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Identity-Making and Social Media

Leisure spaces are key sites for the production of belonging and identity. As just another leisure space, the Net is obviously a significant site for such leisure work in contemporary society. Digital leisure, like other forms of leisure, provides both a communicatively rational way of interacting, and a space for the instrumentalization of such interactions. At the moment, I have taken to reading blogs analysing polling data ahead of the next General Election in the United Kingdom. I am interested in the way these blogs make slightly different forecasts based on their models, and the way in which members and supporters of different political parties choose to argue for or against certain results. One of the blogs, politicalbetting.com, is interesting for leisure studies because the blogger is helping people make sense of the elections odds on the gambling market. The blogger wants people to see the strength or weakness of particular polls so they can make sense of the chances of political leaders and parties gaining success, so the readers of the blog can then make the right (most successful) bets. I do not intend to bet, but I am curious about the service provided by the blogger and the rational debates that take place below the line (contrary to the expected stereotype).

This chapter explores the emergence and importance of social media and online social networks in everyday leisure time and leisure practices. I will look at the ways in which social networks are used to build a sense of community and belonging, and the ways in which social networks serve as Goffmanesque public spaces in which people perform acceptable social identities (Goffman, 1971). I will trace how the Net has become a social network and communicative leisure space in more general terms away from the branded and commodified sites such as Facebook. I will show that fans of sports, music and other forms of popular culture can use the Net to discuss their private obsessions with

other fans. But I will show that the Net can also be a place where social activism can be supported, where politics can move from the online to the offline to build effective protests and campaigns. While this development is a boon to radical activists on the left, it is also something that can be and is utilized by activists on the far right. Hence, the communicative freedom of the Net, as I will show, is prone to producing climate-change deniers as much as anti-fascists.

Continuities of belonging and identity

People have always found a sense of community and belonging through social networks. Historically, social networks were organized around families, localities, tribes, workplaces, faith groups and, in modernity, the nation state. All of these forms of community and belonging are imagined and imaginary: that is, they are organized around a past that is imagined or constructed from myths of belonging and exclusion; and the symbolic boundaries that define the community are the result of social psychological processes that are imaginary. Cohen (1985) suggests that the imaginary community may be contingent with particular localities, but whose membership is bound only by symbolic boundaries, tacit knowledge and shared meanings. People make sense of what they observe from their own point of view, hence any interaction between people involves an exchange of symbols to enable one set of interpretations to be understood by the other members of the interaction. Thus, the imaginary community becomes a place for the transaction of meaning, and access is achieved through an understanding of these meanings. One can see that the concept of the imaginary community describes a multilayered member group, with symbolic boundaries closing off inner levels. A suitable analogy would be an onion, with each onion skin being a symbolic boundary, allowing membership of the imaginary community at a number of levels. However, because the boundaries are created by the users, one can also have tension as meaning and symbols are contested and defined: thus, the imaginary community gives us a dynamic picture of agency and structure.

The invented tradition theory of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) treats history as a narrative created in the present which looks backwards. In looking backwards, a story is told that justifies ideologies in the present, which does not necessarily relate to actual events and experiences of the past. One can see that Anderson's (1983) concept of the imagined community of the nation shares this idea of the use of the past in creating and justifying the present, though instead of ideology

or personal identity, the imagined community defines a nation. This idea of inventing or imagining the past has understandably come under criticism from a number of directions. Following the work of Wilson and Ashplant (1988), this selection process can be seen to be biased by the interests of the present ideology. And following Baudrillard (1988) it can be argued that the pre-existing experiences and the invented experiences become conflated and impossible to distinguish from one another, that 'history [has become] instantaneous media memory without a past' (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 22): so the real experiences, while they may have happened, are indistinguishable from the invented tradition. We need to be concerned with the historical discourses in the present, and how they are used to create boundaries and cultural icons.

A more trenchant critique of Hobsbawm has come from Anthony Smith (1993), who argues that traditions and their role in defining nationhood cannot be described as inventions, and fabrication and manipulation are not the primary means through which the (re)construction of tradition takes place. As he suggests, 'traditions, myths, history and symbols must all grow out of the existing, living memories and beliefs of [people] ... their popular resonance will be greater the more continuous with the living past they are shown to be' (Smith, 1993, p. 16). This dismissal of the imagining and its role in defining community is also expressed in criticisms of Anderson. In particular, there is concern that nations and nationalisms are more than just a psychological invention. In response, I would argue that although the discourse uses terms such as 'invention', 'imagined' and 'imaginary', this does not imply that the external is dismissed in place of a community or historical story that someone just made up in their head while sitting in front of a fire. What Hobsbawm, Anderson and Cohen are saying is that discourse, symbols, perceived realities, shared understandings and hegemonic ideologies are far more persuasive in both defining history and identity – what actually happened and who we actually are become meaningless questions because we cannot answer them without recourse to these imaginings. Secondly, by speaking of imagination, we are not saying these ideas and perceptions are wrong or false. Rather, for the people doing the imagining, it is the reality they use to shape their everyday life (Cohen, 1985).

In these social networks, leisure has played a key role in shaping the imaginary and imagined community. Leisure is one of the ways in which social networks become performative spaces. For Goffman (1971) and the symbolic-interactionists, all human meaning and action has to be interpreted to be understood. These interpretations include the

meaning given to symbols as well as our motives. Goffman describes a world where our interactions with others are not necessarily authentic; in other words, we 'role play' situations conforming to societal roles expected of us. A shared social reality therefore exists, and the social construction of reality and identity could be said to take place. Which sports we like and play, which foods we eat, what we drink, the books and films and music we like, all of these leisure forms provide uniforms for our performance of certain identity-making roles. If one is to be seen as belonging in a social network, one must dress the part and act the part, and do the correct leisure.

This notion of performativity in social networks is similar to the notion of 'webs of significance' theorized by Geertz (1973). These webs are spun by human actors searching for meaning and belonging. These webs create social identity, and are predicated on interactions with others. These webs of significance are public spaces, where our performance of the right sort of identity allows us to join the imaginary community. Social networks are spaces that allow this Goffmanesque identity work to take place. Everybody in a given social network will be performing the role they think gives them the correct social identity, the right form of belonging. To be seen as an authentic member of the Western middle classes, for example, one might promulgate in the social network of the workplace an interest in fine wine and classical music; one might show one's colleagues that one drives a car that has the right status, and one might engage them in conversation about a typically middle-class sport such as rugby union (Spracklen, 2013a). At every stage of the performance of middle-class identity, one looks at the others in the social networks to gauge how much they accept the performance. In social networks, there is always interaction between people in the network. Sometimes the arbiters of belonging have control of many layers of symbolic boundaries, and they allow people to have partial access to the community (who belongs in an extreme music scene, where belonging is only achieved by those who can demonstrate they have undertaken a long pilgrimage – see Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen, 2011); at other times, belonging is easily achieved through the right ritual and uniform (watching a soccer match in the pub). Where this interaction is not communicative, the webs of significance appear like the histories mentioned by Marx (1963): we make our own destinies, but our histories are not of our choosing. So we have to perform the right roles to be accepted into the imagined, imaginary community, but sometimes it is impossible for us to do so because we are ostracized by our gender or class or some other social structure. This identity work has always taken

place in social networks, and leisure has always played a key role as a prop in the performance. As we have entered late modernity, the Net is just another leisure space where social networking and performativity operate.

The Net, social media and the example of Facebook

The Net has become dominated by social media in the 2000s and the 2010s. The first social media website that became globally prominent in the 2000s, MySpace, allows individual users to build their own pages and connect with friends. When it was first set up it allowed bands to create pages that shared music and videos, and it allowed fans to follow their favourite bands (Tripp and Herr-Stephenson, 2009; Wilkinson and Thelwall, 2010). MySpace grew so big that it was bought by the transnational company News Corp, which expected to make a huge profit on the investment. This commercialization of MySpace meant that it became dominated by adverts, and the simplicity of its design was hampered. At the same time, scare stories in the mainstream media about pornography and paedophiles made parents wary of allowing their children to use the site (Tripp and Herr-Stephenson, 2009). However, young people had already switched from MySpace to Facebook and Bebo, and other social media sites, seeing MySpace as just a site for listening to music rather than a social network.

With the launch of Twitter in 2006, Facebook has become less fashionable (Arceneaux and Weiss, 2010; Murthy, 2011; Panek, Nardis and Konrath, 2013; Van Dijck, 2011). By the time you read this, both may have followed MySpace and bulletin boards into unfashionable obscurity. Twitter is designed for the smartphone users, where technological limitations of screens and keyboards mean it is difficult to write or read anything beyond 140 characters. With Twitter, it is easy to make a quick comment about something and to read other people's comments without having to scroll down a screen. The function of hashtagging makes it easy to share tweets with others who have decided to read anything with particular hashtags. The limitations of the characters and the use of hashtags have led to a new form of language emerging on the site, which shares features with early Netiquette but which has taken the hashtag along with the demotic of text-messaging (Van Dijck, 2011). Twitter allows people to follow celebrities and gain their insight. It allows celebrities, politicians and corporations to control their image and message. It allows urban hipsters to connect with one another to discuss craft beer and artisan pizza; it has also become a place where people can

engage in verbal abuse and trolling. The anonymity of Twitter (the fact that it allows fake accounts to be constructed, the lack of any real form of moderation other than a fairly passive complaints procedure) makes it easy for users to engage in bullying and sexist, racist and homophobic abuse (Bishop, 2014).

In my own social network, everyone is on Facebook. There are two exceptions. The first is an anarchist who has turned his back on it as a product of governmentality and State surveillance, even though he uses the Net and has a smartphone. The second is a graduate student of mine, who seems to be similarly concerned about the issue of giving her personal data to corporations. Everyone else uses it to a greater or lesser extent. I have friends and colleagues who have out-of-date personal pages on Facebook, who use it only to connect with things important to them, but mostly people seem to be on Facebook updating their pages with photos, posts and videos, as well as commenting on other people's posts. People seem quite happy engaging in the etiquette of liking each other's posts, giving the 'thumb up' equally to posts that are highly political, deeply personal or perfectly mundane. There are moments of political disagreement, but mostly the comments tend to fortify the original post's opinions. The only place where there is disagreement is where people post their liking of a particular band, and others mock them for their poor taste. Interactions on Facebook reinforce the sense that everybody thinks the same, though of course we choose who to friend and who to follow, allowing ourselves to be surrounded by people like us. This creates not a Habermasian public sphere – rather, an exclusive private space that is at the same time publicly viewable by anyone and everyone.

This is the one fact that will date this book very precisely. All the 12 people I spoke to for this research are on Facebook. This is the way people connect to distant relatives, colleagues in other countries; it is how some people do business, how people do the work of serious leisure involved in organizing dance classes and nights out. It has become the social media of the first years of the twenty-first century. But it seems already to be on the turn: as older people like my own father connect to it to like pictures and posts, younger people and hipsters have switched to other social media (Schiermer, 2014). Facebook is not fashionable, and even its users complain about its transformation into a mass market website. As one person in this research explained to me: 'they should call it Familybook ... all I see these days is boring photos of other people's children'. Others object to the way in which Facebook has become dominated by adverts and sponsored links, sometimes carefully

disguised as personal posts. One person told me that he ‘hated the way Facebook thinks it knows what I like’, while another complained about the way in which Facebook had made it look like he liked a transnational corporation to his friends. Despite these concerns and complaints, all of the people I spoke to used Facebook on at least a daily basis. The availability of smartphones and laptops and the ubiquity of workplace PCs make accessing the Net a part of every middle-aged, middle-class British person’s day – and despite the popularity of Twitter (which was used by nine of my respondents), Facebook remains a key social media site that people feel the need to check into. Even if they do not update their own pages, people are on Facebook reading the posts of their friends, liking photos and liking pages put together by corporations, groups or organizations. On Facebook, the rule is that no one is allowed to have fake identities – everyone is a real person with real personal data, real friends and real likes. Where people set up fake or pseudonymous accounts, Facebook reserves the right to shut them down. This reduces the scope for trolling, scamming and predatory paedophiles to operate, but people do circumvent these rules: for example, young people use false dates of birth to set up accounts (Panek, Nardis and Konrad, 2013).

I am on Facebook, and have been since December 2007, when two friends from university separately sent me notifications to become their friend. I was suspicious of what data might be collected by Facebook, but decided on the face of it that it would be a good thing (and an easy way) to get in touch with old friends. Initially, I set myself a number of rules about what I would do on Facebook. I would keep my private life off it, I wouldn’t post updates about my life, and I wouldn’t sink to the seemingly desperate act of making friend requests. The first rule ensured a measure of privacy and confidentiality. I did not see why Facebook needed to know which schools I went to, for example, or other important personal details. The second rule was my ‘student’ rule. As a lecturer I do not think it is appropriate to put anything on the Net that could put me in a difficult position with students. In that sense, it was an extension of the second rule. For that reason, I also decided never to accept a friend request from a student until they had left university. The third rule was a way of trying to stop me becoming addicted to increasing the number of my friends, and a way to make me manage the potential size of Facebook. Initially, I ruthlessly patrolled the ‘no post’ rule and ‘no making friend requests’ rules. But as I used Facebook more and more, I started to break both rules. There were key moments in my academic career (writing a book, becoming a professor, for example) that I wanted to celebrate with my circle of friends, especially since a large proportion

of my Facebook friends were academics in leisure studies and metal music studies. So when a book was published, I told my friends about it. I have also reacted to things in the news that are related to one of the subjects of my research. The other rule ended up being broken through the desire to contact and speak to people for academic research and networking – and I confess I sent a friend request to William Shatner, the actor who played Captain Kirk in *Star Trek*, because I do on occasion get foolishly fan-boy about things (he is the only person I have connected to in this way). Facebook, then, has become my way of maintaining social networks around my work, though I still use it for the leisure activity of personal interactions.

Facebook is a great way to maintain contacts and social networks. The software allows members to personalize what they read and who they interact with, and gives them the opportunity to work and take part in inconsequential leisure. However, the work of performativity is challenging. It takes time to read everything posted, even the things posted only by your closest friends and family. As well as making sure you politely engage these important connections, you have to work out the best way of responding to others. That is all before you decide what things to post that will gain you the right kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which will allow you to pass the symbolic boundaries you want to get past (Cohen, 1985). Facebook is a babble (and indeed a *babel*) of competing performances, all demanding attention and demanding the imprimatur of an authentic performance: the ‘like’ by a key taste-maker, the comments that justify the performance. To borrow another Biblical metaphor, the imagined and imaginary communities mediatized through Facebook are built on shifting sand, and what people post today as the marker of a particular social identity may look completely unfashionable tomorrow. The performativity is always taking place and the social identity is always provisional, subject to the changing mood of the people in the social network. As I write in 2014, people are proving their cultural capital and their worth in the imaginary community by making jokes that reference the television programme *A Game of Thrones*. But in six months’ time, it will be another television programme that has captured the attention of this fickle general public. There is also a psychologically distressing form of performativity at work on Facebook that resembles the LinkedIn social network’s inflation of employment successes (Harris and Rae, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013). People use Facebook to perform confident, fun, outgoing roles – the person out every night with a dozen friends, or the successful mother working as a city lawyer taking her daughter to violin

class (Van Dijk, 2013). This is a form of boasting and bending the truth of our messy lives into picture-perfect moments of social confidence and success. At best this competitive performativity turns Facebook into a parade of narcissism; at worst, it actually threatens people with psychological trauma (Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier and Cheever, 2013).

Despite the importance and popularity of Facebook (or perhaps because of it), it is a highly problematic website. Facebook wants to know who we connect with and what we like so it can sell advertising space to corporations looking to sell things to us. Facebook is a corporation with a vested interest in protecting its profits and its place in the market. At the moment it is free to register and use Facebook because they need the billions of users to generate the data for their advertisers. But the corporation may change its business model if the instrumental rationality of its financial plans dictates such a move. And it is difficult to disconnect from Facebook – it isn't just hard to make that disconnection on the website, it is difficult to make because the design of the site is so visible and ever-present. It has successfully integrated itself into people's lives, becoming the first place we go when we want to tell people things about our successes. Not only does the organization pay to get its products built into new smartphones and laptops, the system is designed to be attractive – the updates from other people demand our attention, persuade us to get involved, and once we are chatting with others we can keep chatting for ever. Facebook suggests pages we should like, and friends we might know. It is designed to keep us locked in and using the system, and we do so only half-conscious that everything we post to Facebook becomes the property of Facebook. We allow Facebook to track us, to identify us in pictures and to make decisions about what we are allowed to post. Facebook reserves the right to play with our data and to experiment with our news feeds (see Brandimarte, Acquisti and Loewenstein, 2013). Finally, Facebook seems to construct a record of our thoughts and our likes that would be very useful for a totalitarian or paranoid government to have – it is an open book of our desires that any security agency can use to protect the hegemonic interests of nation states.

Social networks and communities of interest

A, one of my respondents, has a daily ritual of checking her favourite websites. She does this if she is on her smartphone at the weekend, or in her office during the week. She checks her Facebook and Twitter accounts first, replying to messages and comments, then reads

'important' things on other websites she browses (the *New Statesman* magazine, Channel 4 News) before reading the spoof website *The Daily Mash*. If she has time she might log on as a user on an alternative music forum and make a few comments about things with her friends who post there, but this social networking is less important for her than the networking done on the corporate websites. Another respondent, B, is more engaged with social networking. Not only does he tweet regularly, throughout the working day, he spends a large part of his evening chatting on a soccer fans forum. A third respondent, C, uses Facebook to advertise his work as an artist, while making comments about things happening in the news media. He spends money on eBay on old comics and discusses comics and science fiction in a number of chat rooms, though he is not a regular user of these websites. My own ritual when I access the Net in the morning is to look at the local news, three rugby league websites and their chat forums, and a heavy metal chat forum where gigs are announced. I do sometimes post to the heavy metal forum, but so far I have never reached the point where I post on the rugby league forums. My social networks are constructed on Facebook, where I am closely involved in the International Society for Metal Music Studies page, and where I spend ten minutes every day (usually at lunchtime) catching up with old and distant friends. If I have more leisure time and access to the Net I will go to a small number of other music sites, the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* (news and features about higher education) and the Secret Leeds forum, which involves discussions about hidden places and histories of Leeds (my home city in the United Kingdom). While the Net might be huge, the sites we visit are actually small in number – and the social networks we make are equally small (Lupton, 2014).

Every individual using the Net has certain rituals and behaviours. The Net has key uses for each of us. We use the Net as a space for entertainment – we seek pleasure and satisfaction through watching or reading or listening to or interacting with something. We use the Net for gathering information – news, weather forecasts, the times of flights and trains. We use the Net to buy things. And we use the Net to form social networks through communities of interest. When we access the Net it is not always easy to delineate our motivations and intended uses. But whatever we do on the Net, we are seeking social identity and belonging, and using the Net to create a sense of community through identifying with communities of interest. That can be seen when we are consciously seeking to join in conversations on a chat room discussing the merits of DC Comics. We want to share our love of those comics, and our

knowledge of them with others who have similar interests (it is possible for people who hate comics to join a forum discussing comics just to wind people up, but these trolls are usually found out by moderators and expelled – see Bishop, 2014). Belonging to a particular professional soccer team's unofficial fan forum creates a sense of community belonging as strongly as wearing the club's colours on the train to work.

But other uses of the Net create such social networks, too. When people choose to read the news on a conservative news website instead of a liberal news website they are behaving *as if* they were making those choices in public. The owners of the website and the other readers of it will not know that we have made a choice to read it, but we have made the choice to identify with the politics of the site and the public reputation the site carries as if we had bought a newspaper and read it on the train. Respondent A mentions the Channel 4 News and the *New Statesman*. She does not interact with these sites, but she does read their news. She gets a sense of belonging to a thick social network (Geertz, 1973), one associated with the middle-class radical-left cosmopolitanism of each. This gives her meaning and identity that is as strong as that found on a soccer fans forum.

Similarly, when we choose to construct our Facebook pages or our avatar identities in chat rooms, we are presenting to an imagined public an identity that they will think is both acceptable and proof that we are close enough to them in our tastes for us to be seen as part of their public. In posting about heavy metal, I have to prove to the others in the community of interest that I know who the good bands are and which ones are jokes, and I have to prove I know something about the history of heavy metal and which of its genres are legitimate in the particular forum. People who post in chat rooms use pictures and references in their signature lines to prove they know something about the subject of interest: *Star Trek* fans use pictures of Klingons for avatars, and reference dialogue from important episodes (Booth, 2013; Scholz, 2013). Whisky drinkers will test each other's knowledge of single-malt distilleries and the taste of particular expressions and make clear which they prefer, while showing off their visits to distilleries on Islay (Spracklen, 2011b). All interaction and connection with the Net is a game of identity-making and community-making, where we choose to show off our position within certain established, acceptable social networks. And even where people are being iconoclastic they do so with the intention of being seen as part of an iconoclastic culture – such as the comments under YouTube videos, where trolling, being snarky or bored or unimpressed is the norm (McCosker, 2014).

Social activism – radical left

In my first full-time job following my PhD, I was a policy and research officer for the Liberal Democrat councillors on a city council. It was a politically restricted post (that is, I was employed by the council and could not engage in certain political activities), but I was expected to network with other people working for the Liberal Democrat politicians. This meant accessing via a dial-up modem a Liberal Democrat conferencing system hosted by an ISP called CIX. The Liberal Democrats were ahead of the other main political parties in the United Kingdom when it came to using the Net to share information, discuss ideas and make decisions. I saw the value that CIX gave to the politicians seeking to find ways to win elections, but there was value as well in the way it allowed the party's officers and researchers to feel part of a wider social movement. At the time, the Liberal Democrat party had a strong radical-left caucus; as the people using CIX were younger researchers and politicians, this side of the party was usually dominant in discussions online. CIX gave the radical-left caucus of the party (what others might call social liberals, those who believe in the importance of the welfare state and the role of the State in promoting social inclusion, in contrast to the economic liberals who prefer smaller states and free markets) a feeling of purpose and legitimacy: they could come to agreement about how egregious the New Labour Government was acting, while taking their own MPs to task if they failed to say the right things. The Liberal Democrats made significant gains in elections and the popular vote over this period, applying grassroots and community campaigning to every street, and the CIX conferencing system probably played a key role in that advance (former leader Paddy Ashdown used the system frequently).

The Net continues to play a key role in supporting the rise of new social movements and radical politics more generally. As discussed earlier in this book, Castells (2012) has identified the way new social movements and the radical left have been able to mobilise, communicate, campaign and outwit their rivals. A new generation of anti-capitalism activists situate the serious leisure of their campaigning and activism online (Bennett, 2003; Chatterton, 2008; Hammett, 2014). There is still the need to get activists to march on streets and to assemble outside banks and other sources of radical anger, but this high-profile, media-friendly action is planned and publicised on the Net. The new generation of radical activists all use the Net as a primary source of organizing and information-gathering because this is how they have always used the Net – they are the world's first Net-citizens

(Arora, 2014; Castells, 2012). Anti-capitalism activists have attempted to turn the nihilist-hactivism of sites such as 4-Chan into morally good actions – breaking into websites and systems owned by transnational corporations and governments, disrupting service, stealing information that reveals the corrupt nature of global capitalism, or just leaving a rude message (Fitri, 2011). Others use the Net to create informal social networks of petition-signers and lobbyists, making mass emailing and million-number petitions easy to organise. While some critics think this means political activism on the Net is something less real (it is easy to click and sign a petition, but how many of these people try to make change in the real world?), the lobbying campaigns and virus marketing of radical social movements does raise the profile of issues and does influence the decision-making in the public sphere (Arora, 2014; Castells, 2012; Hammett, 2014). The work of volunteers raising money for charities is also made easier by the Net, whether it is specific websites that handle financial transactions (with the questionable share of the proceeds that some take), or just mass emails and posts that say someone is about to climb a mountain for Greenpeace. Local campaigns against unwanted development succeed through the use of the Net as serious leisure space; for example, as I write this, there are well-organised campaigns against fracking (getting oil from rocks underground by blasting the rocks with hot water) in the United Kingdom that are using the Net to lobby, publicise and effect change (see frack-off.org.uk).

More mainstream radical activism – campaigning and organizing political parties on the left, the work of trade unions and national and transnational NGOs and charities campaigning for social justice and the environment – continues on the Net alongside the activism in the real world. Half of my respondents expressed membership or support of a radical-left organization, and they either read the relevant website or subscribed to mailing lists. This did not make any of my respondents identify themselves as politically active. None of them had stood for election, or worked as an agent or officer of some organization or party, and only one had delivered leaflets on behalf of a party. Their membership or support through donations, or just the support in kind offered by the Facebook ‘like’, is enough for them. They support the aims of radical-left politics and want their friends and colleagues to know they are keen to challenge the inequities of capitalism, neo-liberalism and globalization. They found a strong sense of community in expressing their politics, and performed it publicly to gain the approval of their peers. While this aspect of their communicative digital leisure might seem morally empty, it is recognition that their ability to seriously

change the world is limited by their work and family circumstances – by funding the work of others, they at least change the world vicariously (Castells, 2012). The social networks of radical-left activism have also given them ways to discuss policies and politics globally, while acting locally in their homes and on their streets. This can be seen in the way some of my respondents are involved in growing their own food on allotments, in volunteering to clean up local parks, and in supporting local businesses instead of chain-stores owned by transnational corporations. All this activism in the real world is researched and reported online in their leisure time, in posts on their own Facebook pages or on the pages of community or green groups.

Social activism – radical right

None of the people I spoke to use the Net to be active in rightist politics. All the respondents to my small-scale research projects are people I know fairly well, so it is no real surprise that none of them expressed an interest in right-wing politics. But the right is heavily involved in organizing and campaigning on the Net. I do have some friends who are part of the mainstream right, such as supporters of the Conservative party in the United Kingdom, and they use Facebook to post stories from right-wing sources and pass comments on these. Their semi-private sphere includes me because I am their friend on Facebook and in the real world, but there is evidence that people use social media to reinforce their political ideologies through isolating themselves from those who have different political views (Gustafsson, 2012). The tools of social media make it easy to choose to unfollow or un-friend those people who belong to the other side, and so our feeds become mutually reinforcing and selective, reducing our interactions with the others and limiting the value of the Net as a site for dialogue. It is not good for communicative rationality and the public sphere to limit our conversations to those with whom we agree.

Mainstream right-wing parties and politicians in the West have been effective at using social media to bolster support and engage in positive and negative campaigning (Åström and Karlsson, 2013; Bos, Van der Brug and De Vreese, 2011). Their control of the media in many nation states has allowed them to extend their hegemony into the virtual leisure space, using the tools of spin and persuasion to make their views on neo-liberalism and nationalism become the norm. They have used the Net to pursue the demonization of the poor, women, migrants and minority ethnic groups (Bos, Van der Brug and De Vreese, 2011). They have used the Net to convince people that anyone can be successful in

life as long as they work hard, the American dream that is at the heart of the myth of neo-liberal choice (Hillygus and Shields, 2014). But the real strength of the Net's social networks has been exploited by the radical right, or the far right, from the *poujadistes* of the Tea Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP), to the Islamists and the neo-Nazis and fascists of the Aryan fringes (King and Leonard, 2014; Mammone, Godin and Jenkins, 2013; Spracklen, 2013a).

The Tea Party and UKIP are both far right fringe factions that have shifted the mainstream of centre-right politics to the extremes (Hillygus and Shields, 2014). The Tea Party has been a lobbying group connected to the Republicans, which started out as an extreme libertarian, patriotic movement giving voice to the disaffected white working class of America, the part of society most troubled by globalization, post-industrialization and the recession. That it is funded by rich donors with interests in pursuing global capitalism does not matter much to those who think the Tea Party speaks for them. The Tea Party has tapped into a wider vein of popular radical rightism in white America, which distrusts federal government and bureaucracies, thinks multiculturalism and feminism are bad for the country and which believes America has been betrayed by those trying to impose pacifist, socialist world-government on it. This radical rightism draws on fascist and neo-Nazi theories about the decline of the country, and Christian fundamentalist theories about the rightful role of America in world politics (*ibid.*). The Net allows the Tea Party to draw upon an entire set of ideas, policies and communities that come from this radical-right milieu and to mix and match videos and news reports that fit their narrative of decline and betrayal. UKIP has drawn on this same social network of angry people and communities, using the Net along with other media to entice voters to their pro-British, anti-foreigner message. This narrative of bad migrants has of course been at the heart of mainstream British political discourse anyway, so UKIP are the happy recipients of the racist stories put out and publicized by the Conservatives and their friends in the tabloid newspapers (Lynch and Whitaker, 2013).

Elsewhere, I have shown how the far right has used music subcultures on the Net to propagate their politics and normalize elitist notions of whiteness, purity and nation (Spracklen, 2013b). For fascists and neo-Nazis, the Net provides a communicative space where in their defence they can invoke Netopian commitments to free speech and allow everyone to have their point of view heard (King and Leonard, 2014). Varg Vikernes, the metal musician from Norway who is known for his band Burzum and for his extreme radical-right views, can use his website to

write long books and articles propagating his views alongside details of his music. The nihilistic music of Burzum serves to bring music fans closer to his beliefs about racial purity, heritage and pride. The Net is also used as an internal organizing device for radical-right groups intending on bringing disruption to the streets. Just as social movements on the left find value in the communicative leisure space of the Net, where the private and the public can be carefully delineated, new radical movements on the far right find resources, support and organization. This can be seen in the success of the far right in the United Kingdom, where groups such as the English Defence League and Britain First take part in various marches, invasions and stunts (Allen, 2011). Perhaps the biggest success story of the far right is the Islamo-fascist movement associated with Isis in Syria and Iraq. This movement is involved in armed insurrection, terrorism and struggle as it tries to impose an extreme right-wing, neo-fascist version of Islam in the nation states of the old Islamic Caliphate (Klausen, 2014; Storey, 2012). Like other similar Islamo-fascist groups, Isis is comfortable with appropriating digital technology for propaganda and recruitment purposes. Official Facebook page and Twitter feeds show grim videos and photos of the latest massacres, and call on Muslims to join in the jihad. Individual soldiers are encouraged to post their own updates on social media from the front line, encouraging other young Muslim men in their countries of origin such as the United Kingdom to 'do the right thing'. For young men brought up on video games and used to using the Net to inquire about the nature of their faith, this is a powerful and attractive discourse.

Conspiracy world

Part of the radical-right milieu that feeds into the discourse of the Tea Party and UKIP (and others on the extreme right fringe) is the assumption that the truth about the world has been hidden from the people-at-large by the people who run the Establishment. This assumption draws ironically on similar debates on the left, which draw on ideas about mediatization and hegemony that run through much Marxist theory. There is clear evidence that elites use the media and education and popular culture to keep the masses docile, so that the elites get to keep their status and power. There are conspiracies to make us buy things, there are diplomatic understandings beyond formal agreements, and there are cover-ups by governments seeking to maintain their reputations (Gramsci, 1971). The radical right takes these facts as evidence of deeper, active conspiracies designed to eliminate their freedom and

reduce America and the West to socialist servitude. The real problem of climate change caused by modern industry, something that most rational scientists who are experts in the field agree is actually happening, becomes a conspiracy by socialists, politicians and diabolical others to place restrictions on the economy (Antonio and Brulle, 2011; McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Norgaard, 2011; Washington, 2013). Being sceptical about climate change becomes a marker of status and belonging among the radical right (McCright and Dunlap, 2011). They draw upon real scares about bad science, the limits of science and unethical practice by scientists to say that climate-change science is weak, or full of holes, or funded by vested interest (again, there is an irony in the fact that most of the sceptical resources and campaigners rely on funding from industry groups with a vested interest in denying the fact of climate change – see Brulle, 2014).

The Net fuels the growth of climate-change denial, as it has other conspiracy theories. For the climate-change deniers there are pseudo-scientific blogs and websites that make extravagant claims that have not been tested through the mechanics of scientific peer review. There are news magazines and channels that repeat climate-change denial as if it has been proven that the climate-change science is a scam. The growth of the climate-change denial movement is supported by the radical right and normalized by groups such as the Tea Party and UKIP. As it receives huge amounts of funding and support it is able to dominate discussions online. It has become something that ‘normal’, ‘right-thinking’ people think is true – governments lied to the people about all sorts of things, scientists are in it for themselves, so why should anyone believe them? Even reputable news organizations such as the BBC feel bound by some misplaced ethic of balance when it comes to climate change, as if the deniers have any basis for their claims against the tens of thousands of research papers that prove it is happening.

The Net has made such belief in the untrue much easier to sustain. In the early years of the Net, conspiracy theories were already part of the popular discourse. In the 1990s, the world of Ufology, the people and organizations seeking to establish the truth about sightings of alien spaceships took a turn towards radical-right conspiracies (Bell and Bennion-Nixon, 2000; Dean, 1998; Knight, 2002). Stories about the United States Government suppressing news and information about UFO sightings and crashes led to speculation about what it was the government was hiding. The consensus was that crashes at infamous sites such as Roswell had led to the United States Government keeping aliens (alive or dead) and alien technology (including back-engineered

spaceships) at Area 51. These ideas were popularized by shows such as *The X-Files*, and became dominant memes in online culture: the government was lying, manipulating people and even killing them to hide the truth about its interaction with aliens. These conspiracy theories soon gathered in other conspiracies – it was claimed that the moon landings never happened, it was claimed that there were secret societies secretly controlling everything and everyone, it was claimed that fluoridation of water supplies was a trick of some kind. The pompous lie dressed up as truth through pseudo-scientific language and analysis became part of the conspiracy theory's mode of persuasion – alongside more folkly appeals to people to judge for themselves. Net-citizens were exhorted to be suspicious of what they had been taught to be true, and to find things out for themselves. This was part of the Net's utopian ethics (Aupers, 2012; Lewis and Kahn, 2005). But in the hands of people plugging conspiracy theories it became a way of convincing people that up was down. Like climate-change denial, believing that the American Government has aliens in a bunker somewhere, right next to the film set where the moon landing was made (down the corridor from the room where Elvis eats his breakfast) is exciting because it is iconoclastic, a way of proving one is smarter than the gullible folks who watch the mainstream news. These conspiracy theories still have enormous power and popularity on the Net. While the alien conspiracies have become less ubiquitous in everyday popular culture, they are still discussed and analysed online, along with more recent conspiracy theories.

Hovering around the conspiracy theories on the right were the old lies about the Jews: Jews as secret haters of Christians and Muslims, Jews as pullers of strings and manipulators. These lies have existed in Christian and Muslim public spheres for many years, but the Net legitimizes them. When Islamist terrorists attacked America with such devastation in September 2001, it was a matter of minutes before the far-right conspiracy theorists were at work online, making claims about the truth not being told. An entire industry of 9/11 truthers emerged to point out how unlikely the accepted narrative of the attack was, and how likely that it was actually someone else playing some kind of evil trick (Jones, 2012). Both American far-right conspiracy theorists and Muslim conspiracy theorists found a common scapegoat: the Jews must have been behind it to try to get America to fight in the Middle East; the Jews had been told to stay at home on the day of the strikes on the World Trade Center (Durham, 2003; Jones, 2012). These are dangerous and pernicious lies, because they feed into legitimate protests about the actions of the United States and Israel. On the Net the real questions about the

invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the limits of neo-liberal interventionism and the rise of an American Empire get submerged in the noise about 'bankers', Zionists and the Jewish lobby.

Conclusion

The Net is positive space for constructing and maintaining social networks, identity and belonging. There is real communicative action at work in the formation of what is clearly communicative leisure. But the Net's instrumental nature makes it fail as a truly communicative space. People can find communities of interest and like-minded people to share politics with, but the Net is actually weak as a form of public sphere. Earlier in the book I cited Habermas' belief that the Net was a failure as a public sphere because it only creates exclusive communities of interest, and in this chapter I have shown there is little evidence that social media and the Net more generally create the bridging capital needed to build such a public sphere (Putnam, 2000). The Net encourages people to find community only with those we want to find, and the rise of conspiracies and far-right political spaces shows that the Net allows people to only read and engage with information that supports their prejudices and ideologies.

Furthermore, social media and the Net's wider social networks might make it easier to connect with one another, but the technology and the normalization of its use raise huge ethical concerns around surveillance and control. Are we comfortable in sharing so much data about ourselves with software developers, telecommunications companies and the governments that work with them? Rather than being a positive, communicative space allowing communicative leisure to take place, social media seems to be by design made to make the surveillance work of nation states and corporations easier. People who are worried about terrorists and paedophiles might argue that this is a fair loss of privacy and a fair amount of control, but such surveillance and governmentality has already limited the leisure of people online: in the fight to control illegal downloading, as I will show in the next chapter.