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# Pagans online and offline: locating community in post-modern times

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## TITLE PAGE

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**Abstract** This paper examines the ways Australian Pagans use email discussion lists as a means of fostering community amongst dispersed offline practitioners. Sociologists struggle with ways of characterizing the Pagan movement. It appears to lack the necessary set of uniform beliefs and organizational features that reference community relations in other religions. However, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) accompanying globalization are changing the forms of human association and have stimulated speculation regarding the extent to which they foster community. Existing conceptualizations of community suffer from the historical emergence of the ‘virtual’/‘real’ distinction and are inadequate to characterizing sociability in the networked society. Wenger’s theory of a ‘community of practice’ (1998) is suggested as a way through this dilemma. The ‘community of practice’ model is used to examine how Pagans integrate online and offline communications. Pagan social practices illustrate the ways in which individuals negotiate personal meanings and a sense of community in post-modern times.

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## **BIOGRAPHY PAGE**

### **Bio**

Dr Angela Coco lectures in sociology in the School of Arts Social Sciences at Southern Cross University in Australia. Her research explores issues of power, identity and community in cultural and organizational change, particularly the ways these are affected by the diffusion of information and communication technologies. She conducts research in the areas of new religious and spiritual sensibilities particularly Catholicism and the Pagan movement, community development, and higher education organization and teaching.

## ABSTRACT

### PAGANS ONLINE AND OFFLINE – LOCATING COMMUNITY IN POST-MODERN TIMES

This paper examines the ways Australian Pagans use email discussion lists as a means of fostering community amongst dispersed offline practitioners. Sociologists struggle with ways of characterizing the Pagan movement. It appears to lack the necessary set of uniform beliefs and organizational features that reference community relations in other religions. However, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) accompanying globalization are changing the forms of human association and have stimulated speculation regarding the extent to which they foster community. Existing conceptualizations of community suffer from the historical emergence of the ‘virtual’/‘real’ distinction and are inadequate to characterizing sociability in the networked society. Wenger’s theory of a ‘community of practice’ (1998) is suggested as a way through this dilemma. The ‘community of practice’ model is used to examine how Pagans integrate online and offline communications. Pagan social practices illustrate the ways in which individuals negotiate personal meanings and a sense of community in post-modern times.

## TEXT

### PAGANS ONLINE AND OFFLINE – LOCATING COMMUNITY IN POST-MODERN TIMES

#### INTRODUCTION

Religion is a source of social cohesion. It promotes community values and provides plausibility structures by which individuals construct personal senses of meaning and belonging (Lovheim and Linderman 2005, p.122). The interdisciplinary study of religion, as well as identifying the nature of religions, addresses religion's social dimensions and its functions in the broader society. Issues of identity and community, both online and offline, are central to this quest and as such the study of religion is uniquely placed to contribute to Internet Studies (Campbell 2005, pp. 312-313). Methodologically, religion researchers also are accustomed to exploring the ways perceptions of non-physical spaces and symbolic notions impact human meaning and action (MacWilliams 2005, p.181). In post-modern times, the de-traditionalisation of symbolic meaning structures and resultant reduction in psychic security (Putnam 2000) has prompted theorists and practitioners alike to address the issue of social cohesion.

Paganism presents a special case with enduring research puzzles. Nietz (1994) characterizes Paganism as a quasi-religion because it lacks the necessary organizational and denominational features of religion. Others maintain that Pagans and Pagan groups are too dispersed geographically to acquire the status of a social force (e.g. Bruce 2002). York describes Pagan social structure as a 'Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network' (1995, pp. 324–329). These features lead Berger (1999) and Beyer (2003) to label Paganism a late-modern/post-modern religion. Extending this line of thinking, Dawson and Cowan (2004, p. 10) ask whether Pagan religious structures are uniquely suited to the combination of online and offline interactions available in the post-modern era. This paper is located within this dilemma.

I begin by addressing the conceptualization of community. Wenger's (1998) 'community of practice' model is recommended as a way of bypassing dichotomies evident in the literature. I outline the main features of the 'community of practice' framework and use them to explore the development of Pagan solidarity in Circle (pseudonym for a city in Australia), a city in South-west Summerland (pseudonym for a state in Australia).<sup>1</sup> Finally, I explore the interaction dynamics in a Pagan community for what they reveal about the ways individuals in late/post modern society appropriate technologies as part of their day-to-day projects for constructing selves and creating communal ties.

#### CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNITY

In concert with Internet Studies (henceforward IS) researchers (e.g. Hampton 2004; Baym 2007), Religion Studies of the Internet (henceforward RSI) maintain that social interactions on the Internet are embedded in and cannot be divorced from the meanings and structures operational in people's everyday lives (Young 2004; Berger and Ezzy 2004). However, theories of community seeking to conceptualize this embeddedness have suffered from historically entrenched dualisms between 'virtual' and 'real' or 'online' and 'offline' timespaces. Admittedly, the word 'community' has been used in so many contexts as to become somewhat meaningless (Cowan 2007). We refer to a community spirit, the local community, worshipping community and so on. But the symbolic power of these expressions means that the word 'community' is not only a description but also has strong ideological and

normative connotations (Bell and Valentine 1997, p.93). In the absence of communal ties, people are said to be alienated, a condition that undermines social solidarity (Durkheim 1952). It seems necessary to retain the term 'community' and develop adequate conceptualizations of it.

Baym (1998) and Dawson (2004) provide models for identifying community *online*. For instance, Baym, originally focusing on Usenet groups, theorized practices. She outlined four features that she felt would characterize community online: 1. new forms of expressive communication; 2. exploration of public identities; 3. creation of unlikely relationships, and; 4. new behavioural norms. These practices, she maintained, depended on pre-existing offline structures and meanings. However, characterizing the field this way separates the online and offline realms and elides the possibility of identifying the mutual interplay between the two. Dawson argues that Baym's characteristics alone would not help us to identify community. She posits six features that would characterize *online* community: 1. interactivity; 2. stability of membership; 3. stability of identity; 4. netizenship and social control; 5. personal concern; 6. occurrence in public space' (2004, p.83). But, putting the problem of a Pagan 'public space' (Cowan 2007) aside, in a post-modern context there are difficulties with talking of stability in memberships and identity.

The strength of an Internet collective lies, not in a stable group of people but in a forum that may provide tools for managing late-modern sociality in which temporality, partiality and heterogeneity are normative conditions (MacWilliams 2005, p.195). Further, identities are changeable. People quite customarily mask/reveal different parts of themselves in different contexts and the associated roles in which they are moving, for example a lover, worker or worshipper (Goffman 1971). Masks help the person to behave in a manner that is appropriate to the different roles demanded by different social settings, but also to change as they interact in different contexts (Giddens 1991). Turkle (1995) further suggests that the Internet provides a safe place for testing identity constructions before using them offline. In other words identity is the activity of *positioning* one's self rather than a stable condition.

While some sociologists have tended to define communities in terms of connections in geographic places (Dawson 2004), others like Hans Mol (1983) offer social accounts of community consciousness. Mol (1983) made a distinction between geographic and social communities. He maintained that what makes a group function like a community for an individual is not the type or attributes of community but the individual's commitment or faith, their 'emotional attachment' to an identified group (1983, p.106). His argument presages Wellman and Gulia's conceptualization of strong and weak ties associated with 'networked sociability' (1999, pp.169-171).

The key contribution that Mol (1983) makes to RSI and to IS more broadly is that the construction of meaning, an intrinsic quality of individual/community relations, is inextricably bound to *places* and the things that happen in them. For Mol, theorizing before widespread public access to ICTs, place is largely a geographical concept associated with human habitation, interaction and meaning construction. But the new ICT media enable human beings to populate new spaces, which then function as *places* of association (Dallow 2001, pp.67-69). Meaning is derived from interactions with others who by their very presence, online or offline, *define places* of association. Further, crucial to the development of meaningful ties, particularly in the light of the tendency to partiality and fragmentation in electronic communications, is the sequencing and continuity of conversation and the extent to which discussions reveal jointly shared meanings (Dawson 2004, p. 83).

Kolko and Reid (1998) and Højsgaard (2005) insightfully locate the body as the key to tracking continuity between online and offline interaction. Meaning is embodied. Meaning

structures are developed and altered through the cumulative effects of experiences over the life course (Stanley and Wise 1983, p.131). The body carries the memories of such experiences forward and backward in time and mediates between inner and outer realities (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, through the body, meaning, and therefore *identity* and *community*, can be made/unmade through inter-acting both online and offline. In practice, bodies connect many *places*.

Wenger (1998) investigated how people connect disparate pieces of information and create innovative communicative practices to achieve common goals. His 'community of practice' model provides a useful framework for identifying communities that are not circumscribed by fixed symbolic or geographic boundaries, stable memberships, singular identities or unchangeable rules and dogma. Below I outline the main features of Wenger's framework and discuss its usefulness for studying the interplay between online and offline interaction. Next, methodological procedures are described. This is followed by a socio-historical account of key events in the development of the South-west Summerland Pagan community and an analysis of selected interactions that illustrate how Pagans connected online and offline contexts. I discuss Pagan solidarity and compare it with other IS and RSI research. Finally, indications for future research directions are noted.

#### THE 'COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE' MODEL

Wenger (1998) studied insurance claims processors in their physical workplace. The processors developed practices and meanings that only members of that workplace would know and understand and as such they formed a coherent group that Wenger refers to as a 'community of practice' (CP). CPs emerge when individuals identify mutually felt concerns and share a vision of goals to be achieved. A CP's coherence and continuance over time is sustained in the ongoing *practice* of communication which evidences three inter-related dimensions; *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise* and *shared repertoires of meaning* (Wenger 1998, p.73). *Mutual engagement* refers to the fact that the membership defines the community and members are continually engaged in managing the tension between harmony and conflict. As individuals do this work they negotiate and renegotiate ways of getting along with each other, part of which involves developing modes of mutual accountability. Wenger calls the establishment of modes of accountability the *joint enterprise*. Over time, agreements and processes become implicit in discourse; people know what the rules are, what values are operating, whose word is to be respected, who possesses what skills and so on. Wenger labels this third feature, a *shared repertoire of meaning*. The shared repertoire of meaning is the history of outcomes of mutual engagement processes that inform the community's ongoing practices.

Communities of practice develop through two mutually constitutive action processes; identity formation and community building. For individuals, a significant motivation for practice is to cultivate one's sense of belonging. This is achieved through three types of communicative processes; *engagement*, *imagination* and *alignment* (Wenger 1998, p. 73). Individuals may predominantly involve themselves in an engaged way negotiating the internal functions of the community on a regular basis, some may provide imaginative scenarios for revitalizing community practices and still others may be boundary riders, seeking to align aspects of the community of practice with ideals and practices of a broader culture or other CPs. Belonging has a dualistic and fraught nature however, involving processes both of identification and negotiation (Wenger 1998, p. 208). Because individuals at one and the same time may belong to a number of CPs, they are constantly faced with the need to negotiate their role and the meanings multi-membership raises. Their success at doing this will determine the extent to which they identify with the CP and contribute their energies to its sustenance.

When considering online interaction, there are crucial aspects of individual identity not mentioned in Wenger's schema, in particular, one's name and physical appearance. In online environments one is not (and may never be) physically visible either in name or body (Donath 1999). Online participants deduce something of a poster's identity by reading the clues in their email addresses, but there are also ways of concealing these if an individual wishes. Nevertheless, like participants in the Usenet groups Donath investigates, in Pagan online groups people are assumed to be who they say they are. However, the structure of the internet and its linguistic mediation detract from readers' abilities to connect personae to embodied individuals with resultant difficulties in developing trust and resolving conflict in online collectives (Kolko and Reid 1998).

Both linguistic and non-linguistic interactions are important in the process of sustaining a community (Wenger 1998; Cowan 2005). A CP in the networked society therefore, will evidence a mesh of online and offline interactions and activities. Through communication practices CPs generate artifacts which then serve as resources for further interaction. Pagan email discussion lists and offline gatherings can be understood as particular interaction artifacts. This research focuses on interactions that obtained between these online and offline contexts. It examines how Pagan community was developed as individuals connected with each other and identified common goals.

## METHODOLOGY

Pagans have been active in Australia at least since the 1970s (Hume 1997, p.30). Nationally, they are represented online by several portals and websites including The Pagan Awareness Network (<http://www.paganawareness.net.au/aboutpan.html>) and Pagan Alliance (<http://www.paganalliance.org.au/>). The material for this paper is drawn from an ethnographic study of one local Australian community. I maintained my transparency as a researcher by using my given name and University email address (c.f. Sharf 1999). Methods involved fieldwork offline including participation in private rituals, birthday parties and festivals. Online, my methods included participant observation and content analysis of postings on two email discussion lists over a two-year period. Information gained from impromptu discussions and twenty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews covering topics directly related to Pagans' use of technology and the internet also informs this analysis.

To examine a system of action the researcher attends to instances of both participation and reification in the development of community culture (Wenger 1998, p.52). I take a socio-historical approach to data presentation and interpretation so that it is apparent to the reader just how and when people interacted and how reified practices developed and then were challenged, reproduced or forgotten. I begin with an account of the creation of the first email discussion list (L1) in Circle and its connection with offline activity. This is followed by an examination of new member's reasons for joining L1 which illustrate early modes of participation contributing to the development of *mutual engagement*. Then I explore two instances of reification; firstly, the conflict over list moderation in L1 that led to the creation of the second email discussion list in Circle (L2), and secondly, the perception of failing support for formal offline Pagan gatherings. These examples highlight issues of meaning and belonging. They are chosen for what they reveal about the community's sense of a *joint enterprise* and the depth of the *shared repertoire of meaning* that had developed. The analysis reveals how email lists facilitated the three types of individual participation; *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*. These few examples are chosen as typical instances of many situations in which Pagans, though separated by geographic distance, were able to use ICTs to interact and communicate regularly enough to develop a sense of community.

## EMERGING MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT – MEETING OTHER PAGANS

Late in 1999, Laura, a woman then in her late forties initiated the first Pagan email discussion list (L1) in Circle. She had not long returned from the United States where she encountered the Pagan movement and had joined an American Pagan email list. Laura wanted to locate Pagan folk in Australia. Her reflection illustrates her wish to participate in a Pagan group and how far she was prepared to travel to meet others face-to-face. She explained:

Laura – [I was thinking] Keep trying ... [to find Pagans in Circle]. ... it was [tough] to find a group ... this guy ... came on [the American list] and he said, 'I'm starting up a group down the [place 70 kms, about 1 hour's drive south of Circle] if anyone is interested?' And then I thought OK. Well that's too far from me, but maybe if I e-mailed him. He might know of some people in [Circle].

Laura went on to say that she began the email list because she felt that if she found it difficult to find Pagans offline so would others. On the front page in yahoogroups, Laura described her email list as being set up for people who live in [Circle] and its surrounds or for people who have a connection with [Circle], for example, if they had previously lived there. Laura defined the boundaries of the online group in terms of her perception of the parameters that determined the possibility that she could meet other list members face-to-face. In the meantime she joined a secretive local coven that was recommended by her Australian connection on the American list.

A feature of Pagan culture is that individuals reflexively use alternative names to their given ones. Such 'craft' (name given to Pagan practice) names are often intimately linked to their spiritual persona. For example, a woman might choose the name of a goddess who possesses particular characteristics that she sees in herself or wishes to cultivate about herself. Other Pagans recognize, use and respect a member's alternative name. Laura posted an invitation in which she asked new applicants to give some personal details, including their craft name and the tradition in which they practiced and names of favourite books on Witchcraft. This strategy, as well as providing characteristics by which others might identify something they have in common, goes some way to ascertaining someone's identity in the virtual environment, marking the person as a 'genuine' seeker and permitting entry to the Pagan list.

Not long after her list started to populate Laura heard of a new offline gathering being initiated in Circle, Pagans in the Park (PITPark). PITPark was initiated by a now well-known activist member of the South-west Summerland Pagan community. Laura promptly advertised PITPark on L1 and went along to the next gathering where I first met her. She invited me to join L1 as she did many other Pagans she met offline. Most of the people I interviewed had joined L1 during the first year of its operation, but their interviews revealed different ways of using the Internet to meet other Pagans.

I asked interviewees what led them to join L1. Some indicated a need to connect with others, initially from home, while several set out deliberately to find Pagans offline by using the online environment. Jenny's excerpt below demonstrates how L1 served as an introduction and regular access to people with whom she could identify without at the same time having to leave her home:

Jenny - To me it was just 'wow, some way I can meet people, what a great idea, this is fantastic, get me on this list' [L1]. And the other great thing about it too was I didn't actually have to go out of my house to somewhere to meet a bunch of strangers. I got up, I did my kids' thing, I had my breakfast, I logged *on*! ... I finally had an outlet to touch minds that were like mine ...

Jenny's experience reflects that of others commonly reported in 'virtual' community literature (e.g. Berger and Ezzy 2004) and recounted by other homebound and unemployed Pagans as well. Similar to Turkle's (1995) online psychiatric processes, L1 enabled them to manage the introductory stages of their relationships with other practitioners because it was anonymous and therefore less fraught. Over time Jenny's modes of participation in the community evolved. In 2002, she organized an offline Information Night which attracted people from roughly 80 kms north and 70 kms south, (1 – 1.5 hours drive away) of her home in regional Circle. Three year's after joining L1 she had met Laura and become an engaged and imaginative community member offline as well as online; a pattern I witnessed with many other Pagans.

Louise, a university student who had recently arrived in Circle from the United Kingdom, gave an insight into the ways the experience of participating in L1 facilitated the process of meeting strangers offline. She remembers (interviewee's words are in square brackets):

Louise - ... I kind of like remember walking into the park thinking like 'I hope someone's there who I've been talking to off the *email list* ... I remember seeing four or five people sitting at that table. And I walked up and said high, high! [quietly] And I sort of sat down at the corner of the table ... (my emphasis)

[and ok – hope there's someone there from the list – this thought help you? What happened?]

Louise – ... because people at Pagans in the Park, [they] usually [use] ... their real name as opposed to their craft names which means you go 'hello I'm Louise', and asking if *they're on the list*. Then them saying, 'yes' or 'no', and then [you] saying, 'oh yes I'm such and such a person' [on the email list]. Because I hadn't been on the list very long 'Oh okay' [they'd say] {laughs}. (my emphasis)

I observed that the opening greeting, asking people if they are on-list and to identify who they are on-list was a common way of opening discussion in all kinds of Circle Pagan offline get-togethers. Once people established the online identity connected with a person whom they met offline, they had identified some common ground for communication. A knowledge of the online persona contributed to a sort of *shared repertoire of meaning* developed on-list which they could build upon offline. The anonymous online naming, which online researchers report as inhibiting trust and commitment, turns out to be a communication facilitator for Pagans transiting from online to offline meetings. These early practices reveal how individual Pagans shared a goal of meeting other Pagans offline and mutually engaged in communications that facilitated this goal. However, L1 grew to over 200 people and evolved into something more than the original meet and greet place initiated by Laura.

#### A JOINT ENTERPRISE - OWNING THE COMMUNITY.

Conflict split Laura's list early in 2001. It began over a discussion about a particular person in the offline community whom some of the posters encountered offline and whom they felt indulged in practices unbecoming to the image of the Pagan community they wanted to cultivate. Laura felt that the conversation on L1 was scandalous and could ruin the reputation of someone who was not on-list and therefore unable to defend themselves. As list moderator she sought to retain control over individual list member's participation. Up until this point in time, individuals' engagement with each other evidenced a largely harmonious sharing of information and provision of technical and emotional support.

By this time L1, over eighteen months in operation, included people who, unlike Laura, were long-standing Pagans and were also experienced in e-list moderation. Alan and Mike in particular did not cease the conversation, and upon repeated requests from Laura, shifted the

conflict focus to a discussion about what they perceived as a lack of democratic principles and freedom of speech in L1 moderation. Laura simply restated in her ‘Moderators’ Statement’ that she would not enter into a ‘lengthy discussion’ and people who were unhappy with her moderation rules were ‘welcome to leave’. In effect, some members were attempting to involve Laura in negotiations that could lead to developing a joint approach to managing difficult issues of group moderation.

In Wenger’s framework we could say that L1 reached a state of *reification* that some participants found stultifying. As a result, their participation changed from one of *engagement* in the developing community both online and offline, to include *imagination*, suggesting a change to online group moderation practices. In effect, they were assuming *mutual engagement*, and attempted to negotiate the terms of their belonging. Their negotiations are illustrated by the following excerpt from Mike’s post replying to mail from another member (noted by the >).

Re: [... L1] Moderators (*sic*) statement!

> To date I think [Laura] has done and is doing a great job of moderating this  
> group on her own and  
> has pretty much left things run there (*sic*) own cause (*sic*).

Yes, [Laura] has done a great job. The list is going very well. Note that moderator power has not been exercised.

[Paul's] suggestion of multiple moderators does not undermine [Laura's] ownership of the list but offers a positive suggestion as to how difficult issues of list management can be made a little easier, other than the declaration of rules ...

> This list is a "democracy" and not a "dictatorship" and like the rest of us  
> the moderator is entitled to her opinion as well and to have her say.

Which we're not denying her.

But the post in question was not giving an opinion on the content of the list, but was at a level above that. This [cut from Laura’s post]

*Any kind of threat, aggression or slander towards anyone either on the list or otherwise, will in the future result in the persons (*sic*) immediate removal from the list. [my emphasis, indented for clarity]*

is not an opinion expressed in a democracy. And this

*The list moderator has the final say in all matters. [my emphasis]*

is dictatorship not democracy.

I’m open to alternate interpretations of course...

Mike lived in Circle and in his interview was clear about L1’s value to him. He had been participating in e-lists since 1992, and prior to L1 had experienced a sense of community on only one other list (of the 24 to which he subscribed). Mike’s perceptions about community were echoed by most other interviewees and a good proportion of the members who joined in the conversation on L1. Their ideas aligned with Wenger’s notion of a CP, that community is mutually defined by its members rather than by a single leader. As Mike said, “it came down to the question of ‘is this our group – we who participate, or is this Laura’s group?’”

## SHARED REPERTOIRES OF MEANING - NEGOTIATING MEANING AND BELONGING

Individuals who were becoming disenchanted with L1 communicated via private emails and/or their coven email lists. Several set up new e-lists in case the outcome of the struggle on L1 was not positive. When certain posters persisted in asking Laura for an explanation, she unsubscribed the most vocal members and others left of their own accord. Alan and Mike were two of the people excluded. Within a week a new list, L2 was up and running with an almost identical name to L1. On the yahoogroups' introductory page, L2 is described as the only list founded by the Pagan community of [Circle] and for the Pagan community of [Circle]. It says its intended participation is Pagans and their friends living in Circle and its surrounding regions.

Alan and his partner Madeleine had been running their own ritual group for many years. They were involved in the behind-the-scenes activity that led to the development of L2. Alan and Madeleine lived about 80 kms north of Circle and Alan's presence was much more frequent online than in offline gatherings. They had never met Laura. In the following excerpt, Alan describes the desired goals for L2. In terms of community identity his explanation illustrates similar commitments to those of L1; a geographical base in a local region and the wish to keep it Australian.

Alan - I've seen it [L2] grow and it's something that I really feel is a real positive thing for the whole Pagan community. Being locally based, I've seen a few other [Australian] lists which showed promise to start with, completely wrecked by the Americans getting on them. ... it sort of - makes the list so big that it takes you half an hour to go through and read all the posts and makes it not very interesting.

[You mean it's locally based in terms of people who moderate the list, the local -]

Alan - Yeh, yeh. And there's no law or rule saying that if someone's in [large Australian city 1400kms away] they can't be on it or anything like that.

To Alan and Madeleine and the other Pagans who sought a place to communicate when they left L1, the idea of local community, in the sense of those people who could identify with Circle and its environs, was important to the integrity of the online list. Further, national identity affected the process of online Pagan community building as the topics and issues discussed by people from overseas were 'not very interesting' to Australian Pagans. In effect, the meanings and discourses they introduced could not be aligned with the shared repertoires of meaning that were developing in Circle.

All of the online communications about list moderation up to the split revealed a willingness to negotiate the terms of belonging rather than break with the larger community, as illustrated in Paul's post below. Paul, a solitary (Pagan who does not practice in a group) at the time, posted the excerpt two days after Mike was unsubbed from L1. His mail also illustrates the need he and other members felt for a more democratic and collaborative approach to the online group management.

Well guys, with much regret, and after much thought, I'm leaving the list too ...

... A democratically moderated list, that includes most of the elders from this old list can be found at:

[http://www.yahoogroups.com/groups/\[name of list\]](http://www.yahoogroups.com/groups/[name of list])

And that's where I'm headed ...

[Laura,] if you'd like a list where you can state your reasons for this policy freely and without fear of moderation, please feel free to join up and chat with us at any time. Join up under a pseudonym if you want to make sure we're not bitching about you behind your back ...

People are, of course, more than welcome to be on both lists at once ...

... I'm hoping that this will be a good thing for both lists. It might clear some space for new voices to arise, both here and on [name of new list]. I hope to bump into many of you at the various Pagan events held around the place. Please come up and say hi!

In effect, Paul was unable to *align* himself with the political processes on L1. He posited L2 as a community artifact providing a new interaction resource to accommodate wider interests of the growing CP thus illustrating Simmel's argument that conflict is essential to change and development in a group (1955, p.15). For a short time, roughly six months after the split in L1, the online conflict was reflected in the offline community as well. Offline gatherings tended to be composed predominantly of people from either L1 or L2 and discussions at these events often turned to the matter of the online conflict. However, after about a year, L1 and L2 simply represented two different places of interaction whose functions were incorporated into the community's broader repertoire of meaning.

*Shared repertoires of meaning* are symbolic in nature and can accommodate plurality while facilitating personal reflexivity (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In the example above, individual's inability to align personal meanings with group processes resulted in the expansion of the community's places of social interaction. But in other cases, individuals can change by aligning themselves to group needs. A process initiated by Alan serves to illustrate this point.

In 2002, Alan complained on L2 that he had offered six weeks of free workshops in the craft, and was preparing a Halloween event in Circle and had received no interest in either of these initiatives from the community. (As Alan lives in a remote mountain range region his free weekly workshops were still considered expensive for a major proportion of people on the lists. The Halloween entry ticket was AUD75.) His post reveals a concern about his ongoing role (and therefore his identity) in the community. Alan threatened to leave L2 as he felt that his services were not needed or appreciated. Many people, including the poster below, responded that they had neither the time, nor the money to attend these events. The sample post also challenges Alan to align his interpretations about his role in the community with input from others.

I don't think it's fair of you to resort to put down's and aggro [aggression] towards those on this list who, although it may seem a foreign concept to you, ... we're seriously BROKE, man! And everyone I talk to about it from this list is in EXACTLY THE SAME BOAT!

[Alan], this has nothing to do with any cliques, or enemies you may have made, the enemy here is the almighty dollar I'm afraid ... don't take it personally ...

*Mutual engagement* and the sense of a *joint enterprise* were revealed in the almost daily postings over the ensuing weeks as individuals imagined ways of stimulating renewed interest in important offline Pagan events. The content of posts evidenced a *shared repertoire of meaning* around Alan's skills and his behaviours as well as knowledge of previous community interactions and other member's life circumstances off-list. Messages encouraged Alan and offered helpful suggestions as illustrated by the excerpt below from Chrissy's post.

Chrissy lived in a country area about 50kms south of central Circle. She has become a leading woman in the community, having initiated another yearly public Pagan event.

I absolutely agree [Alan] the Halloween gigs are great.

This event has been one of the backbones for [Summerland] Pagans for donkeys [a long time] and it's always a great week-end. ...

I do hope things pick up ... Pagans should support Pagan gatherings, if we don't who will?

I wonder would anyone putting on events combine an event guide and make up one advert [advertisement] and share costs to place in Insight or similar mag [magazine] throughout the year?

Like a Pagan/Heathen Event Calander (*sic*).

We have a few things each year going on ... here in [Summerland] don't we?

Just a thought ...

In response to list deliberations, Alan, after a week or so, indicated that he had done some 'soul searching' and in effect devised a new interaction resource for the CP. He and Madeleine instituted a '[Summerland] Pagan Club', the preliminary details of which were posted to L2 and subsequently discussed and refined by other members of the list. The club is a savings scheme whereby Pagans can contribute a small amount each week so that when events are imminent they have funds set by to pay the fees. At Jenny's Pagan Information Night, held about a month later in Circle, a mix of L1 and L2 people were present. Alan and Madeleine attended and handed out a flyer outlining all the important details of the club. The scheme received hearty support and patronage from the offline Pagan gathering.

The communications processes that resulted in the creation of the Club and other support practices demonstrates how people, regularly engaging with each other online, may imagine new ways of doing things, and can re-align their self projects to contribute to community maintenance. These examples reveal how the many-to-many features of web technology enable timely and regular interaction when community problems and issues of personal support are pressing but geographical distance may preclude timely intervention (c.f Hampton and Wellman 2002).

## DISCUSSION – COMMUNITY IN POST-MODERN TIMES

Wenger's insurance claims processors operated in a building space each performing a specialized role in claims processing work. They developed communicative practices whereby they could finalize claims economically by drawing upon each other's knowledge. When their work spaces were reconfigured they invented new communication practices. Pagans differed from claims processors in two dimensions: the more distant geographical distances between them, and; the ways they used ICTs to communicate. In this section I discuss Pagan interactions using Wenger's indicators for identifying a community of practice.

Wenger (1998, p. 125 - 131) specifies fourteen features of an established community of practice: 1. sustained mutual relationships either harmonious or conflicted; 2. shared ways of engaging in doing things together; 3. rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation; 4. absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of ongoing process; 5. very quick set-up of problem to be discussed; 6. substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs; 7. knowing what others know, what they can do and how they contribute to an enterprise; 8. mutual definition of identities; 9. ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products; 10 specific tools, representations and other artifacts; 11. local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter; 12. jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of production of new

ones; 13. relations of proximity and distance, and; 14. learning that constantly creates localities that reconfigure the geography. The Summerland Pagan community developed these relations by integrating online and offline communications.

Pagans developed mutual relationships (point 1) across online and offline spaces which evidenced both harmony and conflict. They created innovative ways of doing things together (point 2). For example, L2 moderators developed their own private email list to discuss list moderation issues and other list members agreed to the procedure of voting for ten moderators for the list each year. This practice still continues (2008). Members ability to mobilize and continue shared ways of doing things depends on knowing what others know, what they can do and how they contribute to an enterprise (point 7). Sharing this knowledge in the group environment, contributes to the mutual definition of identities (point 8). For instance, communications regarding support for Pagan initiatives revealed considerable knowledge about Alan's character, a mutual recognition of his skills and a shared understanding of his role in the community. Pagans built up a stock of knowledge from their online and offline engagements that provided continuity in meaning over time.

The shared stock of knowledge helped participants to collectively assess the appropriateness of members' actions and products (point 9). For example, some Pagans assessed Laura's moderation of L1 and found it wanting. Appropriate artifacts and collective representations were produced; L2, the Summerland Pagan Club and offline festivals (point 10). Chrissy invoked local lore in terms of the 'things we normally do' (point 10) using jargon, 'for donkeys', that all others would have understood. Shortcuts to communication (point 11) like the 'fluffy bunny' sanction have been produced (Coco and Woodward 2007). These activities evidence a shared reality, recorded in memories, in online logs and web sites and offline places, and serve as points of reference for future interactions.

Contrary to Dawson's (2004) typology, identities and memberships were not stable. For instance, Jenny, once an anonymous member of L1 during the time her children were growing up, now has a job, has formed a ritual group and provides offline services to the Pagan community. Laura has passed moderation of L1 over to a friend and moved on from involvements that characterize the community (personal communication, 2007). Not only do lifestyle and lifestage make a difference to people's Internet use (Anderson and Tracey 2002) but they may also be related to different kinds of community participation, online and offline. Such variation over time may also affect the interpretation of 'strong' and 'weak' ties identified by Wellman and Gulia (1999). This observation bears further investigation.

Wenger's points 3, 4 and 5 reference the nature and temporality of communication. Alan's post provoked immediate responses and different kinds of information from at least a dozen list members (points 3 and 5). Alan did not introduce himself nor did any of the other emailers, they assumed others would recognize them (point 4). Where mutual goal definition is the intention, email lists help to link communications in time and space in a convergent way. The continuity and connectedness of communication was facilitated by the address of the poster, the subject heading of a post and sometimes cut and pasted elements from previous posts producing the effect of ongoing conversations as illustrated in Mike's post. These communicative practices bypass the potential partiality and fragmentation in message formation characteristic of ICT communications by facilitating recall and contextualizing messages in the relevant discussion thread.

Finally, Wenger's points 13 and 14 refer to the issue of space. For insurance processors relations of proximity and distance shaped communicative practices. It is not proximities in time or in space that configure community but the dynamic interplay between communications in proximity and communications at a distance which reconfigure the

geography. The core of regular South-west Summerland Pagan online communications took place between people up to 150kms distant from each other supporting Hampton and Wellman's (2002) observations that electronic communications were most frequent in the intermediate distance 50-500kms. In terms of offline connections distance might be better conceptualized as perceived travelling time. The definitional (fuzzy) boundaries for both L1 and L2 referenced people whom one could potentially meet face-to-face without too long a drive. To travel the same distance can take longer through built-up urban areas than through open roads to country settings. Pagans were prepared to travel for up to one and a half hours a few times a year to engage in the broader community building and bonding activities. This configuration of almost daily online interaction with moderately spaced face-to-face meetings may resonate with emergent structures in the House of Netjer (Krogh 2004), Digital Waco (MacWilliams 2005) and Swedish indie music fan networks (Baym (2007) and could benefit from comparative studies in the future.

#### PAGANS ONLINE AND OFFLINE

In the absence of a relatively uniform set of beliefs and practices and related organizational structures, Pagan communications practices reveal mutually constructed social goals that serve as foci for community building. Reflexive selves create reflexive communal ties. Online groups facilitate the sharing of information, identity construction and engagement in community building practices (c.f. Berger and Ezzy 2004). But offline gatherings like PiTPark, Jenny's Pagan Information Night, and large scale Pagan festivals serve similar purposes. Alongside these structures there are more closely knit covens in which small groups of Pagans follow agreed sets of beliefs and ritual practices. Other religions may evidence groups both online and offline where divergent worldviews are aired (Karaflogka 2006) but these discourses exist in counter-point to the 'true' traditions. In Paganism generally, the plurality in beliefs and practices is intrinsic to the movement's self-understanding and Pagans have developed structures to accommodate this phenomenon.

It seems that Paganism has institutionalized liminality by providing established timespaces, both online (c.f. Berger and Ezzy 2004) and offline, in which the inter-related development of relations between community and identity are the main business. There is a community for solitaries quite distinct from the normal accommodations made for individual spiritualities in other traditions like those of the monk or nun who are incorporated into religious 'orders' or some yogis who remain alone and officially unconnected to any religious social group. This study of Pagan community building suggests that individuals are more likely to manage post-modern conditions in a 'hypertextual' (Haraway 1997) rather than a 'networked' way (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002, p. 34) moving in and out of, or in any direction amongst the available places of interaction. The ways Pagans in South-west Summerland engage in building community solidarity may reflect how other individuals in contemporary society are able to develop and experience community ties across broad multi-layered, online and offline environments.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Circle' and 'Summerland' are Pagan terms. Circle refers to the characteristic form of ritual organisation and movement while 'Summerland' is the name given to the afterlife, similar to the Christian idea of heaven. These words were chosen because they are common in Pagan discourse and least likely to evoke connotations to which some Pagans would take exception.