

The spaces for social relations in the Net user's home

The computer room

Paulette Duarte

The research paper *Le médiat et l'immédiat dans les espaces de sociabilité contemporains* (Duarte et al. 2003) investigated contemporary social relations and the spaces in which they develop in terms of the growing use of the Internet. The practices of social relations mediated through communication and information technology (ICT) affect family, friendship and professional spaces. Although they have a spatial anchoring (primarily within the home, but also in the workplace and centres of leisure activities), they build social networks connecting the Net user to his living environment.

The qualitative and microscopic methodology used has consisted in observing, starting with the domestic space in urban and peri-urban environments, and in particular “computer corners”, the facilities, social perceptions and representations implicated in situations of mediated social relations. Seventeen Net users were questioned and observed empirically and for extended periods during their particular and frequent use of the Internet: chat, forum, email, site browsing, etc. Almost half of these Net users reside in peri-urban or rural (mountain) environments, near Grenoble.

This observation was supplemented by the direct observation of a Local Area Network party (LAN party), an exclusive space, in a rural environment, where many Net users met to play online, and by a participative observation of the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) “iVisit” for the systematic use of the webcam and the microphone by the Net users present.

The Net user, who is at the centre of his practice, uses facilities, social perceptions and representations. He exploits the technical facilities available on the Internet, the facilities that extend real space into virtual space and that push back the limits of perceptible and practicable space. The Net user implicates all his senses (touch, sight, hearing, etc), even if the sensorial affordances¹ of the computer do not allow for their actualisation in a standard manifestation. The Net user expects social representations to define his

sociability. ICT systems are operations that ensure, by means of perceptions and representations, a form of relation to space, time and the other.

Spaces of sociability – the domestic space, the mediated space, i.e. constructed through Internet use, and the public space – of Net users living in peri-urban areas can in no way be distinguished from city-dwelling Net users. Their social behaviour resembles that of non-Net surfing inhabitants: it is contradictory and complex, since it is in turn and at the same time meaningful and superficial, public and private, close and distant, mediated and immediate.

The domestic space as indicative of the Net user's social relations

In the peri-urban context, typical configurations of the domestic space and, in particular of the “computer corner”, set up by Net users are indicative of actual or desired conditions of social relations.

In the configuration of the “computer corner” as a space of retreat, the resident Net user will often install his technical devices (screen, keyboard, webcam) in his bedroom or office so it faces the door. He may close the entry door to be able to indulge in cyberspace alone. He will even, sometimes, go as far as to block the window to remain isolated, cut off from any connection with the environment.

Thus installed, “facing” any potential intruders, the Net user favours control of access to his intimate sphere: control is initially auditory since any intrusion is initially perceptible in terms of the sound of the door. Then, although still

1. Affordances can be briefly defined as the sum total of properties which allow or which invite action. Cf Gibson J.J., 1977.

auditory, this control becomes visual and occurs in terms of the Net user's field of vision. The "computer corner" thus configured, inhibits entry into the intimate sphere of the Net user by the visitor. The latter will need to make a detour through the office to reach the screen and enter the user's mediated space.

The configuration of this setting is a good illustration of the relationship of the Net user to his cohabitants and the access of the latter into his mediated environment. It also illustrates the relationship of the Net user with other Net users. Despite the use of a webcam, any access to his domestic space by other Net users is excluded.

This retreating operation thus gives precedence to the separation of domestic space and mediated space. The Net user orders his space so as to maintain control over situations of non-mediated and mediated sociability. The organisation of this space testifies to a sociability that wishes to be exclusively individual and mediated. Non-mediated domestic social practice is here deliberately suppressed.

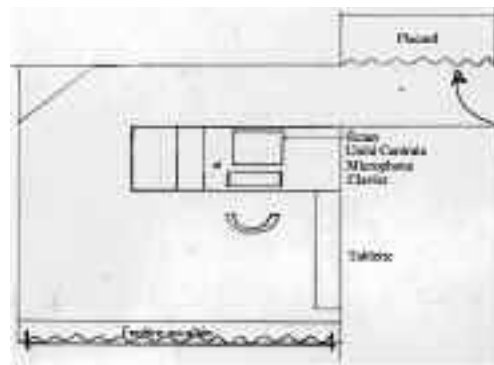
In the configuration of the "computer corner" as a controlled space, the Net user leaves the door open; the window of his room or his office is not shut. While his social relations may be mediated and domestic at the same time, his domestic social relations remain determinedly under his control. The Net user is in a position to see and hear the practices and the relations in the house.

Many of the ways in which technical and spatial organisation are configured fit the radial model whereby the Net user encompasses within his visual range all visible space, domestic and mediated. This type of organisation follows a simple geometrical principle of radiance: the radiance of the resident Net user' attention. A sole movement of the head or the eyes makes it possible to perceive sounds, movements, etc. The simplest manifestation of this type of organisation is the disposition of the user's chair, its back against the wall.

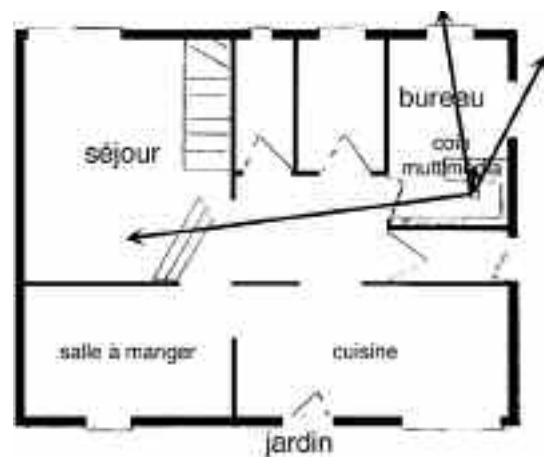
Such a configuration allows "control" of the situation at all significant levels: a visual and an auditory purview of the external, internal and mediated spaces, effortlessly, by the mere movement of the head and the eyes. In other words, several relations are possible contiguously. But the aim of this configuration is not the separation of the domestic from the mediated space as in the preceding case, although it geometrically contributes to it. It enables the Net user to maintain better control over events in domestic space and mediated space.

In the final configuration, whereby the "computer corner" acts as a shared space, the Net user arranges his technical devices (screen, central processing unit, chair) such as to render it accessible to other inhabitants of the domestic space. He lays it out parallel to the door to the room, placing it against a window or a wall, adding, next to his chair, an extra chair to possibly accommodate another family member, sharing his material, which is not personalised, with other Net users that share the home, or

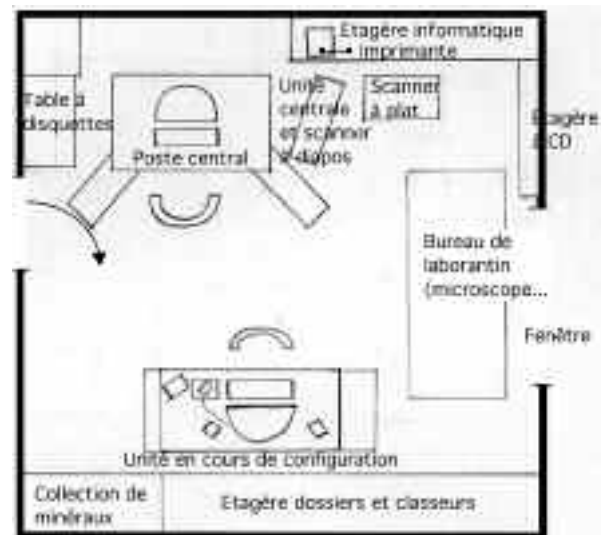
Les trois types de configuration



"Retreat or separation" configuration



"Radial" configuration



"Shared" configuration



Photographs showing examples of spatial arrangements including two chairs



Paulette Duarte

installing his own “computer corner” in the same room as other “computer corners”.

In this type of configuration, the practices of the Net user become visible to anyone and mediated social practice is potentially shareable and thus non-mediated, i.e. domestic.

In contrast to the first two configurations, it is the concept of sharing that predominates in the space of social practice. The mediated space is a sensory space of visibility: a third person gains access with a simple glance as with any other object present within the space (television or whiteboard affixed to the wall, for example). The Net user at his screen forfeits the control of, and the exclusive access to, the space. In line with the spatial organisation of his “computer corner”, it is a situation of non-stop sharing.

Inhabited and/or public mediated space

The mediated space consists of private spaces (spaces for chat or email) and public spaces (Internet Relay Chat IRC). It is conceived by the Net users at the same time in terms of an inhabited private space and an urban public space.

The screen is thus a private space; it can even be said to be inhabited by the Net user, which he himself organises. He organises it by personalising it with icons, windows, colours, images and sounds. He uses it in part in a repetitive manner (browsing his Inbox). From time to time, he cleans it up, altering the decoration, making it more presentable and worth visiting, welcoming and inviting other Net users as he pleases. He inhabits his mediated space much as he inhabits his house.

The screen is also an urban space. The Net user develops particularly urban practices on the Internet. He saunters through cyberspace as he would downtown. He visits sites open to the public, chats in public spaces (rooms) or with friends in chatrooms or through email much as he would visit a museum or chat with friends in downtown

bars. It is however just when the window has lost its function in neighbourhood sociability in the urban space that the Internet today offers an opening to other functions, a potential space for encounters. This interest in reverting to the outside world through the window is enhanced by a return to urban life. Through the computer window, the Net user generates a new urban space which, in fact, is an combination of domestic spaces, each temporarily embodying an aspect of urban life.

A space continuum

Space often consists of several disjointed spaces: public space, domestic space, the “computer corner”, the mediated space, the screen, the window, etc. But the Net user is unaware of spatial ubiquity. He initiates spatial continuity or discontinuity through his attention and his practices.

The Net user, can, for example, simultaneously chat on the Net and with other people present in the domestic space, accommodating the technical setting, or first chat on the Net, then with those other individuals. The attention of the Net user switches then, more or less simultaneously or otherwise, from one space to another. But he can also choose to isolate himself and become settled in the mediated space to chat, his attention being focalised exclusively and instantaneously on the mediated space.

It is in terms of his attention and his practices that the Net user contributes to the space *continuum*. He constitutes the nexus between spaces, which are often distinct spaces of sociability. He embodies and practises a space of sociability without being aware of his compositeness. He inhabits contexts within which beings and the things with which he interacts exist as much around him as in the mediated space.

The Net user thus employs his everyday social skills and perfectly integrates the spatial and technical structures through which he expresses normal patterns of social behaviour.



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Autoreprésentations d'Internautes

Standard mediated social relations

Mediated social relations are a “standard” form of social relations. They share the same characteristics: individualist, fragmented, diffuse, complex and contradictory. To begin with, they take on characteristics of mediated social relations as described in the research on the links between new technologies of communication and social relations by R. Bernier and P. Lardellier (1997), A. Acoun (1998), P. Virilio (1996) or M. Guillaume (1996). Such social relations are immaterial, individual, narcissistic, derealised, atomised, impoverished or standardised. To a certain extent, they resemble urban social relations as described by G. Simmel (1989) and the Chicago School (Grafmeyer, Joseph, 1990), i.e. superficial, individualistic, transitory or secondary social relations. We may also infer that the form and the nature of the social relations developed in towns and cities is extended into cyberspace and contributes to sustaining the development of such social relations. Finally, they are also, in part, meaningful social relations, implying mutual aid, or primary social relations, in line with French or English research relating to social relations in urban districts from 1960 to 1980² or more recent research on mediated social relations in cyberspace, for example, as described by Ph. Breton, B. Cathelat, B. Galland and Mr. Bassand.

The Net user, often all alone at his screen, develops various social relations with other Net users to enhance his own social experience. Depending on his desires, and on the affordances of the technology used, he will sometimes develop relationships that are transitory, instantaneous, distant or public, or, at other times, relationships that are durable, meaningful, close or private. These social relations can be friendly, familial, predating their mediation by Internet, or brand-new. They constitute a social network of which he is the point of origin. This social network appears in an erratic manner and is established only at the whim of the user's clicks and contacts via the media. His

social relations, often paradoxical, being in turn or simultaneously public and private, close and distant, mediated and immediate, meaningful and superficial, is therefore complex.

The Net user, like *Homo Urbanus*, or G. Simmel's city-dweller, displays a certain intelligence and rationality in his mediated social relations. Much like the city, cyberspace offers a variety of social interchanges, of different natures. Faced with such a proliferation and intensification of interchange, with so much insistence, the Net user must assess and take account of different criteria to discriminate between different interchanges, to choose whether to maintain or break up established mediated social relations. Thus, he chooses to create a social experience that is friendly, familial or even neighbourly via the Internet. “With multimedia creation, the cyberspace user becomes a sort of god... The cyber-nomad acquires the privilege of reorganising society according to his own whims while deciding who he connects with, composing his address book by joining a group or constituting a micro-network that revolves around him... He generates his own family, his tribe, his true village or neighbourhood.” (Cathelat B. p. 43).

Moreover, it is clear that the Net user develops a culture of mediated social experience, based on everyday social skills. The contexts of experienced social relations testify to this. The Net user develops a knowledge and a know-how, certainly technical, but above all social, in cyberspace. He implements straightforward or adapted uses with regard to the technical setup in order to be socially effective. He works out and incorporates codes and standards to enter into a relationship with others. He proves capable of governing his distance, his contacts and his relationships with others through the Internet medium. He thus displays a normal ability to make and maintain social links, whereas,

2. Inter alia, the research work of Coing H., Gans H.J., Hoggart R., Young M. and Willmott P., Chalas Y. and Torgue H., Noschis K.



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Internet home-workers

a priori, it was assumed that Net users were into nothing more than just having fun with a technological gadget. This social culture is a “standard” culture, which extends and reproduces in a technological space-time that is nothing but a complex and sensory space, a space of social relations.

Mediated social relations, situated and face-to-face

Mediated social relations are “situated”, from the point of view of the Net user. They sometimes even form part of more composite social experience, i.e. mediated and non-mediated, experienced as continuous and situated by the Net user. It follows that the scientific definition of the “situated” or “in situ” social relation, which considers the latter as a social relation anchored in a physical space is enhanced. “Situated” social relations can thus be of a form anchored in an electronic space. It is the representation of time and space, the experience of emotions and feelings in the interaction, the experiential relationship to the other by the Net user who situates the social relation.

This social relation can also be qualified as a face-to-face social relation. It exceeds the definition of J. Toy (1978), of V. Beaudouin and J. Velovska (1999), who speak of face-to-face social relations only when two individuals are in co-presence in the same spatio-temporal sphere and are anchored in the same “standard” physical space, akin to social relations as described by R. Ascott (1996), A. Sauvageot (1996), Ph. Quéau (1996) or M. de Fornel (1992) as cyberceptive, sensory, interactive or real social relations. Admittedly, the faces of the Net users are still incapable of physically interfacing, for their eyes to meet, their hands to touch, the technical devices being inadequate in terms of inter-visibility and in inter-tactility. Nevertheless, face-to-face remains possible. The Net users exchange and inter-



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face through written words in particular via the IRC and email. It can be said that in lieu of face-to-face discussion, we have to make with word-for-word. The word-for-word of the IRC, for example, which is a to-and-from of questions and answers or a set of reciprocal assertions within a drastically reduced time period and the visible space of the screen, places the Net users in co-presence and leads to instantaneous interactions and social face-to-face.

A continuum of social relations

Mediated social relations are part of the continuum of contemporary social relations inasmuch as they are experienced by the Net user as a continuous extension of his existing non-mediated social relations, whether friendly, familial or professional. Much as the Net user exists as the link between discontinuous spaces, the Net user is here the link between disseminated and varied social relations. There are several types of continuum: a continuum by reciprocal enhancement of social relations, a continuum by reciprocal extension of social relations and a continuum where both merge.

In the first type of continuum, the new social relations generated thanks to the media or within the mediated space supplement the Net user's other social relations, i.e. “standard”, non-mediated social relations, and conversely “standard” social relations come to enhance mediated social relations. The Net user learns from these various social relations and extends his social network. It corresponds to the oft-quoted example of friendly social relations carried out on the Internet, which come to enhance the Net user's “standard” friendly social relations. The Net user meets other Net users on the Net and strikes up friendships. These mediated friendships feed his representations, his emotions and his thoughts on friendship. Again, the Net user maintains “standard” family relationships with close family

members. These relationships enhance the representations he makes of family social relations. These alter, supplement or enhance family social relations developed via the media with relatives who are distant, that he does not physically frequent.

In the second type, social relations are either a mediated extension of existing “standard” non-mediated social relations, or a “standard” non-mediated extension of mediated social relations. Thus, the “standard” social relations that Net users develop, since they are also individuals vis-à-vis others, are extended into “virtual” space. Net users meet first in various locations (work or leisure loci, etc), then, pursue their social relations in cyberspace, via email or online dialogue. And reciprocally, the social relations built by the Net users in cyberspace is extended to “standard” spaces of social relations (cafés, bars, public spaces). Net users meet on the Net, then meet face-to-face, and pursue their social relations in cyberspace and/or other standard spaces. Moreover, it is worth noting that the actualisation of the mediated social relation in “standard” spaces is conducted in line with the way in which the Net users wish to live their relationships anyway. If they desire a close relationship, they choose places which lend themselves to it. If they do not wish for deeper social relation, they meet in public places (cafés, bars). Ultimately, there are few spaces pre-designed as a context for meeting. More likely, existing public or private spaces are utilised opportunely.

Finally, with the third type, mediated or non-mediated social relations merge and become implicated in the existential context of the Net user such as to form one continuous social relation. The medium is thus no obstacle to such a continuum. On the contrary, it acts as the “third operator”, (Amphoux, Sauvageot, 1998). Observations of the situations of social experience have revealed that Net users were capable of developing relationships via the media, while still in interaction with occupants or cohabitants of their domestic space. Examples are notably of the Net user who develops a mediated social relation in the co-presence of a member of his family sitting beside him right behind the screen, or of the Net user who watches another Net user with his webcam and who writes to him, all the while talking to a member of his family close to the technical setting. In these situations of overlapping social relations, it is very difficult to locate the Net user definitively. Is he first in a mediated social relation and then in a non-mediated social relation? Or on the contrary, is he initially in a non-mediated social relation, then in a mediated social relation. It only becomes clear when the Net user explains that it is a whole and that he acts as the common thread among these various social relations in his practices and his representations.

This notion of a continuum in social relation is in opposition to the view developed by certain authors, such as P.

Virilio (1996), who see the development of new communication technologies as bringing with it the disappearance of meaningful “standard” social relations developed in proximity to the family, friends or neighbours. This continuum, on the contrary, is in line with the reflections of authors such as B. Galland (1995) and S. Fdida (1997), who assert that existing non-mediated social relations are strengthened by information and communication technologies and demonstrate the respective extension of mediated social relations in physical space and of non-mediated social relations in cyberspace.

Increasingly blurred frontiers between the spaces of social relations

Bernard Cathelat asked what our living spaces will be like in the future in light of the development of ICT: “What will become of the places where we live, the neighbourhood, the village or city, the nation, when one can get connected to the four corners of the world?” Internet-mediated social relations, far from making these living spaces disappear, contribute to a complex redefinition of the relationships between them, in particular between the private and the public space, between the space of proximity and the remote space.

In a mediated social relation, space is neither private nor public. Such attributions are not of the nature of space but of context. It is the context of the social relation that defines it as private or public and the space implicated by the situation takes on the characteristics of the latter. There is a nuancing of the relationship between private and public. Private space can open up to the public on the occasion of a particular event (e.g. exposure of one’s private space on the Net by the webcam) and become public, just like within public space there are private situations (private phone call in public).

Internet-mediated social relations impact on two spatial levels that are very far removed from each other. They support relationships at the level of proximity and relationships at the remote level. The proximity level, hardly developed in contemporary society, is a relationship level where users are all but able to touch each other, while the level of remote relationships entails relationships with people at the other end of the world. These two levels are not exclusive; there is a rapprochement of the proximity and the remote relationship thanks to ICT. Spatial distance as obstacle to the development of social proximity is abolished. Spatial proximity or distance does not inevitably and reciprocally signify social proximity or distance.

It thus becomes possible to conclude that ICT accompanies the evolution of contemporary social relations, reveal-

ing blurred and porous frontiers between various types of space, and perhaps contributing to the organisation of these spaces of social relations. With increasingly dispersed and complex social relations, standard inhabited spaces (in particular domestic space, neighbourhood, vicinity and public space) are not as relevant anymore. Spaces become

multiform and blurred. The contemporary space of social relations becomes exclusively, simultaneously or successively, the agglomeration, the city, the neighbourhood, the house, the room, the "computer corner", the microcomputer screen or the window in the screen.

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About the author

PAULETTE DUARTE is a University Lecturer in Town Planning at the *Institut d'Urbanisme of Grenoble* (Grenoble Urban Planning Institute) and a researcher at the UMR PACTE. Her research concerns social representations mobilised by inhabitants, technicians and politicians to define spaces, objects or actions.

paulette.duarte@upmf-grenoble.fr