Making a Place for Seniors on the Net:
SeniorNet, Senior Identity, and the Digital Divide

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Expanding the Story of the Digital Divide

The most recent edition of the annual "Falling Through the Net" report from the U.S. Department of Commerce says that people aged 50 and older are among those groups who are least likely to be Internet users [1]. While we might question whether demographic categories are the most useful way to track Internet use, it's clear that these categories are dominant in conversations about the digital divide. In this paper, we will follow that thread to look at the digital divide for the category of seniors, based on our year-long study of SeniorNet, an organization that supports seniors in learning about technology. By focusing on seniors as a group, we conform to the discourse of the digital divide. At the same time, we want to open up this discourse, to move outside of its conventional story lines and categories. We are both speaking the language of the digital divide and questioning some of its assumptions.

Most of the seniors we encountered in our study use the Net for many purposes—email with family and friends, consumer research, shopping, hobbies, and news. However, we focus here on seniors' ongoing participation in the Internet *through* their collective identity as seniors, just as they do when they choose to participate in SeniorNet. We are interested in the distinctive character of SeniorNet as an access site. How do people form identifications with particular online content? How do communal affiliations change people's conditions of access? Our example tells a partial story about the far side of the digital divide.

In the language of the digital divide, the Internet is a resource for obtaining information, goods, and services, with increasing relevance for education and career opportunities. In general, the Internet is figured as a site for diverse forms of consumption, mostly oriented to individual users. SeniorNet, by contrast, is an Internet destination centered around social activity. It is possible to browse through SeniorNet as a casual visitor, gleaning information from the news and comments posted on the site, but the visible forms of participation in SeniorNet involve social exchanges with other people. SeniorNet members point to the special style of social interaction in SeniorNet as a key factor in its attraction and relevance to their online interests.

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Social affiliation is increasingly recognized as a relevant feature of Internet access, but the digital divide debate is anchored in a model of information access as one of the primary goals and benefits of being online. The notion that computer networking is an "information infrastructure" and that "information is one of the nation's most critical economic resources" [2, 1] is the dominant model for understanding the value of the Net as a public resource. Based on this model, those concerned with issues in differential access have rightly argued that we need to be concerned about "information haves and have-nots" [3-5].

Lee Sproull and Samer Faraj describe some of the implications of this model: "The pursuit of information – the cruise or the browse – is implicitly solitary; hundreds or thousands of people may search at the same time, but each is independent and unaware of others" [6, 63]. Sproull and Faraj suggest that the Net should be considered a social as well as an information technology: "People on the net... are not only looking for information; they are also looking for affiliation, support, and affirmation." [6, 65].

A few years ago, the HomeNet study released some provocative and widely-publicized findings suggesting that Internet use causes depression and declines in social involvement. The study's authors advocate for policies that support uses of the Net that are interpersonal and lead to strong social ties rather than only information access [7]. This research project is one of the few to examine home-based access and to analyze the effects of using different kinds of Internet software. Specifically, this study uses email to exemplify interpersonal uses of the Internet, and it uses the Web to exemplify information or entertainment uses of the Internet. The HomeNet study found that email was the preferred application, that it was a more stable use than the Web, and that it predicted longer-term usage of the Internet, whereas the Web did not. They conclude that the Internet may have a primary benefit as a tool for interpersonal communication, much like the telephone [8-10].

Our study of SeniorNet is in alignment with the general HomeNet approach of differentiating between uses of the Net and stressing the value of interpersonal dimensions of Net access. However, we would like to push further in interrogating how specific uses of the Net are related to social involvement. We argue that it is crucial to differentiate usage not only by software applications and individuals, but also by shared content and group activity. Communication between individuals results in strong social ties when those communications are part of a shared social, cultural, and historical group context. In other words, we advocate analyzing Net usage along communal and qualitative variables such as content areas and community contexts, which can cross-cut different technologies such as the Web, email, Usenet newsgroups, chat, and bulletin boards.[6]

We argue that we must attend to communal categories if we want to understand interpersonal uses of the Net. We must extend our view beyond a focus on individual benefits and communications to take into account communal affiliation, cultural context, and social practices. To understand social alienation, a crucial variable is membership in an online group, which is tied to long-term relationships and cultural identification with the content of the Net. In Seniornet, we found that this sense of identification was a key factor in supporting technology access. These kinds of factors may explain other aspects of the HomeNet study's findings, such

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[6] The HomeNet analysis of depression and social involvement excludes group uses of email (such as distribution lists), Usenet newsgroups, MUDs, and Internet Relay Chat, as these do not represent private person-to-person communication [9].

as why race is a resilient variable despite the elimination of economic barriers to access. Other studies have also found that even with comparable incomes, Blacks and Hispanics lag behind Whites in PC ownership and online access [11], pointing to resilient social and cultural barriers to access.

In our study of SeniorNet, we are interested in how everyday social practices in a communal context are related to Internet access. We pay particular attention to the ways people characterize their affiliation with SeniorNet and the social networks they encounter there. Although we are looking at seniors as a demographic category, we do not treat them as a homogeneous group, nor do we treat the Internet as a homogeneous destination. SeniorNet is a culturally and socially distinctive setting that stresses communal support and social interaction. Similarly, the seniors on SeniorNet are not necessarily a representative sample of seniors facing the digital divide. SeniorNetters are notably literate and technically competent, and many of them play a leadership role in drawing other seniors to the Net. Rather than focus on factors and accounts of access that attach to individuals, we focus here on SeniorNet itself, as a setting where the participation of many individuals creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Study Background, Methods, and Analytical Approach

SeniorNet is a nonprofit organization that was founded in 1986 with the mission to "provide older adults education for and access to computer technology to enhance their lives and enable them to share their knowledge and wisdom" [12]. The organization's history spans over fifteen years and four different online services [13-17]. SeniorNet now has about 20,000 members and 4,000 volunteers. It is a "bricks and clicks destination", since it supports online communities on the World Wide Web and America Online (AOL) and about 200 local learning centers where seniors can go to take basic computer classes. Both of the online sites provide chat capabilities and many roundtables (bulletin board-style discussion groups) on topics such as health, literature, and religion.

In 1998, we conducted a yearlong ethnographic study of SeniorNet [18, 19]. We interviewed staff members, observed online activity on the Web and on AOL over a period of months, attended classes in three Bay Area learning centers, and interviewed twenty online community members and Learning Center students. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on how members gained access to computers, the Internet, and SeniorNet, and what they found compelling about computer and online use. The interviews were conducted primarily via phone, though we interviewed three members in person and one via online chat. We observed sixteen classes and conducted nine follow-up phone interviews with students at the SeniorNet Learning Centers. We also observed a variety of roundtables and created a roundtable of our own for discussing our research with community members.

Although not generally part of public policy discussions of Internet access, ethnographic description and cultural analysis can be important tools for understanding the varied ways in which people encounter the Internet and make it their own. For example, in a study of Trinidadian use of the Internet, Daniel Miller and Don Slater write: "What we were observing was not so much people's use of 'the Internet' but rather how they assembled various technical possibilities that added up to *their* Internet" [20, 14]. This is our entry point for examining access issues for diverse social groups. It is not sufficient to look at whether individuals do or don't have access to online resources; we must also investigate how people form affinities with particular aspects of online life.

In our analysis of SeniorNet, we pay attention to how social identities are described and enacted. SeniorNet is explicitly associated with the "senior" demographic category, which is not a neutral variable that simply denotes age; rather, it is saturated with popular understandings of what being a senior is about. We do not attempt here to evaluate our own assumptions about what it means to be a senior, but we do look at how the people of SeniorNet address this question themselves in their online interactions. Of course, being a senior is not an exclusive social identity. People are members of multiple, often spatially-dispersed communities, each catering to different identities and social needs. SeniorNet is just one of many possible online affiliations, but it is one that centers on a particular set of identity issues.

In their Trinidadian Internet study, Miller and Slater argue that, contrary to much of the rhetoric of cyberspace as a place to depart from the local identities and contexts, "We found utterly the opposite. Trinidadians – particularly those living away – invest much energy in trying to make online life as Trinidadian as they can make it, to see the Internet as a place to perform Trini-ness." [20, 7]. We find similar dynamics at work in the SeniorNet case.

Making a Place for Seniors On the Net

The main focus of SeniorNet's online presence is its roundtables. Each of these is staffed by a volunteer host who welcomes new people, keeps the discussion going, and moderates conflicts. The roundtables are noticeably different from one another in tone and rhythm. For example, the SeniorNet Café gets hundreds of postings each day, mostly light and chatty comments on what's happening that day. The AlAnon group generates about ten messages a week, usually from people exchanging advice and encouragement on how to handle crises with alcoholic relatives. All of this is public activity—the postings are readable by anyone, including non-SeniorNet members. But most groups have a core of regulars, and often people's postings include comments directed to particular people, though readable to all.

Support and caring are considered particularly emblematic of SeniorNet across its different roundtables and chat areas. When we first introduced ourselves online, we asked people for advice about how we could get to know SeniorNet. A frequent suggestion was that we should go look in the sympathy and bereavement roundtable, to see the quality of support SeniorNet people give each other.

When we asked about key events in SeniorNet's history, SeniorNet member Betty Reid Soskin posted this message about how she used SeniorNet while her mother was dying:

> I felt that I grew into a deep sense of my own mortality through mother's passing, and did it with the help and support of people I'd never met. There were retired physicians, therapists, health educators, just good virtual 'friends', psychologists and social workers - on hand and ready when I'd return home each night from the nursing home. They were able to help me to think through some of the hardest decisions I've ever had to make; decisions which literally had life and death consequences…I've kept those notes and consider the experience one of the most enriching of my life. Have always been very grateful for the fact that all of those sometimes crippling emotions were able to find expression online and there was little residual sadness when it was over. I suspect that's why I'm still here. Have wanted to be a part of that kind of support for others who may need it, I think.

This message was posted in our research roundtable, and it was followed by notes from several people who were newcomers when this event took place: one who said she "was so impressed, both with her beautiful prose and with the help and support she received at that time," and another who referred to Betty as a "great role model for 'staying with her own truth'" and

"opening up." The support people find in SeniorNet is produced in a common social space, where it is visible to onlookers and becomes a public resource for people to understand what kind of place SeniorNet is—and should continue to be.

Throughout our observations, we were struck by SeniorNet's remarkably warm and welcoming atmosphere. Everyone in our research group had spent time in numerous network communities, and we were all surprised by the amount of caretaking that goes on in this one. It is an unusually supportive and civil corner of the Net.

SeniorNet's emphasis on mutual support is linked to a related set of behavioral expectations for SeniorNet participants. SeniorNet participants are encouraged to adhere to the prevailing norms, to preserve the low-key character of the site. SeniorNetters who have controversial views or styles of interaction are seen as transgressing boundaries. One active SeniorNet member was felt to be especially challenging; she often expressed views that were at odds with group norms and raised people's hackles. People tried hard to contain her provocative remarks, but it was hard to do this without violating the dominant norms of SeniorNet behavior. Some people did engage head-on in controversial discussions in the roundtables, while others chose private email or a determined silence instead. The transgressor herself was aware of her impact on other people in SeniorNet, and she felt alternately frustrated and entertained by the group's mainstream values; she saw her own role as a kind of useful gadfly. She complained about the "pervasive sameness" of the online conversations and the need to conform in order to fit in, and she did not appreciate people's attempts to change her interaction style. Clearly, SeniorNet is a space that works best for those who are willing to accede to the group's norms for senior attitudes and behaviors.

We don't want to imply that people are always calm and friendly—the religion and politics groups get heated here, just as they do elsewhere. But the tone is generally polite, and many people told us that this is why they prefer SeniorNet to other areas of the Internet. One volunteer host told us that *all* the senior web sites he participated in had a high standard of courtesy. "It's just a matter of age," he said. "You know, people are supposed to get old and cranky, but no, they generally tend to get old and mellow… It's the young people who are uptight all the time. A lot of the time, let's say."

This supportive stance also extends to technical help. Newcomers are encouraged to ask questions, and it is common for people to ask technology questions in the middle of a discussion about something else—to find out what an acronym means, or how to produce those colorful fonts in a posting, or how to set up new chat software. How-to questions popped up in every roundtable we observed. This is a notable exception to the prevailing customs in most Internet discussion groups (and indeed, an exception to the standard rules of netiquette that have been codified from prevailing customs). Elsewhere on the Net, people are often chided or flamed for making off-topic comments, but here, technical assistance is always on tap. It is part of the basic character of the community.

The digital divide metaphor suggests a single crossing, a single moment of transition from no access to access. But it is not just newcomers who need technical help, since Internet technologies and service arrangements continue to change rapidly. Crossing the digital divide is something that has to be done many times, not just once. When people get online, they need to find ways to keep up as the technology changes beneath their feet. For sustained participation in

the Internet, people must be embedded in a social network of technology use, like those available to SeniorNet members.

In addition to support in crisis and technical help, people also emphasized to us the value of being with others who share their own interests and experiences. A number of the roundtables focus on topics of special interest to seniors: World War II memories, nostalgia, arthritis, hips and knees, death and dying. Even in groups whose topics appear less related to age, people tend to establish common ground around similar life experiences. For example, the AlAnon group's discussions followed familiar AlAnon themes—people talked through the steps in the 12-step program and ended their postings with tags like "One day at a time" and "Let go and let God". But here, most of their "qualifying relatives," the family members whose alcoholism had prompted them to join AlAnon, were their grown children and grown grandchildren. So they also asked each other advice about how they should respond when a child's marriage fractured because of alcoholism, or how they should handle their children's requests to move back home for awhile.

In general, people find SeniorNet a comfortable place to hang out. Bud Robb, a long-time SeniorNet member and volunteer, explained his long participation in SeniorNet:

> When I first got online, we were all on Genie, and I joined Genie too. And there was none of the sense of community there, none at all. SeniorNet created, whether it was artificial or not, it created a sense of hey, you belong here. You know, you're comfortable here. People are here because they are your age, and they're learning the way you are learning. Without a doubt there was a validity to that.

A great deal of work goes into creating this sense of comfort, particularly for people who are new to the Internet and SeniorNet. Although there are several roundtables that were designed for beginners to practice the basics of online communication (such as the "Newbie Nook"), hosts worry (very reasonably) that the newcomers won't manage to find them. So several hosts have developed a practice of dividing up the hundreds of roundtables and trolling through them every day, scanning each posting to look for people who seem to be confused or hesitant. When they identify newcomers, they send off a friendly welcome letter with hints about how to get the most out of SeniorNet. Jeanne Lee, one of the five hosts who performs this role, estimates that approximately two hundred welcome letters are emailed out every month.

Most of the content on the SeniorNet sites is generated by online hosts and members, unlike commercial sites that focus on professionally-produced content. Marcie Schwarz, the staff member who oversees SeniorNet's online activity, describes this as a self-conscious policy on the part of the organization. Schwarz is in close contact with the volunteers and encourages them to take responsibility whenever possible. Although community members do turn to her occasionally to mediate disputes, she encourages community members to resolve their own problems and define the content and norms of their community. She explains:

> On our site, the goal has always been to encourage active participation. . . We thought that we were creating a structure for an online community in which they could collaborate and support one another. That has been our objective. I think people see that it's a place [to go] if they want to get more than just information like on a search engine.

The nonprofit status of SeniorNet and its philosophy of community empowerment are key factors in the distinctive character of the online sites. Staff point out that volunteer help has been an ongoing necessity because of limited funds. While this could be considered a limitation to growth, it has also created a strong sense of community ownership that has enabled a sense of solidarity and personal investment among community members.

In the conventional discourse of the digital divide, the most dynamic element is the movement of people who are crossing the divide to become users of technology—the destination appears fixed, except in terms of ongoing technological change. What we want to draw attention to here is the way seniors create a destination for themselves through their communal online activity. Seniors are not taking the Net as they find it. Through their communal affiliation, they are making some parts of it into the kind of place *they* want to be, where the content and style are relevant and inviting.

Working with Senior Identity on the Internet

In their discussion of communities and learning, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger propose that the problem of learning is often relational one rather than a purely cognitive one [21]. Failure to learn, whether it is about learning to read or learning to use technology, is often about whether one relates to and identifies with a social group that embodies the expertise in question. Learning goes hand in hand with participation in a community of practice. If we apply Lave and Wenger's framework to the question of Internet access, we need to analyze what kinds of cultural associations and what kinds of social practices surround certain uses of technology. Does the Internet cater to the styles, interests, and values of particular social groups? Are there certain identity categories (based on gender, race, or age, or other groupings) that are supported or not supported on the Net? And if so, what kind of work needs to be done to challenge the cultural associations and practices that might feel uncomfortable or exclusionary to some?

Most SeniorNetters do not display factors that generally characterize populations considered at risk in the digital divide debates. Large surveys of participants and our smaller sample of interviewees suggest that online members are typically Caucasian, well-educated, suburban, and middle-class [16, 17]. At the same time, seniors—and SeniorNet participants are no exception—suffer from stereotypes that characterize seniors as technophobic and technologically incompetent. Age identity probably trumps other cultural categories such as gender and race in popular beliefs about affinity with information technology. Children are thought to take naturally to computers and the Internet, and seniors are thought to lie at the opposite pole. Simple technology is often described as something that "even my grandmother could use." Leslie Regan Shade, in her exploration of gender and access issues, has argued that "masculine values" are pervasive on the Net and may deter access for women [22, 38]. Similarly, we might consider the dominant (though probably not majority) culture of Internet groups to be centered around cultural references and rhetorical styles that are oriented toward the youth-oriented imagination of the baby boom generation, much like the hip countercultural attitude of *Wired* magazine.[7]

Age does not contribute to as broad a disparity in access as economic or regional factors, but the disparity is still significant [11, 24-26]. Seniors above the age of 65, in particular, have much lower rates of computer and online access [26]. The trend, however, is for seniors to be adopting computers in large numbers [26, 27], attesting to a shift in the age basis of computer users. However, greater numbers of seniors going online does not necessarily translate to their representation in the online universe. Representation means more than the means to access a particular context; it also entails having a voice and encountering interesting and useful content.

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[7] It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a cultural analysis of Internet culture at large. See [23] for a critique of the technology elite represented in *Wired.*

The seniors we encountered in SeniorNet provide us with a portrait of a group of seniors who have overcome the technophobic stereotype, while at the same time retaining a strong identity as seniors. SeniorNet works as a performance space for being a particular kind of senior, one who conforms to many stereotypes of what a senior is, but who resists some stereotypes. SeniorNet is an exercise in the reshaping of an identity category, retaining associations and practices that members feel are valuable—such as behaving with warmth and civility toward others—and challenging negative aspects such as the idea that seniors are averse to technology.

People talked a lot about senior identity, both with us and with each other. In many of their online discussions, SeniorNetters explored the elusive boundaries of becoming and being a senior. One contributor wondered if she might start watching Lawrence Welk or enjoying tuna-noodle casserole, since she'd noticed that seniors have a tendency to become more bland over time. Another said she was surprised one day when she looked in the mirror and saw her grandmother staring back at her. Another commented that she had "aged 20 years in a couple of weeks" after her mother died—not because *she* felt any different, but because suddenly people started talking to her as they had talked to her mother. Another wrote, "Now that I no longer care what make and model an automobile is, I think 'Gads! I've become my mother.'" Each of these observations was followed up by "me-too" postings from other SeniorNetters. In these messages, people were turning the senior category over, looking at it to see how other people might be looking at them.

In one of our first online encounters in SeniorNet, we were challenged to explain why there were no seniors on our research team. People wondered aloud whether we could really understand what went on in SeniorNet, and they also mentioned that there were perfectly well-qualified social science researchers among the seniors who were active online. That is, age matters, but not in the ways *we* might think.

One SeniorNet member describes this difference between an internal sense of affinity with other seniors and an externally-imposed view of seniors:

> Like attracts like…seniors attract seniors. That is not to say I don't mingle or socialize with younger people, I do.. However my comfort zone is with people I can relate to and with…Some of the youth of today do not understand us. They categorize us in one lump image. Not so, and we as seniors know it. Each day is the day I again start to live.

Similarly, several SeniorNetters had pointed suggestions for us: since "a senior is what the younger generation perceives as one," they said, we should ask younger people if we want to know what a senior is like. We're just *normal*, they said—it's the young people who think we're different.

SeniorNetters are quite clear that seniorness is a label imposed from the outside, a category produced by non-seniors more than by themselves. They are, at the same time, aware of the strategic value of the senior category, as it defines the space of SeniorNet and is mobilized in the world at large in places such as the digital divide debate. By participating in SeniorNet, members are making use of the external senior category. At the same time, they are opening up to internal debate what it means to occupy that category in ways that outsiders would not necessarily understand.

While people objected to blanket characterizations of seniors, most valued SeniorNet as a place with unique characteristics, defined in opposition to Internet culture at large. SeniorNetters linked the warmth, civility of SeniorNet to the participants' identity as seniors. One member

notes, "A lot of people come on SeniorNet and other places and say, 'I just got so tired of the youngsters out there doing all the dumb things they're doing on chat and so forth.'" Another SeniorNet member, D. Pat Cooper, objected to some of the language found on the Net at large: "As soon as I see a bad word or a cuss word in a chat room or filthy talk—and there is a lot of that—I just leave." In other words, SeniorNet demonstrates how being an up-to-date user of technology doesn't require one to adopt other aspects of Net culture that many seniors may find objectionable.

In terms of technology access, the key question here is how a place like SeniorNet is able to support technology use for seniors through this unique communal context. Adept technology users on SeniorNet described a variety of resources they had relied on for their initial access to the Internet and their ongoing learning about technology use. These included friends, family, colleagues, and community center classes, as well as online help. While recognizing that access to technology needs to be grounded in a range of supportive social contexts, we focus here on the unique contributions of SeniorNet in supporting technology access.

The culturally distinctive context of SeniorNet supports technology use in two ways. First, SeniorNet provides concrete technical help keyed to the learning styles of seniors. As we have described, SeniorNet roundtables are characterized by a uniquely open and helpful style, in sharp contrast to many other areas of the Net that demand a certain level of technical expertise in order to participate even in getting help. Secondly, SeniorNet members function as role models, displaying their identity as technology-using seniors and encouraging other seniors to make this identity shift. Jeanne Lee, a SeniorNet host, describes the kind of shift SeniorNet promotes:

> I think we were all leery of [the technology] at first, and kind of feeling our way along. But when new people come in now, they see everybody in their own age group doing all these kinds of things and they think, 'well, you know, this one's seventy, I'm only sixty-eight. If she can do it, why can't I? I'm going to learn how.'

One posting by a frequent participant in a SeniorNet newcomer's roundtable embodied the spirit of those providing technical support:

> Hang in with us here at SeniorNet. We all had the same problems, at one time, that you do now. Most of the time you'll get an answer to your questions—if we think we can help. At times we can't—But that's rare :-). At times we may be away or busy doing other things, but eventually someone picks up the ball and runs with it. In a few short years you'll be as good as the grandkids, or more likely, better :-)
>
> Ram34
> SeniorNet member

The relation between identity and access is particularly central for seniors, and SeniorNet self-consciously works through a process of identity transformation to support seniors' access to technology. In our discussions with members about how they learned how to use technology, most described it as a relatively easy task once they decided to do it. SeniorNet embodies this stance—a great deal of energy is directed at overcoming people's initial reservations about technology, the cultural barrier to access that says that computers are not appropriate tools for seniors. As a by-product of underwriting a Net-based senior community, SeniorNet also becomes a site for the production of a technologically-empowered senior identity. Sheltered from the often caustic and youth-oriented culture of the Net at large, SeniorNet is a place that is

localized for social practices that are particularly suited to the interests, needs, and aspirations of many seniors.

Conclusion

We want to use the SeniorNet case to shift some of the assumptions that underlie the digital divide project. The familiar language of the digital divide is about deficiency and anxiety—gaps that must be bridged before they grow too large, people who are in danger of being left behind, and information haves and have-nots. In SeniorNet, we see instead people who are interested in using the Internet as long as it seems relevant for people like them, and who change the Net as they use it. The Internet is not a comprehensive, one-size-fits-all destination, but a site for diverse forms of participation. As a consequence, there are multiple digital divides and multiple ways of addressing them. To support broader access, we need to understand and make visible the unique cultural contexts through which people create their own uses and meanings for technology.

We have an expansive notion of online access—it is not just about acquiring equipment, finding an Internet service provider, and learning how to use email and the Web, but a trickier matter of enrolling people into a place they feel they belong, a place for people like themselves. The sense of belonging people feel for SeniorNet has to do with being among other seniors, yet seniorness is also at stake here. People talk online about the senior category, debating what it means and whether or not they think it fits them. SeniorNet is a site people use to perform being a senior and interrogate it at the same time. By collecting people around a senior identity, the SeniorNet site strategically makes use of the category to position itself vis-à-vis the world at large. At the same time, it provides an open space for seniors to be themselves, challenge stereotypes, and explore their diversities, particularly the idea that seniors are not necessarily adverse to technology.

The non-profit aspect of SeniorNet has been important in supporting this sense of community empowerment. While it is not inconceivable that a commercial effort could support such a community, the nonprofit context allows for a sense of community ownership and distributed responsibility that is at odds with the interests of a profit-making venture. By necessity and design, the SeniorNet organization has allowed members to grow the community over many years into something of their own making. Sustained by a (changing) critical mass of core participants, SeniorNet has emerged as a resilient and long-standing community that can handle the comings and goings of individual participants. Stakeholding in a community is a shared social responsibility and a meaningful personal interest, not a financial investment or transaction. The Net will become a truly diverse and democratic domain not through corporations marketing to and providing content to a diverse clientele, but through diverse people actually having a stake in and responsibility for their own forms of participation on the Net.

The SeniorNet case provides a window into online access for a demographic group that is not well-represented on the Internet. When we talk about representation, we mean both the actual numbers of seniors online and their cultural representation, the sense in which the content of the Internet reflects the cultural references of this particular social group. Enfranchisement is not a matter of possession (I have access or I don't), but rather it is a model of social and cultural *inclusion*—which points to issues of identity, belonging, relevance, and meaning. Being "marginal" means having neither the means to participate nor the shared context to do so.

SeniorNet has contributed to seniors' representation on the Net in both senses—and it has done so by striking a balance between providing a context for identification (around a diffuse "senior" identity) and creating openness for group members to self-organize and mobilize on their own terms. It is crucial for this kind of online presence to be supported for seniors as well as other underrepresented populations.

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