



Chapter 13

The Search for a New Identity: Post-Organ Transplant Recipients and the Internet

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the Internet into our lives has been explosive and wide-spanning. While five years ago, few people had access to the ‘information highway’ and the World Wide Web (WWW) had not even been invented yet, today the first phrase is already considered “cliché” and the second has become a household word. Undeniably the Internet’s impact has gone beyond the military, education, and business, which were its first users. It has changed our lives and in many cases the way we see, talk to, interact with, and confront each other.

At its core, the Internet is a communication medium. As such, it can enable social interactions between people in different parts of the world and at different times. The last technological innovation that changed the way we communicate so drastically was the telephone. Its social impact has been dramatic and the Internet is already influencing our lives just as significantly.

In this chapter I describe the use of a small part of the Internet by a specific social group. I will discuss the issues surrounding the use of an Internet-based newsgroup dedicated to organ transplantation. My observations will prima-

rily deal with organ transplant recipients and their use of this newsgroup to define a new identity for themselves after the disorienting lifesaving procedure of a foreign organ grafted onto their bodies. Using an “anthropological” method of observation, by being a virtually unobserved observer, I examined the interactions of the newsgroup members without interrupting its natural process. I informed the participants of my activities only at the beginning and at the end of my research, providing them with ample time to forget my existence. As I promised to the newsgroup members I will keep all their contributions anonymous by using different names. In some cases, however, I received the information from the WWW which is considered more “public,” so I will use the persons’ real names.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE INTERNET

The Internet has invaded the lives and homes of many individuals across the world. Throughout history, technological innovations changed the social structure of the environment in which they were introduced while at the same time the technology itself was heavily influenced in its development by its social context. When a new technological artifact is introduced, various social groups are formed around this artifact. The members of these groups are often bound by common issues concerning the new technological system. Each group, in its own way, influences the development of such a system and its level of acceptance in society. This approach to technological innovation and development is called the “social construction of technology” (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch 1987).

For example, when the bicycle was first introduced, one social group that determined its evolution was that of women bicycle-riders. Given the times’ appropriate clothing for women, mounting the bicycle was an issue faced by the members of this group. This influenced future designs of the bicycle into easier ones for women to ride (Bijker et al., 1987).

There is no doubt that the Internet and the technologies associated with it are an integral part of our social environment. In the past few years, the Internet has infiltrated every part of our lives: entertainment, business, education, romance, law, politics, and so on. And it promises to become an even more important part of our lives as more and more people are “wired” and “plugged in.” While the Internet changes the way we work, play, and communicate, various interest groups are also influencing its evolution.

Examples of such groups are medical institutions, doctors, and patients that have been using Internet technologies for a few years now. Today, web

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