# Online interactions have positive effects for real-life communities

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If you think Facebook, Twitter and other Web sites that foster online communication and interaction are merely vapid echo chambers of self-promotion, think again, say two University of Illinois professors who study computer-mediated communication and the Internet.

According to Caroline Haythornthwaite and Lori Kendall, professors in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Illinois, online interactions not only have positive outcomes for real-life, place-based communities, but the intersection between online communication and the offline world also forms two halves of a support mechanism for communities.

Previously, most attention was paid to highly virtual, online-only experiences. But as information and communication technologies have become increasingly intertwined with everyday life, the Internet and social media have combined to create a vibrant and indispensable communication and information platform and infrastructure for today's world.

"In its earliest incarnation, the online world was considered a separate realm, and it was not viewed as a serious venue for work or business," Haythornthwaite said. "But as more people have come online, the more online communication has become the norm. So it isn't thought of as a separate realm anymore, but as one that merges and overlaps with our daily activities."

From [social networking](#), to civic participation, to community support during emergencies, to providing on-the-ground information in disaster areas, the professors say that the rapid development and widespread use of online technologies - for communicating and networking, for contributing and distributing content, and for storing, sharing and retrieving files - are creating ties that bind for offline communities.

"Research on who people communicate with online shows a lot of local activity," Haythornthwaite said. "So online communication always reinforces local relationships and local identities that build networks of interacting individuals who are mutually aware of each other. Together, this demonstrates a continuous change in how we maintain local community, while also emphasizing the importance and significance of our attachments to local places and spaces."

Although there are still a considerable number of people who go online to build new, non-local friendships, there are also people who go online for a specific purpose - to research information about breast cancer, for example - and, incidentally, form relationships as a result.

"While people can go to a site for information and personal support, they have also formed some long-term relationships with others they've met there and communicated with," Kendall said. "So both things are happening, but I would say there's probably more contact online with locals, and more searches for local information."

"What has been growing over the years is a stronger, Internet-enabled connection to the geographically-based community," Haythornthwaite said. "We've evolved from one-to-one or small group communication to whole 'community' communication."

From crowdsourcing for information to citizen journalism, the participatory culture that exists online, where people will work for free,

is an extremely important trend, both socially and economically, the professors say.

"Socially, the Internet provides a platform for just about anyone to contribute, and everyone benefits by having many different angles on a news event or topic," Haythornthwaite said.

"Economically, the ease of publishing Web pages challenges traditional publishing, which we can see played out in the battle between the traditional news media and blogs, news aggregators and Twitter," she said.

Emerging and evolving uses of information and [communication](#) technologies only serve to reinforce and regenerate geographically-based community identities, the professors say. With the ubiquity of Internet-enabled cell phones with cameras, the mobile Internet provides a low effort, just-in-time, virtual printing press, making anyone a writer, editor and publisher of hyperlocal news.

"I think the use of cell phones to access the Web is a bigger factor in connecting the Internet to a local geographical community than the World Wide Web has been," Kendall said.

Whether they're posting a status update to Facebook, sending out a tweet from Twitter, or uploading photos to Flickr, "people have a [cell phone](#) with them in physical space, and they connect that physical space to the Internet when they use their cell phones for Internet access," she said.

Does all this focus on the local bleed into myopic provincialism?

"I think it's more of the online communities than the local ones that become parochial," Haythornthwaite said. "As individuals join communities of interest, they increasingly join communities of people

who are like them - same interests, same background. Offline, or outside of our geographically-based community identities, we're more exposed to new people and ideas."

"It's very possible for people to ignore opinions they don't like and talk only to people they agree with online," Kendall said. "Offline is often messier. To the extent that you're going to get involved with your local community and your neighbors, you're going to have to hash out disagreements and deal with a wide range of identities, experiences, and opinions.

"To a certain degree, all communities are 'imagined communities' - that is, our sense of being part of a community is always something we must create in ourselves, and it often occurs through media."

Haythornthwaite and Kendall's article, "Internet and Community," is published in the April 2010 issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*.

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