This article examines the issue of ‘ubiquitous connectivity’ on the Internet. The Internet, combined with the wireless technologies, is said to have made it possible for ‘anyone to contact anyone else anywhere at anytime’, but such ubiquity of connectivity has failed to materialize in actual human contact. Drawing on Goffman and Giddens’s theories of human interaction, the authors make a distinction between co-location, which is a spatial relationship among individuals, and copresence, a social relationship. While co-location puts people within range of each other, copresence renders people mutually accessible for contact. However, the establishment of copresence is normatively regulated in society, which demarcates different regions of space for different types of activity. Social contact takes place in a domain where copresence is affected not only by the regionality of contact but also by the power relations that underlie personal affinity and social engagement. It is concluded that so long as there are social barriers that separate people into different groups of interests and different positions in the hierarchy of fame and power, there will be fragmentations in the online world that make the ubiquity of social connectivity impossible.

Keywords Copresence; Internet; online communication; social network; ubiquitous connectivity

In the literature on the social impact of electronic communications, there has been a misconception that equates electronic connectivity with social connectivity, mistaking the removal of physical barriers for the removal of social barriers. This misconception has caused repeated prediction blunders every time there was a major technological breakthrough in the field of electronic communications. In this paper, we provide a brief history of the confusion, identify the principal factors that are responsible for the confusion, and, in particular, explore the normative contexts and character of copresent relationships in the online world.

Drawing on Goffman and Giddens’s theories of human interaction, we make a distinction between co-location, which is a spatial relationship...
among individuals, and copresence, a social relationship. While co-location puts people within range of each other, copresence renders people mutually accessible for contact. We argue that, unlike the creation of co-location which is essentially a technical problem, the establishment of copresence is a normative endeavor that involves the demarcation of different regions for different types of activity. Social contact, defined here as activities of socializing and friendship, takes place in the realm of copresence — which is affected by the regionality of space and the power relations that underlie personal affinity and social engagement. The implications of copresence remain under-theorized, and we contend that one implication is that the emergence of the Internet alone cannot bring about the type of ubiquitous connectivity some researchers have hoped for.

**Naïve history: co-location as copresence**

As early as 1791, six years after the appearance of the optical telegraph technology, an entry in the new edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* predicted with great enthusiasm that ‘The capitals of distant nations might be united by chains of posts, and the settling of those disputes which at present take up months or years might then be accomplished in as many hours’ (cited by Standage 1998, pp. 14–15). In 1891, as cited by Putnam (2000, p. 168), one telephone official suggested that the technology of telephony would bring an ‘epoch of neighborhood without propinquity’. Seventy years later, Webber (1963) still saw the telephone (and the car) as leading to emerging ‘communit[ies] without propinquity’ dispersed across and within urban areas. A decade later, Aronson (1971, p. 162) made nearly the same prediction:

> With the spread of the telephone a person’s network of social relationships was no longer confined to his physical area of residence [his neighborhood, in its original meaning]; one could develop intimate social networks based on personal attraction and shared interests that transcended the boundaries of residence areas. (Emphasis added)

In this statement, Aronson made an important clarification about the new network of social relationships: this is not only a ‘neighborhood without propinquity’ but also a network that consists of new intimate relationships developed through the use of the telephone (see also Wellman 1979).

The dawn of a new electronic era, more revolutionary than that of either the telegraph or the telephone, in which people would be able to communicate with each other on a truly global scale, was first announced by McLuhan (1964, p. 248):
We live today in the Age of Information and Communication because electric media instantly and constantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate... The simultaneity of electric communication, also characteristic of our nervous system, makes each of us present and accessible to every other person in the world. (Emphasis added)

McLuhan was among the few people who foresaw the ‘Age of Information and Communication’ even before the word ‘electronic’ had come into use. McLuhan anticipated the rise of ‘a total field of interacting events’ on a global scale in which ‘all men [and women] participate’, which had in fact not become technically possible until the advent of the Internet. More importantly, McLuhan equated global electronic connectivity with universal human accessibility. Based on the possibility of instant and constant online connectivity enabled by modern communications technology, McLuhan predicted that people all over the world would be made ‘present and accessible to every other person’.

This notion of ubiquitous social connectivity has since been reiterated by many others:

- The Internet is the first technology that lets us have many-to-many communication with anybody on the earth. (Segaller 1998, p. 359; emphasis added).
- As their proponents claim, the electronic media do alter the time–space parameters of social interactions, in principle rendering anyone capable of communicating with anyone else at any time. (Poster 1990, p. 45; emphasis added).

However, none of the above predictions has turned out to be correct. The use of the telephone did not produce new kinds of personal relationships. The telephone has been used mostly to maintain existing social relationships ‘rather than creating socializing societies of telephone friends’ (Pool 1977, p. 376). It might be true that calling has led to more contact with friends and family members, but ‘there is little sign that telephone calling opened up new social contacts’ (Fischer 1994, p. 266; see also Wellman & Tindall, 1993).

Similarly, despite the worldwide spread of the Internet, the ‘global village’ of anybody being able to communicate with anybody else has never materialized. Nor has it been a major force in creating new social relationships. Rather, consistent with the history of the telephone, it appears mainly to support existing social networks, ‘fit[ting] seamlessly with in-person and phone encounters’ as the conditions of life create more geographically dispersed populations (Boase et al. 2006). Email, the ‘killer application’, is used most often among people who already know each other (Wellman & Haythornthwaite 2002), and the ‘Internet is less effective than other means of forming and sustaining strong social relationships’ (Cummings et al. 2002, 2002, 2002).
By some estimates, no more than 14 to 26 per cent of Internet users have made online friends they do not know in person (UCLA CCP 2000; Katz & Rice 2002), leading some scholars to suggest that the Internet acts more like ‘local media’ than global media in friendship-making and community-building (Hampton & Wellman 2002; Hampton 2007).

Why co-location is insufficient

What went wrong? Why did the use of the telephone fail to produce new friends? Why have emails been exchanged mostly among acquaintances? Why has the Internet acted mostly as ‘local media’ when it comes to community-building? All in all, why is the technology of ‘ubiquitous connectivity’ unable to help its users build a worldwide network of new friends and acquaintances? There are four principal factors.

First, there is the digital divide: the fact that many people in many countries still cannot access the Internet due to class, race, gender and other social barriers (Hoffman et al. 1996; Compaine 2001; Norris 2001). Ubiquitous social connectivity requires ubiquitous access to the technology of ubiquitous connectivity.

Second, even if there were ubiquitous connectivity, history shows that it is not sufficient to lead to ubiquitous social connectivity. For example, the telephone penetration rate in the United States has reached more than 95 per cent, but there is little evidence that the telephone has led to the development of new friendship networks (Fischer 1994).

Third, biology and the limits on our time appear to be a factor. Dunbar’s (1993) work suggests that the size of the human neocortex places a rough limit on the number of people – roughly 150 – with whom one can personally, directly and consistently interact, while Bernard and Killworth’s extensive fieldwork provides a larger median number, 290, but still obviously a limited set (Bernard 2008). In other words, the number of people any individual can possibly interact with in a given period of time is inherently strictly restricted by the individual’s limited time and energy. For this reason, a certain level of detachment is ‘simply a protective device without which one would be mentally ground down and destroyed in the metropolis’ (Simmel 1997, p. 154), or ‘at its most basic, it is what makes it possible to walk to the bus or tram stop in the morning without feeling obliged to stop and to talk to everyone on the way’ (Allen 2000, p. 61).

Fourth, normative factors restrict social connectivity. In society, who contacts whom? – for what? and how? – come ‘under strict normative regulations’ (Goffman 1966, p. 24). People contact each other for sociality not just because they are in each other’s proximity but also because, among other things, such interpersonal contact is deemed appropriate in the given situations.
This normative aspect of human contact has not been sufficiently emphasized in current discussions on the ubiquity of electronic communications. In the remainder of this article, we focus on this normative dimension of spati-ality and how it affects social contact in the online world. We elaborate the distinction between co-location and copresence, followed by a delineation of two regions in the online public domain in which copresence for social contact can be established; we also examine various ‘involvement shields’ people can deploy to avoid being engaged in the public domain; and we end with a discussion on the importance of the normative structure that underlines social connectivity in an increasingly networked world.

Co-location versus copresence

What does it mean when we say two individuals are connected online? Do we mean they both have access to the Internet and each has the other’s email address? Often we confound electronic and social connections. The cover of Mary Chayko’s (2002) *Connecting: How We Form Social Bonds and Communities in the Internet Age*, which depicts an Ethernet connector under the word ‘connecting’, vividly illustrates the two different meanings of connectivity: electronic connectivity – the connection among communication devices – and social connectivity – the connection among people.3 Clearly, people are not automatically connected to each other if they are connected to the Internet. But we need to explain why “being online” is not the same as being “connected” to a community of others’ (May 2002, p. 89). We must distinguish between co-location and copresence in human encounters.4

Two individuals are co-located if they are in each other’s proximity. Co-located individuals are ‘mutually present to one another’ (Goffman 1966) and each is within the sensory range of the other. In physical co-location, people are within range of each other’s naked sense perceptions and can see, hear and even touch each other without physically re-positioning themselves. As the distance between them increases, people begin to lose the sensory immediacy that puts them within range of each other. However, such perceptual losses can be partially restored through sensory extensions via electronic mediation. A multimedia communication device, such as a videophone, allows distant individuals to see and hear each other as if they were co-located in the same physical place.

Although co-location provides the ‘distance over which one person can experience another with naked [or mediated] senses’ (Goffman 1966, p. 17), being ‘within range’ is not the same as being available to each other for contact. For example, the person within range may be busy with other things or may be deliberately doing that to avoid being engaged, so even though within range, the person can in fact be out of reach. According
to Goffman, the condition that provides mutual accessibility and therefore allows for mutual contact is not mere co-location but copresence, where

Persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived.

(Goffman 1966, p. 17)

In other words, copresent individuals are not only located in each other’s close proximity but also pay close attention to each other, ready to engage and be engaged, thereby making them ‘uniquely accessible, available, and subject to one another’ (Goffman 1966, p. 22).

In Being and Time, Heidegger (1962) made an important difference between two modes of being: ‘Being In’ and ‘Being With’. In ‘Being In’, we are in a ‘location-relationship with something else’ (p. 79), treating others as ‘some corporeal Thing (such as a human body)’ (p. 80) that is ‘present-at-hand together alongside’ (p. 81). In ‘Being With’, on the other hand, we treat others as ‘circumspectively concernful Being’ (p. 154) who share the world with us: ‘By reason of this with-like Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others’ (p. 155). In a way, co-location is akin to ‘Being in’ and copresence to ‘Being with’. Transcending the mere ‘location-relationship’, copresence makes co-located people tune in to one another, ‘reciprocally related to one another’ (Habermas 1984, p. 80), and mutually accessible for contact. It is the difference between the other being the object or the subject of attention.

Table 1 compares the key features of co-location and copresence. Co-location is essentially a spatial relationship, characterized by mutual presence in close proximity that puts people within the perceptual range of each other. In the offline world, co-location can be seen as a ‘body-to-body’ situation where there is a gathering of two or more people who are not necessarily in contact with each other. Co-location of individuals is common in public places like malls, streets and parks, where people are next to each other, minding their own businesses.

In the online world, co-location is a ‘page-to-page’ situation where people’s homepages, blogs, email addresses and other forms of online presence are only ‘clicks’ away. However, neither body-to-body nor page-to-page co-locations render people accessible to each other for social contact. As Dyson (1998, p. 63) points out in regard to online co-location, ‘People can put up their own homepages describing themselves, but what makes a community is the interaction among people, not their mere presence’.

The condition that allows for mutual contact is copresence. Copresence is primarily a social relationship. In copresence, people are not only in each other’s close proximity but are also reciprocally oriented toward each
other, mutually available and accessible to each other, tuned in to and in touch with each other. In the offline world, copresence is a face-to-face situation that occurs in various social gatherings such as one-on-one talks, small group meetings, games and parties. In the online world, copresence can be seen as a ‘face-to-interface’ situation where people make themselves available for contact through a communication device, such as a desktop, a webphone (such as a Blackberry), or a mobile phone. Unlike face-to-face copresence that requires interlocutors to be present in the same place at the same time, face-to-interface copresence enables interlocutors to be present in different places at different times. For example, Person A can send a message to Person B who can reply to Person A at a different time. According to Putnam (2000, p. 174), this asynchronous feature of communication, which liberates copresence from the constraints of time, ‘may turn out to be a more important effect of the Internet than liberation from the constraints of space’. We now turn to the issue of copresence for social contact.

Regionality of social contact

How can copresence be established for social contact in the online world? A person putting up a homepage with an email address is clearly indicating availability for contact, but finding people’s homepages and email addresses does not provide a green light to contact others for sociality. While the ubiquity of electronic connectivity means that ‘one now needs an excuse to not be readily accessible’ (Altheide 1995, p. 24), it is not hard for anyone to find such excuses. Whether an online contact becomes more than a single exchange is subject to the same kinds of social regulation as are contacts in the offline situations. That is, it will be encouraged or inhibited by the presence or absence of common interests, social status, social skills of the participants, etc. As a result, ‘learning how to gain access to other people’ (Cross & Borgatti 2004, p. 144) remains critical to online communication.
The accessibility and responsiveness of others for social contact varies with the regions in which the contact occurs. Human interaction takes place in physical settings that are situated geographically, but such settings are ‘internally regionalized’ (Giddens 1984, p. 118) for particular kinds of activity. For example, a city is divided into different areas: residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, etc. In the same way, a family house is divided into different rooms, such as bedroom, bathroom, living room, family room and dining room. These subdivisions of social functionality are different spatial regions that are demarcated for different types of social activity. Regions thus constitute the ‘situational geography’ (Meyrowitz 1985) of social life which expresses different modes of spatial practice.

The regionality of human interaction puts human copresence ‘under strict normative regulations, giving rise to a kind of communication traffic order’ (Goffman 1966, p. 24). It is this ‘communication traffic order’ – plus the capacity of the communications technology – that determines social connectivity.

Sociality is a particular form of social connectivity. In everyday life, people interact with each other to accomplish different goals, e.g. political, economic and recreational. Sociality has to do with expressive socializing, friendship, romance and intimacy. Pure sociality aims at ‘a relationship unprompted by anything other than the rewards that that relationship provides ... it is a friendship only in so far as the connection with the other person is valued for its own sake’ (Giddens 1991, p. 90).

‘Social contact’, contacting others for purposes of sociality, differs from other types of human contact in that the social relationship lacks a motive other than itself. Examples of social contact include coffee break gatherings, BBQ parties, cider tastings, poker games and chitchats with friends on the phone or instant messaging. Such informal social connectedness plays an important part in social life and has been found to contribute to civic engagement and social integration (Putnam 2000).

To be sure, sociality is an ideal type. Individuals engage in social contact for both instrumental and expressive reasons, and interaction typically contains elements of both. While co-location and copresence are quite distinct, regularity of co-location over time fosters the development of copresence and, in turn, sociality. It is the regularity of co-location and copresence that foster the development of the sense of normality and trust that sociality requires (Goffman 1971; Misztal 2001, p. 314). For example, the regularity of interaction among coworkers in the same place often leads people to develop friendships that extend beyond the workplace, and mothers who take their children to a playground at the same time of day often find themselves engaging in conversations that lead to lasting friendships.

Copresence for social contact is highly regulated in social life. In traditional societies, social contact takes place almost exclusively among
people who know each other. In modern societies, social contact also takes place among strangers, but such contacts are restricted to only certain spatial regions. In general, people are not available to strangers for social contact in public places. On a city street, for example, individuals are not supposed to approach passersby for socializing without prior acquaintance. ‘Do not talk to strangers!’ is a common admonition parents give to their children in many parts of the United States.

Yet, socializing with strangers is totally legitimate in the ‘open regions’ of the public place, where ‘any two persons, acquainted or not, have a right to initiate face engagement with each other for the purpose of extending salutations’ (Goffman 1966, p. 132). Apart from the institutionalized ‘Third Place’ (Oldenburg 1991) – bars, coffee shops and teahouses – where strangers gather and socialize, open regions can also be found in places like ‘gyms, parties, twelve-step programs, conferences, reading groups, and classes’ (Shaviro 2003, p. 129). In those socially open regions, people become mutually accessible for socializing without prior acquaintanceship, and the more regularly they encounter one another in these regions, the more likely it is to occur.

Regionalization of sociality in the online world

As in the offline world, social contact is regionalized in the online world. Depending on whether an area is accessible to everybody on the Internet, the online world can be roughly divided into two separate domains: private and public. The online private domain is off-limits to outsiders: it is either a one-on-one contact area (e.g. email, IM), a one-to-many contact area such as Facebook, or a many-to-many contact area that is hardware- or password-protected (e.g. the discussion forum or listserv of a company). The online public domain, on the other hand, is open to everybody, though in some instances free registration may be required. It should be noted that there can be public areas in a private domain, and private areas in a public domain. For example, Myspace is a public online domain open to everyone on the Internet, but there are areas in each individual account that can be blocked off or limited to only specified users. Likewise, AOL is a private online domain accessible only to the paid users, but there are public areas within this domain that are open to all AOL users.

The online public domain can be further divided into two sub-domains depending on whether or not it is exclusively devoted to socializing activities: the general public domain and the public social domain (Figure 1). In the general public domain, people interact with each other for purposes other than sociality, such as engaging in political debates, distance learning or online shopping. In the public social domain, on the other hand, people interact with each other for the purposes of socializing, making new friends, and
building relationships. In different online domains, the accessibility of others for social contact differs accordingly.

The online general public domain consists of many areas, demarcated by signs such as `.gov’, `.edu’, `.org’ and `.com’, that are designated for different types of activity. Strangers can contact each other for specified activities in the designated areas. Although it is possible to contact them for sociality, this is not normatively appropriate. For example, while it is legitimate to contact strangers for information and opinions regarding sales and products in an online consumer bulletin board, it would be inappropriate to approach strangers for socializing in that same area. The situation, however, changes in the online public social domain, such as chat rooms and MUDs, where people are mutually open for sociality, regardless of whether they know each other or not. ‘For some’, Calhoun (1998, pp. 384–385) observes, ‘Internet chat rooms are like bars – they facilitate meetings among strangers as well as recurrent visits among familiars’. This example shows why it is not very useful to talk about online social connectivity without specifying types of contact and the regions in which such contacts take place.

Incidentally, the online public social domain came into existence long before the advent of the Internet. In the telegraph era, copresence was established for socializing over the wires among telegraphers who did not know each other in person. As Standage (1998) describes, ‘During quiet periods, however, the online interaction really got going, with stories, jokes, and local gossip circulated over the wires ... just as if the participants were sitting together at a club’ (p. 132). Copresence for social contact was also formed on the air among Citizen Band radio users who chose ‘handles’
(secret names) to identity themselves (Cowlan 1979). In both instances, an online public social domain was created using a communication device that allowed strangers to interact with each other for socializing.

It is important not to confuse a communication device with a communication domain. A communication device is an instrument that can be used, in combination with other things, to create different domains of communication. For example, the telegraph is a communication device, which was once used in the post office for delivering private messages (a commercial private domain) or among the telegraphers as an online chat room (a public social domain). The telephone used in the ‘nymous’ (opposite of anonymous) one-on-one setting for social contact is essentially a private domain for existing acquaintances and friends, and that is the reason why its use does not produce new social ties. However, telephone calling can go beyond the confines of acquaintances for sociality if the setting is changed from the nymous one-on-one contact situation to an anonymous environment, such as www.ccube.com that allows users to call others without revealing their phone numbers, hence masking their identities.

The Internet is not a single device, but an ‘assemblage of technologies’ that support many forms of communication and different domains of contact. Most Internet applications are domain-specific when it comes to social contact: email and IM are private domains for acquaintances, and chat rooms and MUDs are public social domains where many-to-most participants are strangers. Some Internet applications are domain-neutral, depending on the larger environment in which they are used. For example, discussion forums and bulletin boards constitute a general public domain when used in a socially non-open region and a public social domain when used in a socially open region. Some other Internet applications are more complex, including multiple domains, such as the fast-growing social networking sites, where users can interact with others for sociality in different regions.

Involvement shields

Offline shields

The regionality of human interaction determines the ‘communication rights’ (Goffman 1966) people have in different domains of social life. In formal organizations (e.g. the government, military and business sectors), the honoring of such rights is often ensured by institutional rules and regulations. In the military, for example, officers of higher ranks can give orders to those of lower ranks, but not vice versa. In the realm of socializing, however, regionality alone is insufficient for establishing copresence with others because socializing and friendship are based on affinity and common interests rather than on rules and regulations. Being in the right region means that one has the right to engage others for sociality, but this right in itself does not guarantee that others are
willing to be engaged. For this reason, the establishment of copresence for social contact must ‘presuppose collections of individuals ... willing and able to communicate and cooperate with each other, that is, a human network’ (Mowshowitz 2002, p. 126). Thus, willingness to engage — to and be engaged by others — is another key factor in the formation of copresence.

What can people do if they are unwilling to become engaged in sociality in a region where they are supposed to honor others’ engagement requests? People can use what Goffman (1966) calls ‘involvement shields’ to block overtures for contact without flatly rejecting others’ communication rights. In the offline world, a common strategy for doing that is to elect some type of physical barriers to perception. Besides using walls and gates that physically keep others from getting within range, people also create ‘situational closures’ to symbolically close off a region into which they retreat. For example, a door curtain, even if transparent, ‘leads persons inside and outside the region to act as if the barrier had cut off more communication than it does’ (Goffman 1966, p. 152). Secretaries often play a similar role by serving as ‘gatekeepers’ to protect their bosses from interruptions. Another strategy is being ‘away’, whereby a person avoids being drawn into communication by pretending that he or she is ‘woolgathering, daydreaming, or autistic thinking’ (Goffman 1966, p. 70). An interesting example of the use of such a strategy can be found in the case of what Hampton and Gupta (2008) calls the ‘true mobiles’ who bend over their laptop in the Wi-Fi coffee shop to avoid interacting with co-located others. Those ‘involvement shields’ show that physical proximity in the proper regions is still insufficient for establishing copresence, as others can use various strategies to block access to them if they are unwilling to be engaged.

Online shields

In the online world, ‘involvement shields’ take different forms but perform the same functions. The four shunning strategies commonly used online are ‘ignoring’, ‘hiding’, ‘blocking’ and ‘relegating.’ In a face-to-face situation, it is sometimes hard to pretend not to see others, but it is easier to do in a ‘face-to-interface’ situation. For example, people found that their emails to certain friends sometimes got ‘lost’ and they never heard back. Answering machines and Caller ID have been used to screen out phone calls from others one wants to ignore. Another way of shunning the acquainted is to go into ‘hiding’. One can try to hide from others by pretending that one is away and unable to access the Internet. In addition, people can set their email accounts to an auto-response mode that sends out an ‘I’m away’ notice in reply to each incoming message. People can also use new email accounts and screen names when logging onto an online public domain to avoid being spotted by acquaintances. Many Internet users, especially teenagers, keep multiple email addresses
and screen names which they disclose to different people as a way of regulating others’ access to them (Lenhart et al. 2001).

The third strategy for curtailing access is to block undesired engagement requests. Despite the fact that electronic solicitations often come as ‘an irresistible intruder’ (McLuhan 1964, p. 271) or ‘thieves in the night’ (Meyrowitz 1985, p. 117), there are ways to fend them off. In email exchanges, junk mail folders can be created to filter out ‘trash messages’; in instant messaging, a ‘block’ function can be activated to foil attempts from others to make contact; in chat rooms, norm violators can be ‘kicked’ or removed.

Relegating the method of contact to a lesser mode is the fourth strategy of access control. In situations where encounters with others become unavoidable, access restrictions are giving way to restrictions on the immediacy of contact. Giddens (1984) has coined the phrase ‘modalities of copresence’ to refer to different modes of interpersonal access, which can be grouped into corporeal copresence and electronic copresence. Kellerman (1993) further divides electronic copresence into ‘audio conversations’ and ‘audiovisual exchanges’ based on variations in the level of embodiment. Kellerman (1993, p. 29) notes that these three modes of contact make up ‘a rather stratified hierarchy of communications’, with the most restricted form (audio conversation) at the bottom, a more upgraded version (audiovisual exchanges) in the middle, and the most embodied form (face-to-face meetings) on the top. Other things being equal, says Kellerman, different forms of contact convey different degrees of intimacy among the users. Similarly, Pappano (2001, pp. 56–89) observes that modes of communication can be manipulated to exert control over interpersonal space. For example, email can be used to ‘relegate’ others to ‘a subrelationship in which one can respond when one chooses’, and the email contact can be ‘elevated to phone or live interactions’ if the relationship is deemed important.

The above analysis shows that being in the right region of the public domain is a necessary but insufficient condition for establishing copresence with others for social contact. If uninterested in the overtures or unwilling to be engaged, people can employ a variety of involvement shields to render themselves unavailable or inaccessible to others. Because of this, social connectivity may still be unattainable even if there is ubiquitous electronic connectivity and even if people find themselves in the right regions for social contact.

Discussion

The central argument of this paper is that social connectivity, which is different from spatial connectivity, requires both co-location and copresence. Co-location, a form of spatial connectivity, places people in each other’s sensory proximity, making them within range of naked or extended
perceptions for mutual contact. Co-location can be established in the physical realm (physical proximity) by means of transportation and in the electronic realm (electronic proximity) by means of communication. However, co-location is only a prerequisite for social connectivity, which also requires copresence. Copresence is a mode of human togetherness that makes spatially co-located individuals mutually accessible for contact, rendering them not only within range but also within reach. In society, places – both physical and electronic – are partitioned into regions that are demarcated for different types of activity. In the public general domain, copresence for social contact requires prior acquaintanceship, but such a requirement is waived in the public social domain. In either region, the establishment of copresence also depends on people’s willingness to engage and be engaged by others, as various involvement shields can be deployed to block access if people are not interested in participating. It is therefore not just the capacity of a communications technology, but also the attainment of communication rights within the proper region and the willingness of others to be engaged, that render copresence for social contact possible in the public place.

The implications of this paper contribute to the current discussions on the impact of the Internet on social contact, social ties and community-building. Whether Internet use can increase a person’s social network size depends on, among other things, how the Internet is used: it may not increase a person’s social ties if the Internet is used solely in the general public domain, as social contact in that domain requires prior acquaintanceship. However, one’s social ties will increase if the Internet is used in the public social domain, yet the type of social ties one develops and the quantity of such ties one accumulates vary according to one’s ability to make contacts and enlist responses. In short, mere access to the Internet does not give a user access to all the people on the Internet.

One’s ability to develop social ties in the online world is affected as much by one’s social position as by one’s personality. Rarely is sociality pure, unprompted by anything other than personal affinity. There is therefore no surprise that those who are famous and powerful are likely to attract more online suitors for sociality and friendship than the ordinary folks are:

They are sought after for their social capital and, because they are well known, are worthy of being known (‘I know him well’); they do not need to ‘make the acquaintance’ of all their ‘acquaintances;’ they are known to more people than they know, and their work of sociability, when it is exerted, is highly productive.

(Bourdieu 1986, pp. 250–251)
As such, although everybody can try to make connections on the Internet, ‘connectivity seems to go to the connected: greater social benefit from the Internet accrues to those already well situated socially’ (Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002, p. 289). From this standpoint, the success some people enjoyed in making others readily available to them for socializing can be viewed as an outcome of the privileged positions they occupied in the existing social hierarchy.

In other instances, the eagerness of some people to make connections in the online world results from their being ostracized from the offline communities. Members of marginalized groups, the stigmatized and the suppressed are more likely to form alliances among themselves on the Internet, thereby compensating for the deficiency in their offline connectedness (Rosenmann & Safir 2006; Siddiquee & Kagan 2006). The rise of such online affinity groups primarily reflects intolerance in offline socializing and parallels the offline existence of groups of the marginalized.

The issue of online social connectivity is therefore an issue of normative regulations of the use of space, the regionality of social contact, the hierarchy of popularity and marginality, as well as affinity and animosity, privilege and intolerance. In the final analysis, it is linked to power relations, a spatial practice ‘through which social power is expressed’ (Harvey 1989, p. 255). The invention and use of a new communications technology affects social connectivity: not by changing the nature of power relations in the spatial practice, but by changing the existing terrain of communicational space which may result in ‘renegotiating the terms of engagement’ (Pappano 2001, p. 2) and the rules for sociality. So long as there are social barriers that separate people into different groups of interests and different positions in the hierarchy of fame and power, there will be fragmentations in the online world that make the ubiquity of social connectivity impossible.

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Notes

1 Boase et al. (2006) and Kayahara and Wellman (2006) also find that people also use the Internet to access persons outside of their central social networks when seeking information about important decisions. Such activities
have their corollaries in the offline world of telephone and interpersonal contacts.

2 The work of Bernard, Killworth and their collaborators shows that network size depends upon the definition of the relationships; networks of acquaintances may be 10 or more times the size of those with whom we have consistent contact. See, for example, Bernard et al (1990; 1991, 2008).

3 To be fair, Chayko’s publisher confounded the two types of connection, Chayko does not.

4 A reviewer brought to our attention Harrison and Dourish’s (1996) work on ‘space’ and ‘place’ in computer-supported collaborations. Put simply, their view of space is that it provides an ‘opportunity’ for interaction and place is a space ‘invested with understandings of behavioral appropriateness, cultural expectations, and so forth. . . . Place, not space, frames appropriate behavior.’ (1996: 4). Harrison and Dourish focus on the cultural understandings that frame relationships. As we describe below, copresence is about a mutuality of awareness and expectations — including but not limited to the appropriate and cultural — between persons.

References


Shanyang Zhao is Associate Professor of Sociology at Temple University. He received his PhD in sociology from the University of Maryland at College Park. Prior to joining the Temple faculty in 1997, he worked as a senior research associate at the Institute for Social Research in the University of Michigan. His research interests include Internet and human interaction, metatheory and mental health. His recent publications have appeared in Information Technology & People, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, New Media & Society, Presence, Sociological Inquiry, and Symbolic Interaction. Address: Department of Sociology, Temple University, 1115 W. Berks Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA. [email: bzhao001@temple.edu]

David Elesh is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Social Science Data Library at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An urban sociologist, his work primarily involves the study of changes in industrial structure and their consequences for inequality. Long involved with the application of IT to teaching and research, he is a former chair of the American Sociological Association’s section on Communications and Information Technologies. He has co-authored two books, the second of which, Philadelphia: Regional Restructuring and Metropolitan Divisions, will be published in 2008 by Temple University Press, and published numerous articles in sociological journals. Address: Department of Sociology, Temple University, 1115 W. Berks Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA. [email: delesh@temple.edu]