

**Dramas, fields, and threads:
exploring sociality in a Malaysian cyberdistrict¹**

Paper to the workshop
'Complementing Community:
Expanding the Conceptual Repertoire of Sociation'
Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA) Annual Conference 2006
Concordia University, Montreal, May 9-13

John Postill
University of Sheffield Hallam, UK
jpostill@usa.net

First of all, I'd like to thank Vered for inviting me to this session, for which we've been asked to experiment ethnographically 'with one or more concepts of sociation (sociality) that go beyond the usual familiar but often vague and general notions of community, collectivity, etc.'² Also, I must apologise for the change of title, as originally I had proposed to discuss Stephen Reyna's notion of 'string being'. Unfortunately, I didn't manage to tie in this idea with my ethnography, although I do propose towards the end of this paper the related notion of 'threaded sociality'.

In 2003-2004 I carried out fieldwork in USJ (short for UEP Subang Jaya), a recently completed middle-class suburb of Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia. The initial aim was to find out whether new digital technologies were making any significant difference to the governance of this multiethnic locality, especially to its processes of ethnic identity formation³. What I found in USJ was a thriving Internet activism scene coalescing around specific issues such as crime, traffic, education, and parenting. At the heart of this activism lay the struggles of middle-class families – most of them ethnic Chinese -- to reproduce their economic and cultural capital in a poorly serviced suburban frontier.

My first attempt at organising my data back in the UK was to arrange the various grassroots initiatives along a continuum that went from community-like social formations at one end, to network-like formations at other end. At the community end, for instance, I placed a 'gated community' that had tightened its security by means of new technologies and neighbourhood events. At the network end of the spectrum, I placed a loose network of Internet activists stretching across divides of project and neighbourhood.

With hindsight, the trouble with this framework was that, by a priori positing two dominant formations (community and network) I was explaining away a key problem in need of explanation, namely what difference, if any, digital technologies are making to the formation of social and political relations in the suburb. I was not alone, though, in this conceptual foreclosing. In the burgeoning literature on Internet localisation (i.e., how local residents, firms and authorities around the world are appropriating the Internet to pursue local aims), community and network are precisely *the* paradigmatic concepts of sociation. Since I have discussed elsewhere the problems that come with relying on community and network for this task (Postill forthcoming),

rather than repeat that argument here I shall bracket out this conceptual pair and proceed to explore alternative concepts in the study of Internet localisation.

I'd like to experiment with two sets of concepts, one set linked to the concept of field, the other to the concept of residential sociality. Let me talk about field first.

Field, drama, sodality, arena

Perhaps I should start by clarifying that I'm using the concept of **field** not in its general sense of 'social field' – which has its uses as well – but rather as a shorthand for 'field of organised striving' (Martin 2003). More specifically, I'm using it to try and make sense of the motivations and actions of Internet activists in USJ both in relation to one another and to powerful external fields such as the local bureaucracy, the police, the press, etc. I am defining local activism, therefore, as a field whose practitioners have specific interests and strategies of capital accumulation (Johnson 1993: 8); that is, they are all striving after the same rewards. Thus, in the field of art, a consecrated artist is in effect a 'symbolic banker' who has accumulated symbolic capital (prestige, honour, renown, etc) and can lend some of it to favoured newcomers (Bourdieu 1993: 77).

Fields have their own 'fundamental laws'. In 19th century France, for instance, the ideal of 'art for art's sake' became such a law within the field of art. This strengthened the field's autonomy from the economic field (Bourdieu 1993: 21, 62). In their 'upside-down economic world' artists have an 'interest in disinterestedness'; that is, commercial success in the mass market may deplete their symbolic capital within the restricted codes of their art form (1993: 40)⁴. By analogy, in the USJ field of local activism the two fundamental laws are *turun padang* and volunteerism. The Malay phrase literally means 'to go down (*turun*) to the field (*padang*)', i.e. to work with people 'on the ground'. *Turun padang* is the prerequisite of grassroots efficacy *for those regarded as powerful outsiders*. It is not sufficient in itself, but a necessary first step towards helping to resolve local problems. Powerful outsiders (politicians, civil servants, police chiefs, newspaper editors, etc) must first go down to the ground to understand what the problems are. This demands more than a token presence, e.g. shortly before an election. Outsiders must *prove* that that they are helping 'the community' by solving a tangible problem such as a clogged drain, a broken lamppost or a shortage of Mandarin-medium schools. The proof of the *padang* is in the doing.

The other fundamental law of the field – volunteerism -- applies to insiders, not outsiders. This law is repeatedly expressed in conversation and writing, both online and offline. As Raymond Tan, a prominent activist, put it to me: 'We don't want people's money, we want their time'. Like Bourdieu's 19th century French artists, USJ activists have an 'interest in disinterestedness'. They inhabit a topsy-turvy economic world in which commercial interests have to be kept at bay for the sake of 'the community'. Thus, Raymond is currently setting himself up as a multilevel marketing agent with a US-based company. Although he is drawing on his personal network (which includes fellow local activists) to develop his business, he needs to exercise utmost care 'so that people won't say I'm abusing my platform' as a grassroots leader. So the field of local activism is imbued with a volunteerist ethos that clashes both with the profit motive of private enterprise and with the social logic of networked individualism (cf. Wellman et al. 2003).

When considered together, these two laws – volunteerism and *turun padang* – point at a key ‘structural contradiction’ (Turner 1996 [1957]) in the field. On the one hand, it is a strongly egalitarian field in which all social agents, whatever their standing in the wider world, must ‘get their hands dirty’ to earn respect and trust. On the other hand, the Malay verb *turun* (to go down, to descend) indexes the hierarchical structure to which field agents are ultimately subservient; namely the three-tiered administrative apparatus of the nation-state. Successful activists like Raymond have a strong ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1993) of operating along both the horizontal axis of volunteerism and the vertical axis of *turun padang*.

So far I have stressed the more stable aspects of the field. Yet all fields of organised striving are subject to sudden changes and crises. In 2004, this particular field went through a **social drama** that was widely covered by the Malaysian mass media. This drama provides us with an insight into how local activists are appropriating the Internet to pursue their aims. It also reveals the workings of the laws of *turun padang* and volunteerism, and their effects on Internet localisation. The term social drama was coined by the other major field theorist besides Bourdieu, Victor Turner. It refers to a form of conflict that originates within a social group but can spread across a wider inter-group field unless appropriate ‘redressive action’ is taken (Turner 1996 [1957]: 91, 1974: 128-32). Social dramas usually unfold around crises in the political lives of key individuals and point at structural contradictions within the group or broader social field (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 98). Four stages can be discerned in their unfolding: (1) breach, (2) crisis, (3) redressive action, and (4) re-integration or schism (Turner 1996 [1957]: 91-115). We can flesh out this schematic description through a campaign that took place in USJ late in 2004.

Breach

The USJ social drama in question concerned the building of a food court on land reserved for a police station (*M. balai polis*). It was triggered by a perceived breach of the regular norms governing relations between residents’ groups and the local council. The drama began on 22 September 2004 when Raymond started a thread on USJ.com.my, the suburb’s most popular Web forum. The thread was entitled ‘A new balai?’ and the contents of that first posting were also sent to subscribers of USJ.com.my’s mailing list under the heading ‘A new police station?’:

From: Raymond Tan
To: usj_subangjaya@yahoogroups.com
Sent: Wednesday, September 22, 2004 4:57 PM
Subject: [uSJ NewsGroup] A new police station?

The construction has just started but sorry to disappoint you, folks. It isn't for a new balai that we have been asking for! The land which we understand to be reserved for the future expansion of the existing mini-balai in USJ8 has instead being leased out to a private individual who has sub-leased it to Pack Connexion Sdn. Bhd., to be turned into a food court. This food court will be called Subang Food Garden with 107 food stalls, e.g. 35 for halal food and 72 for non-halal food. Operating hours will be from 5pm to 3am or 7am to 3am, subject to confirmation. What do you feel about this new development? We have created a quick poll to solicit your response. Go to www.nwatch.net.my to cast your vote!

Raymond frequently uses mailing lists to direct subscribers to his own Web portal, Nwatch.net.my, which specialises in crime prevention. The aim of the poll was, of course, to mobilise residents against an imputed council's breach of their duty to serve the ratepayers, with the implication of a hidden profit motive. The following day another well-known activist replied both to the USJ.com.my web forum and to the mailing list suggesting that there may be 'somebody in MPSJ [the local council] promoting Food Courts in SJ/USJ'. The fact that the land was reserved for a police station made the issue 'even fishier'.

Crisis

By Saturday 25 September, the discussion had spread to other local mailing lists. In an email sent to five mailing lists across the field of local activism, a resident asked for advice on the recently launched campaign to text local MPs and state assemblymen via SMS protesting the building of the food court. The resident had received an SMS reply from the state assemblyman suggesting that they contact the council directly (the same response had been reported by a web forum poster the day before). Raymond replied by encouraging others to feed the politicians' responses back to the mailing list, or alternatively to either the Nwatch or USJ.com.my portals. This posting was a very clear early indication that a formidable cross-field alliance was in the making. Meanwhile, on the USJ.com.my web forum, Raymond's *balai* thread was growing rapidly. A participant had suggested that all major residents' groups be informed of the campaign, to which Raymond replied: 'worry not - OUR relevant platforms are in constant contact with each other. Right now, all we need most is PEOPLE POWER!'

On Sunday 26 September, Jeff Ooi, the founder of USJ.com.my and an influential blogger on national issues, sent subscribers of all five mailing lists a piece he had recently posted on the portal's news section. The headline left no doubt as to the item's mobilising intent: 'Stop the FOOD-COURT mania!'. The piece chided the MPs and assemblymen for 'keep[ing] mum on the progress of their job to relay the resident's protest to the local council'. It then noted the absence of a project notice board at the building site, 'mandatory of all the erection of new holdings'. This remark resonates with reports of local activism from elsewhere. Faced with powerful interests, people around the world 'have quickly invented resourceful means of resistance' (Abram 1998: 13). Thus, local activists in France 'check whether planning procedures have been correctly followed'. Should any 'procedural lapses' be identified, 'the project can be challenged in the administrative court and any further planning or development works suspended' (Newman 1994: 220, quoted in Abram 1998: 13).

That same day, Raymond announced the recent formation of an S.O.B. (Save Our Balai) Action Committee both on the web forum and in an email to all five mailing lists. In an unusually strongly worded pun, the stated aim was to 'Save our Balai.. from some greedy SOBs who see it fit to sacrifice public interests for other purposes'. He then listed the names and affiliations of the pro-tem committee members, with himself at the helm as Protem Chairman and his Nwatch right hand, Robert Chan, as Deputy Chairman. The other 11 members were recruited from across the field of residential activism. In keeping with the direct appeal character of the campaign,

Raymond ended his email with the passage: 'Our meeting notes will be posted in this forum shortly. Can we count on your support?'

With the formation of S.O.B. we are witnessing the making not of a 'community' but rather of what anthropologists call a **sodality**, 'a group bound together by common goals' (Peterson 2003: 271), or, in some contexts, a 'pantribal association'⁵. The term was traditionally applied to tribal societies lacking in a central government to refer to non-residential groupings that linked people 'across the social boundaries of kinship and village' and were 'important in getting things done -- fighting wars, negotiating settlements, repairing tracks and roads, and so on' (Gillooly 2005). Analogously, the S.O.B. Action Committee was a *field sodality* that cut across boundaries of project, precinct, and personality in order to solve an urgent problem affecting all residents.

On 27 September, Raymond's close ally, Robert Chan, informed web forum subscribers that the campaign to lobby MPs and assemblymen via SMS had 'resulted in jolting each and every one of them into action'. He appended a list of local politicians and their reactions to the texted messages, which ranged from 'full support' to a promise to 'look into the matter'. The following day, Raymond contributed a web and listserv posting in which he identified, like the French activists mentioned earlier, a number of procedural lapses in the food court project: 'But what baffles is how this application could be approved without the green light from Licensing. Fishy, fishy, fishy'. Furthermore, no application had been made to the Engineering Committee, responsible for approving all building work. All this suggested there may be '[a] higher power at play'. That same day, a resident reported on the Nwatch forum having received the following SMS from the state assemblyman, Lee Hwa Beng:

MPSJ had issued a stop work order last Friday. Shall follow up till work stop. Agree the hawker ctr is not suitable. Should built police station only- Hwa Beng

On 3 October the drama's central **arena** (Turner 1996 [1957]) shifted offline when some 200 residents (a large gathering by Malaysian standards) 'held a peaceful protest at the work site under full media coverage', as Raymond put it (see Figure 1). Simultaneously, the S.O.B Action Committee released a statement to the press 'Just to make sure that we do not get mis-quoted'.

Redressive action

The climax of the drama came on 4 October, when the Deputy Home Minister Datuk Noh Omar paid a visit to USJ. Raymond's emotive web announcement captures a rare moment of jubilation, a fleeting moment when the structural contradiction between the laws of *turun padang* and volunteerism was held in abeyance:

We disagreed. We came together. He heard. And he turun padang.

Friends and neighbours, Our Timbalan Menteri Keselamatan Dalam Negeri YB Dato' Noh Omar made a personal visit to USJ 8 Pondok Polis about noon time. After hearing views from all parties concerned (including the operator's rep), he decided that the food court is a 'no-go' and he directed the operator to withdraw the application or he will get Bukit Aman to revoke the lease agreement. He also promised to look into the construction of a new balai by 2005/2006.

Congratulations, folks!

Tune in to RTM and TV3 tonight!

This redressive action by the federal authorities was soon reciprocated by the local activists, who were only too eager, as one of them put it, to ‘complete the cycle’ of the campaign. To this end, the S.O.B. deputy leader, Robert Chan, circulated a message asking residents to show their elected representatives their gratitude by sending them an SMS with the text: ‘Thank you for helping us get back our Balai Polis’.



Figure 1. A local MP shakes hands with the cyberactivist Raymond Tan (standing behind the banner) while they hold a copy of the residents’ statement on the construction of a police station. Source: <http://www.usj.com.my/usjXpress/details.php3?table=usjXpress&ID=366>

Re-integration?

Yet only two months after these happy events, in December 2004, fresh rumours began to circulate online that the operator was planning to resume construction of the food court. On 16 February 2005, the local council approved the project, and physical work reportedly resumed at the site on 18 February. Raymond’s reaction was: ‘Friends and neighbours, are we going to allow these clowns push the FOOD court down our throats?’

Unfortunately, there is no space here to discuss the subsequent unfolding of events, which included a highly unusual offline arena, namely a public hearing held on 26 March 2005⁶. At the time of writing, almost exactly one year after this hearing, activists are reasonably optimistic that the police station will be built with funds from the forthcoming 9th Malaysian Plan. They are not, however, claiming victory just yet.

Implications

This drama demonstrates the limitations of the community/network paradigm for the study of Internet localisation (and any other form of localisation, for that matter). By broadening out the analysis to the wider *field* of local activism in which Raymond operates, we have gained further insights into his individual agency, his relations with other local agents, and the multiple uses of Internet technologies by activists at a critical point in the suburb's history.

Raymond emerged from this drama not as the 'caged monkey' he was made out to be after he accepted public funds for his neighbourhood watch web portal, but rather as a formidable field broker. Like local cyberactivists in other parts of the world, Raymond possesses 'an unusual combination of technical, political and cultural skills' (Coleman 2004: 39) -- skills which he hones not only online, for they are still 'highly dependent upon face-to-face contact' (2004: 39). Throughout the drama, he connected and coordinated the disparate parties involved (activists, politicians, civil servants, journalists, etc) using a range of Internet and telephone technologies as well as face-to-face encounters. At least five mailing lists, two web forums, personal email and mobile telephony were recruited to the intensive campaigning. Two key 'Internet affordances' (Wellman et al. 2003) were exploited to the full, namely hypertextuality and interactivity. Whilst the widely circulated hyperlinks ensured a high degree of message redundancy, the interactive web forum and email threads aided the active participation of residents in the fast-moving drama. The effect was magnified by the high-quality grassroots journalism of Jeff Ooi and by the ample mass media coverage. Crucially for the history of local activism in the township (and indeed in Malaysia), four residents' groups -- ranging from the self-funding through the federal-funded to the local council-funded -- came together for the first time to fight a common cause.

By incorporating into the analysis of this episode anthropological notions such as field, arena, drama, and sodality, as well as folk notions such as *turun padang*, I was able to reach beyond the 'specialized mythology' (Appadurai 1986: 48) of Raymond's neighbourhood. More importantly, I could counter the gravitational pull of community and network as the paradigmatic notions in the study of Internet localisation. Under conditions of rapid social and technological change, with 'settlers' arriving at suburban frontiers at the same time as the Internet and other new social technologies, it is no coincidence that anthropological notions arising from fieldwork with African urban settlers in the 1950s and 1960s are still relevant today (see Werbner 1990, Gledhill 2000). Like rural migrants in the booming urban settlements of Africa during decolonisation, present-day suburbanites in Malaysia find themselves in densely populated settlements with inadequate social and public facilities. The result is the emergence of ad-hoc groupings seeking to address pressing problems. Those groups (many of them short-lived) that cut across parochial and 'tribal' affiliations can be classed as *sodalities*. Unlike the low-income African migrants of a previous generation, however, today's middle-class Malaysians have access to a wealth of modern cultural capital and digital technologies. This episode illustrates their aggregated, Internet-mediated agency in the face of the state's failure to provide for their surveillance needs.

Residential socialities

In this section I'd like to extend the analysis by introducing a set of concepts linked to the plural concept of 'residential socialities'. In her fascinating ethnography of the

first Palestinian intifada (1987-1992), Iris Jean-Klein (2003) goes against the grain of the intifada literature by suggesting that the socialities of houses and committees are intertwined. Whilst in the existing literature, committee sociality is used instrumentally as a metonym for Palestinian sociality writ large, for Jean-Klein this kind of small-scale sociality is worthy of analytical attention in its own right (2003: 557).

I wish to apply this insight to USJ by resisting the impulse to subsume the various forms of residential sociality under a general rubric such as ‘field sociality’. The dangers of such generalisations are only too apparent in the new media literature. For instance, Wittel (2001) distinguishes two kinds of sociality: community v network sociality. Community sociality is the old, pre-modern sociality of slow moving, enduring, physically localised collectivities. By contrast, network sociality is fast-paced and based on fleeting, instrumental encounters (e.g. speed-dating) with a large set of ‘contacts’. Young urban professionals working in new media industries epitomise this latter form of sociality, which Wittel -- following Wellman and Castells -- regards as the dominant sociality of our era.

This sharp distinction between community and network sociality does not stand up to close scrutiny. Vered Amit, in discussing ‘the trouble with community’ as an analytical term (Amit and Rapport 2002), argues that there are numerous social groups that cannot be brought under the banner of emotionally charged notions such as community, diaspora or ethnic group. These include neighbours, co-workers and leisure partners; people who many nevertheless share ‘a sense of contextual fellowship’ that can be ‘partial, ephemeral, specific to and dependent on particular contexts and activities’ (2002: 5). If we add to this complexity the huge proliferation of new forms of digitally mediated sociality in recent years (including chatting, dating, gaming, blogging, texting, viral networking, and smart mobbing), the picture that emerges is one of an increasingly diversified sociality, one that cannot be captured by the community/network pairing.

To exemplify the potential uses of the plural concept of **residential socialities**, I shall now sketch out but two of these socialities in the context of USJ activism, namely patrol sociality and thread sociality.

Patrol sociality

Soon after moving into USJ 18, a leafy precinct with over 500 houses, Raymond Tan had three pairs of shoes stolen over a short period of time while visiting neighbours, who said it was a normal occurrence. Raymond then suggested to them that they organise a *rukun tetangga*, the Malaysian equivalent of a neighbourhood watch scheme, to tackle the problem of local crime. His mostly ethnic Chinese neighbours were reluctant, though, to join a scheme sponsored by the government, seen by Malaysia’s minority groups as favouring the politically dominant Malays. Moreover, the scheme had lain dormant for many years and was widely regarded as ineffectual. So Raymond turned to the Web for inspiration and found neighbourhood watch schemes from Britain, the United States and Australia to emulate. ‘Everything was the same as *rukun tetangga* but without the government. We just repackaged it!’.

In 1999 a 19-strong neighbourhood watch committee was formed. Each committee member would be in charge of organising night patrols for a single street. In its heyday, the scheme had 330 volunteer patrollers looking after the precinct's 536 houses. Patrollers walked the streets in pairs and were advised to report anything suspicious to the police. They carried torches, whistles, batons or long sticks, mobile phones, pen and paper⁷. Except for two women, all other night patrollers were men who volunteered three hours a month. Some women became, however, active patrollers by day. In April 2003, following a spate of snatch thefts that targeted local women, some twenty women created an informal group. The group had no fixed schedule or regular beat for their daytime patrolling. 'This is not just about patrolling. It is more about networking and getting to know the neighbours better'⁸.

Men's night patrols and women's day patrols follow, therefore, different schemas or 'social scripts' (Whitehouse 2001). Whilst night patrols are centrally organised and inflexibly scripted around men's work commitments, women's day patrols are unscheduled, loosely scripted affairs influenced by the vagaries of weather, housework, co-patrollers' availability, etc. This temporal difference reflects, of course, an entrenched gendered division of labour found across Malaysia and elsewhere (Postill 2002, 2006).

What kind of sociality do these patrol scripts engender? Despite their differences, both men's and women's patrolling rely on the same portable technologies (footwear, clothing, baton, whistle, mobile phone, pen, paper) and they both foster a new kind of local sociality that is neither properly 'community' nor 'network' sociality (Wittel 2001). We could call it *patrol sociality*, the side-by-side fellowship of the beat, a rare time-out from the demands of family and workplace – albeit one sanctioned by the keepers of 'family values' (as one informant put it: 'The wives like it, they know their men aren't drinking in the pub, or worse...'). Although these surveillance practices are localised, they take place within a busy, fast-moving metropolitan economy. Furthermore, the long-term endurance of social ties created by patrolling cannot be guaranteed. Suburban residents are prone to moving house and changing workplace, and the unique form of co-present sociality that goes with sharing the same strip time of space-time (Giddens 1984) cannot survive such changes; that is, it is wholly context-dependent. One major threat to neighbourhood watch schemes is the complacency that can set in if they succeed. Indeed, having successfully exported its crime problem to other precincts in its early years of existence, Raymond's scheme gradually lost momentum and by 2004 patrolling had all but ceased. (By the same token, it is safe to assume that a marked rise in local crime could well reactivate this practice in future.)

Throughout their uncertain life cycles, these social practices are small-scale, part-time and subject to marked fluctuations of personnel. Vered Amit's just mentioned discussion of the 'trouble with community' as an anthropological concept is pertinent here (Amit and Rapport 2002). In another book, Amit (2002) illustrates the trouble with community with the ethnographic research of Noel Dyck (2002) in suburban British Columbia (Canada). On one occasion, a group of parents and children had travelled together by coach to participate in a sports event south of the border in Seattle. This journey was fondly remembered, yet the group could hardly be described as 'a community'. The trip was a one-off, ephemeral social occasion rather than the genesis of an enduring collectivity. Amit's 'sense of contextual fellowship' is

captured in the following web forum posting from a USJ resident whose precinct had once had night patrols:

Please correct me if I am wrong but [...] by handing over the neighbourhood [sic] security matters to the professional hired security guards, we have become complacent and have gone back to our usual 'couldn't care less' attitudes.

I am sure that some of us (if not most of us) have forgotten the times when we had the Night watch patrols done by the residents ourselves. In doing our own patrols, we have gotten to know one another, learnt a bit about our neighbours and most importantly, learnt how to be good neighbours and friends.

Threaded sociality

Late in 1999, a group of USJ residents created an e-group (mailing list) out a local protest that successfully blocked a steep rise in local council taxes. It was an early signal to the local authorities of the residents' ability to mobilise by using the Internet and other digital technologies. Subsequently, they built the web portal USJ.com.my. The portal has two main areas: a local news service and a discussion forum. The 'community' news service is mostly inactive these days, except for periods of intense campaigning around a key issue. It is run by Jeff Ooi, the portal's founder who is now a famous blogger on national affairs and consequently has little time left for local issues. By contrast, the portal's main Web forum is still thriving after six years in existence, and shows no signs of slowing down. It has in fact become the central meeting place of Subang Jaya-USJ residents. As of 20 March 2006, this forum had recorded the staggering figure of 5,221 threads and close to 90,000 postings. Most postings are in the middle-class lingua franca, Malaysian English (Manglish), but Malay and Cantonese terms are often used as well. Because of the high daily turnover of new threads, the forum is a harsh environment where only a small proportion of threads survive beyond a few days or, at most, a few weeks. Those new threads that fail to attract posters early on in their lives are condemned to the darkest recesses of the portal's archive. In principle, they can be reactivated at any point in the future, but most users' presentist orientation towards the latest news and discussion makes such a resuscitation an ever more remote possibility as time goes by.

I'd like to suggest that USJ.com.my's forum has engendered a unique form of residential sociality, one that can be readily contrasted with other local forms, e.g. patrol sociality or committee sociality. Here I'll only sketch out four of its main features, namely its being web-based, sequential, partially offline, and torn between two conflicting goals.

First, threaded sociality is *Web-based*. As such, and in contrast to the face-to-face encounters of, say, committee meetings, it unfolds within an online environment, relying on nicknames (nicks), emoticons and avatars to make up for the reduced bodily cues that characterise online communication. Unlike a public lecture or a political speech, thread discourse is not monological but polylogical, as I soon discovered when I started a thread on my fieldwork. The thread failed to attract much interest and rapidly faded into oblivion. An accomplished poster asked me offline whether I felt as I was talking to myself, and that was indeed how it felt. I had failed to draw into my thread a dynamic group of participants to build the required momentum that would 'carry' the thread forth. Because of the narrowcast quasi-

orality of thread exchanges, an interesting form of intimacy arises, a *false intimacy*. Although it *feels* as if one were sharing thoughts, experiences, and emotions with an intimate group of conversational partners, one is simultaneously aware that the whole Web (and his wife) could well be 'listening in'.

Second, despite being Web-based, threaded sociality is *sequential*. This is an important point to stress given the common perception that the Web is an inherently multidirectional, hypertextual milieu where users are free to create their own paths as they go along (Castells 1999). Yet while it is true that thread participants frequently post hyperlinks to relevant websites, thread users of all kinds (whether they are moderators, posters, or lurkers) are still constrained in their thread agency by the serial, sequential nature of this technology. In contrast to the relatively messy exchanges of offline encounters, thread postings are discrete, securely bounded, non-overlapping communicative acts. To make sense of a thread and contribute to it, participants have to gain a basic understanding of its recent history, an understanding easily within reach by scrolling up the thread. This micro-historical learning is aided by an automated system that allows users to receive email alerts with links to their favourite threads each time these are reactivated. It is significant that *users subscribe to threads*, not to the forum as a whole.

Third, although the forum's dominant sociality is Web-based, some of the longer threads undergo *offline phases* throughout their lifecycles. Thus, there is a very lengthy thread (889 posts and close to 35,000 viewings as of 3 April 2006) devoted to arranging offline encounters over a cup of *te tarik* (a sweet tea popular with Malaysians of all backgrounds). To cut a long thread short, these sessions take place on the first Friday of every month and attract some 10 to 15 enthusiasts. Though inseparable from the online threads, these encounters have their own offline, polylogical character: utterances overlap, unmoderated topics and sub-topics break off rapidly, the group splinters into sub-groups, etc. On one occasion, a habitual forum poster who had arrived late was welcomed with the greeting: 'Here comes the missing link!', a reference to a faulty hyperlink he had recently posted on a thread. The conversation soon shifted, however, to a different topic, namely the neighbourhood watch scheme mentioned earlier. It then returned to forum matters, moving on to the antics of an unruly resident, followed by a story about the ordeal of entering the US post-9/11. Then it was back to the neighbourhood watch scheme, onto the question of why different races excel at different Olympic sports, and so on.

Finally, this is a sociality marked by the *conflicting priorities* of the web forum management on the one hand, and most users on the other. For the management team, the forum is a means towards an end, i.e. a more accountable, efficient local government. For most users, however, the forum is primarily a source of local information and conviviality. At times when a critical issue that affects them directly emerges on the forum many will join the campaigning, but most of the time they will remain uninvolved. These conflicting goals are expressed in a frequently invoked distinction between 'small talk' and 'serious talk'. Only last month, a fascinating exchange took place between the forum's main moderator and a group of forum users. The moderator had started a thread announcing that he was about to move a number of small talk threads to a specialist sub-forum so that the main forum could be reserved for pressing community matters, as originally intended by the portal's founding fathers. A lively debate ensued in which forum users protested this plan,

arguing that such a move would condemn the chit-chat threads to an early death, as few people ever use the sub-forums. Moreover, they questioned the moderator's dismissal of small talk as mere *lepak* (Malay for idling or loitering), adding that small talk can sometimes lead to great things. Eventually the moderator relented and the suspect threads were spared.

Conclusion

By bracketing out community and network and experimenting with two alternative sets of concepts linked to field and residential socialities I hope to have demonstrated that social formations cannot be presupposed; they must be identified empirically, case by case. Whilst field theory allowed me to explore the emergence of a sphere of action out of local issues such as crime or schooling, the plural 'socialities' opened up a line of inquiry into the social consequences of that local activism.

References

Abram, S. (1998) 'Introduction', in S. Abram and J. Waldren (eds.) *Anthropological Perspectives on Local Development*, pp. 1-17. London and New York: Routledge.

Amit, V. and N. Rapport (2002) *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity*. London: Pluto.

Appadurai, A. (1986) *The Social Life of Things*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Castells, M. (1999) 'An Introduction to the Information Age', in Mackay, H and O'Sullivan, T, *The Media Reader: Continuity and Transformation*, (OU, Sage), pp.398-411.

Coleman, S. (2004) 'From the ground up': an evaluation of community focused approaches to e-democracy. *Local e-Democracy National Project*, URL (consulted March 2006): <http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk>

Dyck, N. (2002) 'Have you been to Hayward Field?': Children's sport and the construction of community in suburban Canada. In V. Amit (ed.) *Realizing Community. Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments*. European Association of Social Anthropologists. London, Routledge, pp. 105-123.

Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gillogly, K. (2005) Sodality. *AWADmail* 175, URL (consulted March 2006): <http://www.wordsmith.org/awad/awadmail175.html>

Gledhill, J. (2000) *Power and its Disguises: Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*. London and Boulder, CO: Pluto Press, 2nd ed.

- Jean-Klein, I. (2003) Into committees, out of the house? Familiar forms in the organization of Palestinian committee activism during the first intifada. *American Ethnologist* 30 (4): 556-577
- Johnson (1993) Introduction to P. Bourdieu *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Martin, J. L. (2003) 'What Is Field Theory?', *American Journal of Sociology* 109: 1-49.
- Newman, P. (1994) 'Opposing development-led planning – French-style', *Town and Country Planning* July/August: 219-20.
- Peterson, M.A. (2003). *Anthropology and mass communication. Media and myth in the new millennium*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Postill, J. (2002) 'Clock and calendar time: a missing anthropological problem', *Time & Society* 11: 251-270, URL (consulted March 2006): <http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/bibliographies.htm>
- Postill, J. (2006) *Media and Nation Building: How the Iban Became Malaysian*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.
- Postill, J. (forthcoming) Localising the internet: beyond communities and networks. *New Media & Society*.
- Turner, V.W. (1974) *Dramas, fields and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V.W. (1996 [1957]) *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*. Oxford: Berg.
- Wellman, B., A. Quan-Hasse, J. Boase, W. Chen, K. Hampton, II de Diaz, et al. (2003) 'The Social Affordances of the Internet for Networked Individualism', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 8 (3), URL (consulted March 2006): <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol8/issue3/wellman.html>
- Werbner, R. (1990) 'South-Central Africa: the Manchester School and after', in R. Fardon (ed.), *Localizing strategies: regional traditions of ethnographic writing*, pp. 152-181. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press and Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Whitehouse, H. (ed.) (2001) *The Debated Mind: Evolutionary Psychology versus Ethnography*. Oxford: Berg.
- Wittel, A. (2001) 'Toward a Network Sociality', *Theory, Culture & Society* 18 (6): 51-76.

Notes

¹ I submitted a slightly earlier version of this paper, entitled 'Localising the internet: beyond communities and networks' to the journal *New Media and Society* in April 2006. The section on residential socialities builds on a paper I gave at the ASA conference in Keele (UK) in April 2006.

² Vered Amit, personal communication, 17 Oct 2005.

³ This research was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation through the University of Bremen, where I was a research fellow in 2002-2005. I was part of *Netcultures*, a team of anthropologists studying digital technologies and local governance in six countries.

⁴ It does not follow that certain field agents cannot have it both ways: traders and other elite art consumers can in fact accumulate both symbolic and economic capital (Gledhill 2000: 138).

⁵ http://anthro.palomar.edu/tutorials/cglossary.htm#pantribal_association

⁶ <http://www.usj.com.my/usjXpress/details.php3?table=usjXpress&ID=380>

⁷ <http://usj18.nwatch.net.my/article.cfm?id=68>

⁸ <http://usj18.nwatch.net.my/article.cfm?id=147>