, African Americans have resorted to finding other outlets to discuss the epidemic; one outlet is online third places. Blogs were chosen because they represent a single place, outside of large social gatherings, where people can engage in real time conversations on a grand scale, and unlike their physical counterparts, users are empowered by the relative cloak of anonymity afforded by the Internet. Never before has a medium such as ICT existed that can connect and enable conversations from members representing all classes of the community, with potentially everyone able to contribute to the discussion and be heard. By technology being an enabler for rebuilding aspects of community, it adds impetus to the drive towards eliminating the “digital-divide” through tangible benefits, such as improved health outcomes through preventative, rather than reactive, practices.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

With the advent of the Internet, we are seeing a movement away from the traditional depiction of communities built around geographic lines, and are seeing the emergence of “communities of interest”, or self-organizing virtual communities^a that are born of individuals who share similar interests on a topic, or topics, that is independent of their geographic location. As stated by Weinberger, “what holds the Web together isn’t a carpet of rocks [i.e., the physical Earth], but the world’s collective passion” (Weinberger 2002). With this statement in mind, Milne (2004) provided a germane and useful working “technological” definition of community that suits the needs of this paper. According to Milne, “Community is a social technology for bonding people together through shared characteristics that leads to a sense of belonging”. Milne goes on to say that “community” also encompasses the people who are so bonded [technologically], and forming a community is a way to foster a sense of belonging, which serves a wide range of human needs and is the basic survival strategy for individuals and groups (Milne 2004).

Weblogs and Community

Weblogs are defined as “frequently modified Web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring, Scheidt et al. 2005). These Weblogs have also been characterized as having a “community-like” nature to them, due to the inherent interactivity of the posts, which allow readers to respond to individual entries, which fosters “conversational” exchanges on the blog site itself. Marlow (2004) states that “The weblog medium, while fundamentally an innovation in personal publishing, has also come to engender a new form of social interaction on the Web: a massively distributed but completely connected conversation covering every imaginable topic of interest” (Herring, Kouper et al., 2005; Marlow 2004). Graham (1999) describes blogs as “a community, of sorts, a small town sharing gossip and news, recreation and sport, laughter and tears, all for the commonwealth.” The power of real social bonds of virtual communities was captured by one blog participant when he stated that “Weblogs are the first example I’ve encountered where people are meeting each other in masses, and forming real social bonds, the type of relation you’d call your friend... There’s a real sense of solidarity in the relationships we’re forming.”^b (Bausch, Haughey et al., 2002). These virtual relationships may prove handy when individuals are faced with a myriad of pressures that may go unabated, with no source of social support systems upon which to lean, as evidenced by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and its minimal discussion by African Americans in “the real world”.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Past research has shown that there exists a chasm between individuals who have access to information via computers and the Internet, and those that do not. This chasm has resulted in a corresponding gap between the information rich and the information poor, the haves and the have-nots. This phenomenon has been described in literature as the “digital divide”. The digital divide was first observed as distinct group clusters most likely to use the Internet, namely: white, men, residents of urban areas, greater access to education, income and other resources necessary to get ahead (Kvasny & Keil, forthcoming; Mossberger, Tolbert et al., 2003; Norris 2000).

Noting the effects of the digital divide, and the increased likelihood that poorer African Americans will not have access to computers, and thus access to virtual third place sites, one may be tempted to believe that this research is germane only to middle and upper-middle class African Americans. However, this assumption would be false, because research has shown that interactions between African Americans spans class, with upper and middle income members of the community in frequent contact with poorer friends and family. The socioeconomic Web of African Americans transcends the nuclear family that they themselves create, and reaches back to the families to which they were born, their siblings, extended family and friends (Pattillo, 2006). Therefore, the ensuing conversations on the site serve as a means to enrich personal networks via the accessing of new information by means of weak ties (or casual acquaintances), and sharing this newfound information with those with strong ties (or family and friends).

Oldenburg’s “Third Places”

The silence associated with HIV/AIDS by traditional African American institutions created a need to form social bonds in other arenas. This need provided fertile conditions for the rise of an alternate place to gather and discuss transcendent issues; such places are typically born out of a need, and can be labeled as “third places”. Every stable community is comprised of a first place (home), a second place (work), and a third place (informal gathering location). If one of these components is missing, it affects the stability of the community (Baker-Eveleth, Eveleth et al. 2005). The third place (bars, cafes, barbershops, etc.) provides a context for sociability, spontaneity, community building and emotional expressiveness” (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). Within the framework of computer mediated communication there has been a realization that cyberspace (such as blogs, chatrooms, etc.) resemble traditional types of physical social settings described by Oldenburg, providing an informal place where individuals gather to rebuild communicative aspects of community that may be lost (Soukup, 2006).

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